University of Minnesota

Employee Faculty/Staff Network

Research Report

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Executive Summary

This Faculty/Staff Network research project was conducted to help the University of Minnesota determine the need for a formalized, internal employee network which will connect employees with volunteers (other employees) who are willing to share information about their work, and to satisfy a project requirement for my University of St. Thomas class, MBHR 601 Human Resource Management. Since an important goal for my class is to have a realistic plan for implementation, I carried out activities with that end in mind. I believe that needs assessment is critical to implementation, so the majority of my time was spent interviewing potential network users and volunteers to gauge the need for the service and to inform the implementation.

While the interview sample is small in comparison to the large number of employees at the University of Minnesota (20,000 plus), many of the interviews were random and across classifications, and some response patterns did appear. Based on the responses, my overall recommendation is to pilot the employee network for at least one year—and perhaps up to three years—with a strong evaluation component. I speculate that the use of this service will grow over time. In fact, several employees mentioned that they only recently became aware of the University's Employee Career Enrichment Program (ECEP). It makes sense that offerings within ECEP will grow as awareness for the entire area grows. A number of considerations and caveats for implementation follow, based upon the employee survey and other research conducted for this project.

The Context

The University of Minnesota and its human resource offices have been a good learning ground for me. I took on the volunteer project because it would offer me an opportunity to learn about a large public university culture and human resource operation, with which I have been unfamiliar. And, since the thrust of the human resource management course has been the importance of employee relations, this employee network project seemed to fit well with the course learning goals. Also, my own interests lie with human resource development, and thus, working with the career enrichment area of human resources was appealing to me. My connection to this work came through participation in a special interest group for career development in organizations, which is part of the Minnesota Career Development Association. Barb Krantz Taylor, my University of Minnesota contact and the designated mentor/coach for this project, is a co-convener of this special interest group. Barb is a licensed psychologist and assistant director of the University's Employee Career Enrichment Program.

Career Enrichment and the University's Culture

My first steps were to understand the background for establishing an employee network, the structure of the human resources function, the employee classifications and the University's employment culture in general. My activities in this regard were to meet with Barb Krantz Taylor for an orientation; attend a program feedback session sponsored by the ECEP on June 28 to hear first hand from 22 employees; and research the mission, goals and activities of the various areas through the University's Web site. Descriptions of the human resource services are found in Appendix A.

The Employee Career Enrichment Program is sponsored by the Center for Human Resource Development, which is a division of the University's Office of Human Resources. ECEP offers career-related services for current University employees and departments through workshops, individual consultations and in-house services for departments (see Appendix B). The director is Kate Schaefers, and the assistant director is, as previously mentioned, Barb Krantz Taylor. Over the past few years, the department has offered workshops such as "Where Do U Fit In? Creating Your Job Future at the U of M" and "Getting In: The Power of Networking at the University." Some employees have commented that they were interested in conducting informational interviews, but would be helped by a listing of individuals whom they might contact internally. The University is expansive and employees expressed a need for help in making contacts. ECEP describes the concept as follows:

> The goal of our project is to create the first formal University-Wide Faculty/Staff Network. This Network would consist of University employees who volunteer to be called by other University employees to talk about the work they do. The Network would encourage employees to find out more about internal job opportunities related to their interests, skills, and experiences. It could empower employees with new job options and connect employees who might not ordinarily meet. Such internal networking is not only a valuable career planning and job search tool, but it takes advantage of the rich experience and knowledge base that exists already among employees.

Barb Krantz Taylor served as the mentor for this assignment, helping me to understand the background and culture of the University. For example, union and civil service classifications have been unfamiliar to me. One of our ideas was to consult with union and civil service representatives to not only make them aware of planning, but to get their input and feedback early on in the process. Ideally, the more input, the better the design of the program. I learned that gathering feedback from such "representatives" was not a quick and easy process. While we did not have much by way of formal response

from group representatives by the end of June, the survey included a cross-section of employees which captured some responses from Civil Service, AFSCME, and Teamsters groups. Barb was very frank in sharing her thoughts about communication with various groups along the way. In addition, I also researched more about these classifications through the University's and the organizations' Web sites. This research is found in Appendix C.

Barb also served well as a point person to communicate to other ECEP staff, both to keep them informed and to get their input over the period of the project. Early in June, the Network was discussed at a staff retreat and identified as one of three top priority initiatives. I felt that I was working closely with someone who could have impact politically to make the Network happen if the research pointed in a positive direction. Barb played her role well in giving me enough direction to do my work, while at the same time, allowing me enough latitude to shape the effort as I saw fit.

