The Employee and Organization of the Future: A Partnership at All Levels

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Indiana University is an eight campus university system. Overall, 91,000 students attend Indiana University, an institution with a budget of $1.8 billion and faculty numbering over 4,000. The two major campuses are Bloomington and Indianapolis, Bloomington representing the more traditional research, residential student campus, Indianapolis housing the medical school, primarily serving part-time commuter students and providing close linkages with state government. (http://www.indiana.edu/)

In order to meet the institution’s business needs, the information technology organization faces constant change and difficult demands. At University Computing Services, Indiana University, we have made efforts to create partnerships to enhance both the employees’ and the organization’s chance for success:

- Investing in training and redefining reward systems to focus on staff development and empowerment.
- Designing professional growth opportunities that stress business and interpersonal skills in addition to those in computing technology.
- Fostering collaboration and flexibility by responding to individual employee needs.
- Integrating customer feedback into the performance review process.
- Exploring multiple vehicles and forums to enhance communication to and among staff.
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What is the Problem?
Over the past several years, the pace of change in the workplace has increased dramatically; not only in the information technology field, but in many others. Much of this change is driven by global competition, but it also comes from local and national competition, certainly in the higher education and health fields.

It is not news to many of us that the workplace of today is radically different from the workplace we faced upon graduation from college. Today’s graduates are expected to have many careers and jobs, as compared to our generation in which lifelong employment was more the norm. For today’s college graduates who have grown up in this fast-paced environment, this constant change may be more acceptable. However, for those of us who grew up in an earlier generation, with expectations of more stability, the challenge may be greater. For example, recently in Bloomington, a major industrial plant announced it would close in a year. Many of its employees had been working for 20 or 30 years at this location, from which they had expected to retire. In this case, cheaper labor in Mexico seems to have been the driving factor for the change.

Many of our older employees are perceived to have “outdated” skills, an unwillingness to learn new skills, and less energy than their younger counterparts. The younger employees are sometimes perceived to be undisciplined, but bring creativity and energy to the workplace. These are gross generalizations, and all of us can cite many exceptions, but these perceptions do exist. So, another of the challenges we face is to retrain and re-energize one set of workers, and bring discipline and planning to another group. Again, citing an example of dislocated workers in Bloomington, several years ago a local business which had many long-term employees was bought out by a national company, then closed soon thereafter. In a recent newspaper article, several of those employees talked about being forced into new careers, and how challenging but also rewarding these opportunities had been.

Since most of us here deal with information technology in some form or another in higher education, we would like to focus our discussion in this environment. In the modern higher education community, there is increasing pressure to make information technology more relevant to the mission of the enterprise. Technology, once considered primarily a tactical tool for automation of tedious or impossible tasks, is now expected to add value to more strategic initiatives and core competencies of the university. Technology has also become much more pervasive in the university community, thereby increasing the demands for support. Roles and responsibilities of the users as well as the technology staff must be redefined, and more of a partnership environment must be encouraged.

These changes require changes in managerial philosophy as well; much more of a collaborative attitude between manager/employee, manager/manager, technology provider/customer and senior management/administration of university. This differs from earlier years in which technology providers were the “experts”, the main product they delivered was “technology”, and in many instances the technology organization “dictated” what technology was purchased and supported. This new partnership is represented by our role during the recent transition of management of the automation department at the Library, our customer. Wishing to make rapid changes in response to a consultant’s report, the library’s Dean requested help from UCS staff in fulfilling staff and patron automation needs. UCS sent a project leader to help define the structure and the staff responsibilities required for the automation piece of the library’s strategic initiatives. His charge was to work with this unit to devise a plan for them to implement, rather than our sending in a team of technical people to do the work.

First Steps
These challenges and problems were really brought home to us at Indiana University a few years ago with a change in leadership in the technology organization. We were challenged to recognize the changes facing higher
education, and to reorganize both the organization and our attitudes to be more flexible and adaptable to meet these challenges and changes. The terms collaboration, cooperation, and ability to change rapidly became the common buzzwords within our environment. For some employees these were welcome changes and natural inclinations, but for others these terms were difficult to place in the context of a technical organization.

However, a basic shift in management philosophy began to take place in the Spring of 1994. Transitions were made in the senior management ranks, and senior managers were rotated to new and different areas of responsibility. The expectation was that all senior managers would broaden their breadth of understanding of the organization and its services, in order to place more focus on strategic planning and implementation. Prior to this, we were organized with “stovepipes” of responsibility mostly around technologies, instead of services. One of the major challenges was to redirect our services for support of the university’s strategic mission and goals.

In the past, in many cases, the managerial ranks represented positions for promotions for highly valued technical staff members without managerial training or inclination. Our focus turned to hiring/promoting managers, assistant directors, and directors who also possessed “soft skills,” such as people management, service orientation, and a cooperative attitude in working with colleagues and customers. In recognition of the core competencies necessary to remain competitive--keeping close to customers, staying on top of technology and market trends, and striving to be ever more flexible (1)--the new senior manager was to be a role model, embracing, modeling, facilitating change and exerting constructive influence when working with others.