Model Network Research

In order to help design interview questions and envision the final "product," I spent some time searching for similar internal employee networks. Barb pointed me to only a couple of similar efforts that she was aware of, one at Arizona State University and one at Raychem Corporation. We thought additional research into other organization and corporate models would be helpful.

University Employee Networks.

I first scouted out the human resource areas of the "Big 10" universities to see if their employee development programs included such a network. Each of the human resource pages listed a variety of services (Appendix D), but I found no reference to

employee "informational interview" networks. I contacted Kate Lucas at Arizona State University and collected information on their Employee Network. Kate also confirmed that she knew of no other university that had a similar network. In fact, she indicated that the University of Minnesota had one of the most extensive career enrichment programs that she was aware of, and that it is a pioneer in the area.

Kate Lucas reported that she had not started Arizona State's Employee Network, but that they had just updated their volunteer list in the third year of program operation. Their network is basically a printed booklet of the volunteer names, titles, and contact numbers. The booklet is housed in the Career Enrichment area and volunteers typically just hunt through the listing and contact volunteers on their own. However, the Career Enrichment staff are continually referring employees to use the directory and may help identify the best contacts for a given individual upon request. At Arizona State, staff time does not permit arranging network interviews. Kate reported that they know the Network is being used, but they are not certain to what extent. They have not done regular evaluations with employees or the volunteers. Appendix E includes the Arizona State University information, including titles of volunteers, the volunteer application form, and guidelines for employee informational interviewing.

Corporate/Non-Profit Employee Networks

I also approached several contacts to try to find a larger organization, other than a college or university, that had established such an employee network. The only place I found (at Barb's suggestion) was Raychem Corporation. I spoke to Judy Pringle, Raychem training specialist in employee development, and she verified that the company had had such a program. However, it was now extinct. Since staffing had experienced turnovers, she was not sure of the history of this program. Her speculation was that it

was probably discontinued for two reasons. One was the fact that the primary program coordinator had left the company. The other was that she suspected some hesitation on the part of employees, who feared that their supervisors or others would become suspicious if word got out that they were conducting internal informational interviews.

I placed telephone calls to several other individuals whom I thought might have a lead on a Minnesota company with such a network, but came up empty. I inquired of the professor of this human resource management course, Peter Connor; my course classmates who represent American Express and other large companies in the area; Phil Schecter, human resource management professor at the University of St. Thomas; Teresa Daly Millis of Right/Career Dynamics (no response); Jan Logan of Menttium Corporation; Pastor Rich Anderson of St. Andrews church in Eden Prairie (who coordinates networking initiatives for congregation members and the general public); Steve Chirpich of the Minnesota Workforce Center Dislocated Worker Program; Karen Black of Growth Dynamics Employee Assistance Program Inc.; Craig Barrett of Intel's Employment, Resume and Career Information Center; Nancy Rufledt, career development center at 3M headquarters; and Lisa Peterson, employee development at General Mills. Most said the idea sounded very interesting, but that they knew of no companies with formal networks as such.

Employee Telephone Survey

Given the short time frame that I was working under (six weeks) and the fact that the ECEP did not have funding for a fuller scale research project, we determined that the most efficient method to collect data was short telephone surveys. We also considered focus groups or e-mail surveys. In hindsight, I believe we selected the best method. Focus groups would have garnered some of the same responses, but from fewer people

overall. Purely e-mail or mail survey written responses would not have been as clear to employees. As it was, employees even found the Network concept difficult to envision when it was first explained during the telephone interviews.

Survey Questions

I designed a short list of survey questions, based upon the Career Enrichment area's vision for the network, and also with the idea of implementation in mind. Barb and colleagues made suggestions for changes and approved the questionnaire (see Appendix F). The questions were kept short out of consideration for employee work time. Also, people are more likely to cooperate if the survey is short. The telephone surveys averaged about 10 minutes in length, running anywhere from five to 15 minutes.

Survey Population

The survey population consisted of two categories. One category of 25 names (Appendix G) was a set of names from Barb Krantz Taylor. We began calls with individuals that Barb was familiar with. A number of these individuals have some connection with human resources or career services. The second category of 51 names (Appendix H) were names I randomly selected throughout the alphabet, from the staff directory. The focus was toward individuals who fell in categories other than top level professional staff or faculty, whom we thought would be most likely to use such a Network.

In the first phase of telephone calls, direct calls were made and voice mail messages were not left. In the last phase of the survey, voice mails were left in an attempt to reach as many of the total of 76 people as possible. Several individuals were no longer in departments or the telephone number voicemail did not appear to be theirs. Some individuals were on vacation during the days I tried to reach them. And some,

especially those who worked in a variety of locations or out of their offices, were nearly impossible to reach without leaving messages or trying their pagers. In all, a total of 49 employees were interviewed—20 from the supplied list and 29 from the random list. This final interview list and the survey response compilation is found in Appendix I.

Response Patterns

Those individuals who were on the supplied list, who had positions with career services, student development, or human resources, or who were at more advanced levels were less likely to indicate that they themselves would find an employee network useful. They often said that they had developed their own networks, were comfortable asserting themselves to gather information, had done informational interviews in the past, and may even have a role coaching students or others. However, they were probably the most enthusiastic to say that they see a need for this service for others. They were curious about how assertive employees would be and how much the service would be used, but they were very positive about the potential offering.

There were a number of employees who were very excited about the prospect of using the service, and many of these individuals also seemed to be excited about the potential to serve as volunteers as well. Those who would "possibly" use the service were more likely to "possibly" be a volunteer. Those who said they would probably not use the employee network fell into two camps—either they were confident of their own abilities and felt they did not need the support or they said they did not see themselves making career or work changes in the near future.

Some potential pitfalls were mentioned including the following: possible conflict if an employee is actually making application for a specific position; employee fear of word getting out and supervisor suspicion or misunderstanding; misunderstanding of the

purpose of the service if employees in reality have concerns that should be forwarded to the Employee Assistance Program or ECEP individual counseling; or possible discovery of or an experience with inappropriate behavior (like sexual harassment).

Several of the key points brought out in the surveys are incorporated into the attached drafts of Network user and volunteer guidelines (Appendix J). ECEP may want to modify these guidelines somewhat. As previously mentioned, the Arizona State University network guidelines are found in Appendix E. The University of St. Thomas' Career Information Network sample materials are also enclosed for ideas (Appendix K). While the University of St. Thomas network is not internal, some of the occupational interview guidelines may apply. Also, there are some similarities with this type of Network and conducting "Realistic Job Previews" (RJP's). To my knowledge, RJP's are typically used in the employee selection process to help applicants better understand the nature of the work required. It only makes sense that the better the worker understands the work, the more long term the satisfaction level. When RJP's are used, companies usually find that fewer applicants continue to move through the selection process, thereby creating a better and more focused selection pool. Some RJP reference materials are found in Appendix L.

While 49 responses is a small sampling, the majority of the survey respondents indicated that they thought the employee network was a good idea either for themselves or for the University's population in general. Hence, my recommendation to pilot the Network, with certain caveats based on the survey data.

Network Program Design

Several other activities were conducted along side the telephone survey to help shape the network and implementation.

ECEP Employee Feedback Meeting

I attended the June 28 ECEP feedback meeting (see Appendix M), at which 22 employees shared their input on the area's services. When asked whether or not an Employee Network would be useful, the responses seemed to parallel the telephone survey. Over half of the attendees were from the human resources area, which is probably why many said that the service would be helpful to others. This was a good opportunity for me to meet and hear from employees at large and from others in the human resource area.

Organization/Committee Feedback

Part of our goal was to obtain feedback from structured groups and organizations, if possible. Jane Whiteside, a representative from the Office for University Women provided helpful, confirming feedback. Last fall the Office for University Women conducted a series of focus groups to find out how their office could provide more services for women employees. Several themes came from the focus groups, but overall, the women said that they feel a need for more support from the University community. The suggestions for programs ranged along a continuum, from the least active electronic means of connection up to structured mentoring programs. The type of Employee Network here considered was one of the suggestions that came out of the focus groups. Jane was very supportive of the Employee Network concept and said that their office would like to be kept informed and collaborate in this process. However, she cautioned that if both ECEP and the Office of University Women set up separate employee informational networks, both offices would need to be clear about purpose and intent to avoid confusion. I suggested that if the two separate networks come about, each could advertise for the other, which would also help clarify differences in purpose. These two

potential networks might, in fact, compliment each other well if the Office for University Women network is geared to general professional development and women's issues and the ECEP network is geared specifically toward job previews and career related questions.

Stephanie Dilworth, a member of the Civil Service Committee is also supportive of the Employee Network concept. While not officially representing the Civil Service Committee, she gave her own opinions about the helpfulness of such an opportunity. She believes employees would be interested in asking about job duties, how to prepare for certain jobs, what career steps are available, etc. She suggested that both listing the Volunteer Directory on the human resources Web site and offering assistance by ECEP would be useful. She also advised that, while it would be important that Volunteers represent a variety of employee units and classifications, those distinctions need not be stressed in the Volunteer Directory.