Indiana University has a broad-based training program within the Human Resources department featuring training specialists who have taught in major technical firms across the country. We were able to take advantage of their expertise in conducting programs on managing change, first in a session for the Associate V.P. along with the senior managers, followed by a larger group in which other managers and team leaders participated.

As a part of this training, managers were asked to commit to the concept that “the employer and the employee share responsibility for maintaining--even enhancing--the individual’s employability inside and outside the department.” (2) Staff development became the primary objective for all managers, emphasizing their “responsibility ...to show that they care about their employees ...(t)he result is a group of self-reliant workers--or a career resilient workforce.”(3)

**Barriers**

Obviously, changes in management philosophy of this magnitude do not come about without resistance or turmoil. Coupled with impending budget cuts, several layoffs and the threat of more, morale reached a new low. The new leadership had a very different approach, and combined with the natural resistance to change, the climate became quite intense. Even recognizing the need to respond to constantly changing technology, some directions were seemingly mandated without sufficient technical scrutiny or solid foundation, or at least without staff seeing the “burning platform” from which they needed to plunge or not survive. (Conner, 1992) Many staff were unable to see that the burning platform was the critical need to shift from being simply a technology organization to one which focused on serving the business needs of the institution, in order to ensure Indiana University’s, thus UCS’, survival and success.

Growing distrust of management due to cutbacks, poor communication and lack of dialogue placed a barrier to our incipient partnership. Cynicism was a common attitude and rumors spread ferociously, making it an uphill battle.

**Things which worked**

The senior management team then worked closely together to produce an internal paper, “The Organization and Employee of the Future: And the Future is Now!” in which traditional principles of employment were pronounced dead. The organization of the future could only support continued employment for those jobs that contribute to the stated goals of the organization, placing immediate demands on incumbents to become employees of the future--committed to those goals, adapting to change with multiple skills (Schoff, 1994).
For our partnership to be credible, management had to accept its obligations as well. Communicating organizational direction and engaging in dialogue, facilitating a professional growth plan and providing opportunities to achieve those development objectives for staff members became essential elements of the manager’s tasks. Once again, the training specialist from Human Resources have provided excellent on-site programs for our staff on setting and achieving objectives, giving constructive feedback, and coaching and leadership skills.

Fortunately, UCS already had a well-defined performance review process which included goal setting. An attempt was made to incorporate measurable goals into this process, with new focus on individual initiative and service orientation as well as professional growth. Since managers were rated on the basis of their success in developing staff, they allocated time, tools and training dollars to ensure employees achieved professional growth goals. Performance review ratings and merit increases reflected this success or lack of it for both manager and staff member.

Attempting these new measures in the midst of pressing deadlines, increasing demands for more services, and fewer resources, challenged us to create broader partnerships resulting in greater cross-unit cooperation among groups, and a greater focus on the success of the organization as opposed to the individual. Whenever a major new service or new initiative was identified, we looked across the organization to find the appropriate leaders and team members to successfully complete these assignments, as opposed to looking only within a specific unit.

We instituted a feedback questionnaire process to evaluate our success at instilling service orientation among our staff. Defining customer broadly, we solicited feedback from internal colleagues as well as external clients. Managers now use these results to help identify employee strengths or need for further development. Although still in need of refinement, both external recipients and our own staff strongly support the concept. We have created web forms to do the feedback process this year, with the responses submitted anonymously into a database. Although we have always encouraged comments with the ratings, the ease of the online process has produced many more comments this cycle, providing the recipient more constructive information about their service orientation.

We have researched and purchased more in-house training. A technical leader would preview training off-site (involving travel, lodging and per diem in addition to the course registration) and make recommendations enabling us to bring the same class on-site for as many as 20 people at less than $1,000 per person. We extended this partnership by inviting external customers with similar just in time training needs to participate in these sessions. We have negotiated vendor contracts with *free* training involved which has worked to our advantage. We continue to change and add classes as changes in technology evolve. We have found this to be invaluable for our own employees, and have received very positive feedback from our customers as well.

Reallocating monies to create a Staff Retraining Fund, we began to acquire a library of learning and assessment tools. UCS staff members longed to participate in our Education Program’s Certification classes in PC/Intel, DOS/Windows and LAN/Networking technologies intended for technical support providers of the local departments. These programs are evolving now to teach Windows 95 and NT. Strengthening an already solid partnership, UCS Human Resources encouraged offering the local support providers the CBT (computer-based tutorial) courseware purchased by the staff retraining fund for our own staff. In return, extra sessions of the Ed Cert were established for UCS staff members; we served as the testing audience, with a somewhat different perspective, for these new series of advanced technical training.