HRIS Systems

It became clear early on in the interviews that listing the volunteers on the University's Web site would make the Network accessible to the greatest number of employees. Many respondents mentioned that the employees are used to logging into the human resource pages of the Web site (http://umn.edu.ohr) and that this was the most logical place for access. Most thought a combination of listing the volunteers on the Web site along with ECEP e-mail and phone numbers for added support would be best. Only a few either thought they would prefer just to search the list autonomously or walk through the steps with only ECEP staff. My recommendation is to offer multiple entry points for the greatest visibility and access. In a full-scale effort, it would be good to

have several points at which an employee could "click here" and, with their authorization, view the volunteer list.

The strong interest in the Web listing prompted me to have discussions with Eric Schnell, coordinator for research and development in the Office of Human Resources, who represents the ECEP on the HRIS task force. Eric is knowledgeable about information systems and the workings of the human resources area. He was able to help me understand a broader picture of initiatives underway for the systems that support human resources.

With the information that I gathered from Eric, I make recommendations for implementation which include two phases of development. New Employee Self Service and People Soft systems are being designed, which may take up to several months to implement. Also, the two primary systems programmers in the Career Enrichment area recently resigned, leaving a gap for some of the Network design that might be required.

My longer-term recommendation is that the Employee Network be a part of the new Employee Self Service initiative. The People Soft software will have search capabilities, will be linked to the employee campus communities and will be more secure than present systems. Potentially, the Job Center and other human resource areas may be merged into this new system. The Network may obtain greater visibility, have better search capabilites and be more secure if it is included with these plans. I recommend that the ECEP area discuss the plans for the Employee Network and put a memo in writing to Eric with as much specificity as possible. In this scenario, the Network will just reside on a different server system than the ECEP Web URLs now reside. However, ECEP pages could still list "click here if you are an employee and want to search the Employee Network." The page is then linked to the Employee Self Service searchable database.

However, since the Employee Self Service is still in the planning stages, I recommend an alternate path for the short term. Move ahead with formulating the volunteer and network information and have new URL pages created in the current server setup for the ECEP pages. ECEP staff can enter the volunteer information in a basic Word document in the form it should be shown. Creating a new URL page is relatively simple, and, according to Eric, he or a number of other staff members could easily help create the pages if the basic information is entered in a standard Word document. In this case, the volunteer directory is a straight volunteer listing, not searchable by key words. Then, Chris Bongaarts is the systems programmer who can add the authorization piece to the page so that an individual will need to enter their user ID and password to access the Volunteer list. This protects the page for viewing by employees only. This protection and link can be scheduled through Chris and can be accomplished in a matter of minutes. This way the Network can be accessed in a simple format until it can be converted to the new system. As far as employees are concerned, any change in where the information resides is relatively seamless except for the fact that a few of the commands may look different. While the newer system will have more protection from "sniffers" the current system is very reliable, according to Eric and Chris. Also, the information of volunteer name, title, phone, e-mail and brief work biography can be found in the staff directory or in public job description information anyway. In either phase, ECEP will be able to obtain printouts of the "hits" to the Volunteer listing page to track usage.

Evaluation

Evaluation will be important to continuation of the initiative. While the impact on employee satisfaction and career changes may be difficult to measure, there are several checkpoints for usage of the service. First, the ECEP can request periodic Volunteer listing Web page "hits" to see how many people are looking at the Volunteer list. ECEP staff should also log queries for matches in case employees bypass the Volunteer page and go directly to ECEP for help. However, the real indicators will be actual use of the service through the Network interviews. While both the User and the Volunteer can be asked to complete evaluation forms, tracking through the Volunteers will be the most reliable method. ECEP can e-mail volunteers on a planned basis, approximately every two months, to ask if the volunteer has had meetings. This will also help ECEP with awareness of the number of meetings per volunteer to help spread out usage when asked to help make matches.

Another evaluation idea to gauge whether or not the positions and areas represented by the Volunteers is adequate, is to invite employees to e-mail ECEP if they did not find a type of position they were looking for. ECEP could keep track of requests and add volunteers from areas or positions that seem underrepresented. If staff time permitted, ECEP could also take this a step farther and search for new volunteers as the requests came in. This way the employee match is made and, at the same time, a new volunteer is added to the list.

APPENDICES

Implementation Plan

Many of the steps in implementation are based on the data gathered in the survey, visits with ECEP and HRIS staff, and a plan to solicit volunteers and advertise the service at the same time.

August-September, 1999

- Review this project report with ECEP staff and reconfirm the implementation plan.
- Send thank you messages to all who participated in the Network survey.
- Determine the official Network name as either Faculty/Staff Network or one of the following suggestions: The Insider's or Inside Network; Realistic Job Preview Network; Position Profiles Network; Career Connections; Career Advancement Network; Resource Network; Internal Informational Interview (III) Network; or World of Work "Wow" Network.
- Review and revise the attached "Guidelines for Employee Network Use," "Guidelines for Network Volunteers" and "Network Evaluation Form."
- Solicit approximately 100 Volunteers through a planned selection process. Request volunteer names/nominations from deans, department heads, human resource representatives, and the various classifications and organizations such as Professional and Administrative Staff, AFSCME, Civil Service, Teamsters, and the Office for University Women. The listing need not all be by nomination, but this might provide a screening for the pilot.
- As ECEP solicits names, ask areas to help advertise the availability through their channels as soon as the Volunteer listing is posted to the Web site.
- Invite Volunteer prospects to participate, either by e-mail or a special printed invitation. Share the guidelines and expectations with the prospective volunteers.
- Secure the Volunteer contact information via e-mail and enter the information into a basic Word document.
- When a contingent of 75-100 Volunteers are confirmed, post the Network introduction, guidelines for use, volunteer guidelines and evaluation form on the Web site by creating separate ECEP URL pages. Have information services engage link the Volunteer Directory page to the Created URL page with authorization user ID and password requirements.
- Communicate Network system needs to the task force for the new Employee Self Service effort.

October-November, 1999

- Advertise the availability of the service in the Center for Human Resource Development Newsletter, Web pages, and through communication to other Human Resources staff. Also inform managers and supervisors so they are aware of the offering.

- Offer ECEP workshops to support and advertise the network—"Where Do U Fit In? Creating Your Job Future at the U of M" and "Getting In: The Power of Networking at the University."

December, 1999

- E-mail Volunteers to briefly evaluate usage and discover any modifications needed.

January-February, 2000

- Offer ECEP workshops to support and advertise the network—"Where Do U Fit In? Creating Your Job Future at the U of M" and "Getting In: The Power of Networking at the University."

- Advertise the service again to employees. Many think about career and life changes at the start of the new year.

- E-mail Volunteers to briefly evaluate usage and discover any modifications needed.

- Tentatively plan to convert the Web Volunteer directory to the Employee Self Service system and design the corresponding searchable database.

March-April, 2000

- Offer ECEP workshops to support and advertise the network—"Where Do U Fit In? Creating Your Job Future at the U of M" and "Getting In: The Power of Networking at the University."

- E-mail Volunteers to briefly evaluate usage and discover any modifications needed.

May-June, 2000

- Evaluate usage of the program by collecting all volunteer evaluations and calling a debriefing meeting of volunteers who actually met with employees.

- Determine if the Volunteer numbers are meeting the demand. If not, make plans to increase the volunteer numbers.

July 2000-July2002

Formulating and firmly establishing the Network may take up to three years. The following steps may be supportive to the Network and may be considered for implementation as desired in the years 2000 to 2002.

- Volunteers may also want to develop career profiles which would include an outline of a typical day, that can be given to users when they meet (samples from another network are included in Appendix N).

- While not as well defined, some suggestions were made by employees that it might be helpful to attend internal "career fairs" to learn more about work in a department. Another idea is to sponsor on-line career fairs on the HR Web site. Some background information on on-line career fairs are found in Appendix O. While these are external fair examples, the same principles could apply for an internal network.

- There seemed to be some need for employees to talk with others who are in the same position or job family to learn more about how they conduct their work. The ECEP may take a more active role in encouraging individuals to formulate job family or position networking "clusters" to increase satisfaction among employees.

- Once the Network is well established, ECEP may want to consider the Network as a recruitment tool for the University. The student career services area encourages informational interviews, and it may well be that students may be more attracted to staying at the University upon graduation if they have access to the Employee Network.

Summary

Overall, this has been a very interesting and worthwhile project. It was a good learning experience for me in the areas of employee development and employee relations. And, as I have mentioned to ECEP staff, conducting this Network survey was, in itself, a marketing tool for their area. Employees were somewhat surprised and pleased to receive the interview calls. It indicated that the University is making attempts to foster employee development and retain "satisfied" employees into the future. To my knowledge, the ECEP staff plans to proceed with the Employee Network implementation plan in the coming months.