A local Toastmasters club was formed to enable employees to become more comfortable in making presentations, with the side benefit of developing camaraderie across various units. This activity provides leadership skills-building opportunities for staff members at all levels who perhaps had exchanged e-mail but never met.

Supporting the concept of enhancing each staff member’s future employability, we promoted the Staff Development Fund for grants to staff members who wished to pursue learning opportunities related to technology, but outside their current job responsibilities.
On the managerial side, senior managers and directors attended executive training/leadership conferences and classes, such as IBM’s Executive Training Center in Palisades, NY. Senior management was encouraged, and funds provided, to attend national meetings to keep abreast of changes and directions in computing in higher education. The idea of forming partnerships with various vendors to leverage scarce resources was stressed, and several important partnerships were formed.

A short list of priority strategic projects was identified, and cross-divisional teams were formed to develop both tactical and long-term solutions to deliver the services resulting from these initiatives. Staff with a variety of skills and backgrounds came together with common goals which had been set at the highest levels of the organization. By tying these initiatives to the strategic directions of the University as well, it was hoped that employees would begin to see how the mission of the University defined their role.

A staff survey was distributed to all employees seeking input into what they liked least/best and what they would like to change or add. Interestingly, yet not surprisingly, what some staff members liked most was the challenge presented by constant change, while for others that was what they liked least. We realize we must continue to present the reality of change while attempting to identify and reduce the stress agents inherent in our environment. We can also empower our staff by teaching them resilience allowing them to maximize their assimilation points for dealing with change, and minimize their usage each time they confront it. Communication is the primary means of accomplishing these goals.

We have instituted various forums to enhance communication such as a monthly meeting of all managers and senior level staff designed to be a two-way communication forum. We have had a variety of casual get-togethers for holidays, summer celebrations, and staff recognition that seem to be well received and provide an avenue for casual conversations among all levels of the organization. We must continue to analyze what works and what doesn’t and be willing to modify as we receive feedback on these programs.

It’s Never Finished!!
Since there is no silver bullet on the technology end, our goal was and is to enrich each employee’s skillset with habits and behaviors that enable them to continue to learn and adapt, thus cope more easily with the stresses with which they are faced. In turn, we have made a strong commitment to employees willing to learn new technologies or methods, who exhibit qualities of collaboration, and who continue to exhibit the ability to adjust to change.

All of this has not been without its difficulties, and continues to be a struggle for all of us. Stress in the workplace is discussed in many articles and journals, and having seen its effects firsthand, it is a very real concern for us. To reach our goals stated above to achieve resilience in the face of change and stress, we work closely and individually with employees to accommodate their personal needs. We have granted leaves of absence enabling staff members to write books, pursue musical interests, and spend more time with family members. We vary our training opportunities for different learning preferences and lifestyles. Understanding the pressures of management and the need to remain technically adept, we are considering experimenting with job rotations and sabbaticals.

Our efforts to promote staff employability have contributed to our losing staff members with critical market skills they obtained while working with us. Interestingly enough, some of these valued ex-employees are extending feelers, even formally applying, to work again within our organization. While we are taking a hard look at our compensation policies and variable pay options, we are also concentrating on enhancing other factors that make a job attractive and encourage commitment from employees. For excellent staff, an environment that offers challenge, cultivates growth opportunity and encourages feedback and dialogue can offset even the most attractive salary offer.

In the midst of the restructuring of our department, our Associate V.P. for Information Technology resigned in July 1995. A task force charged with defining the portfolio for the new, full Vice President for Information Technology recommended to the University president that voice communications be included. Thus, the horizontal merger of
Communication Services and University Telecommunications (part of UCS) under the Office of Information Technology umbrella took place last July 1. The challenge of integrating units with a long history of disputes and radically different leadership styles and funding models is compelling us to reevaluate and adapt our employee strategies once again.

Understanding that new leadership will have an impact, we nonetheless made an attempt to be proactive and responsive to the staff survey that indicated a need to articulate our direction more clearly. A task force of six non-managerial staff members revisited and revised the UCS Mission and Values statements.

Empowering staff was central to the new departmental mission, and the task force learned the meaning of empowerment from both the positive aspects of partnering and from the frustrating even overwhelming attempts to gain acceptance for their document from their colleagues. This group not only drafted but also presented new statements first to senior management, then to other managers and team leaders.

A new Vice President for Information Technology joined us in January 1997. What will this mean in the way of change for the organization? We do know that both personal and professional change seems to be inevitable in today’s society, and we have learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t. However, we can’t assume that even these experiences will hold true in the future. It would be nice if we could say: we studied it, we made changes and we’re all done, but in order to be successful as an organization, we are challenged to continually survey the staff, make corrections in our approaches, listen, listen, listen, and communicate, communicate, communicate!

Footnotes:


2 Ibid., p. 87-88.

3 Ibid., p. 88.

References:
