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New Work Systems at Harvard pilot project aims to redesign work, engage employees

By Esther Vegh

Resource staff

Lisa Hoppie and Paul Rizzi both report to Stephanie Echavarri, assistant director of benefits in Harvard's Benefits Services Group (BSG). But in a recent project in BSG, each was asked how to improve the department – and each had an equal say in how the unit redesigned jobs and teams.

“I had never heard of having staff and management work together, where there were no set roles, where everybody was equal at the table,” says Hoppie, a benefits consultant in BSG. “I was skeptical.”

BSG is a pilot site for a project run jointly by the University and the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers (HUCTW). The New Work Systems at Harvard (NWSH) project aims to increase teamwork and employee involvement in decision-making, with a goal, the participants say, of making “Harvard work better, and be a better place to work.”

There's no question among business experts that engaged employees are productive employees. In research stretching back as far as the 1940s and 1950s, behavioral scientists showed that getting employee improved both morale and work outcomes. Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford Graduate School of Business, has said that employers whose workers are engaged can experience as much as 30 to 40 percent gain in productivity as well as lower turnover.

Experts point to a number of ways that employers can engage employees: employee surveys and focus groups, “town meetings” with senior management, group volunteer projects and opportunities for employees to share outside interests.

Five pilot sites

According to Bill Jaeger director of HUCTW, the ideas of new work systems are at the very core of the HUCTW's philosophy. “There's a better way for people to interact in the workplace than some of the traditional hierarchical structures,” he says. “There are too many Harvard workplaces where staff are not engaged,” – a situation that he says hurts Harvard as much as employees.

Jaeger notes that with the NWSH project, the University and HUCTW have agreed to attempt to involve staff members more directly in questions like work schedules, job descriptions and training plans.

Scott Camlin, a consultant who has worked with several pilot-site departments, describes the basic idea of new work systems as one where employees take responsibility for

directing their own work, often working in teams. The teams are responsible not just for getting the work done, but also for solving problems and making recommendations for improvements.

Although interest in new work systems goes back to at least the 1999 HUCTW contract, the project began in earnest in 2001, when the University provided seed money to set up five pilot projects throughout the University, in the Harvard Medical School, Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Kennedy School of Government, and two in Central Administration.

Jaeger says participants are implementing the projects in three phases: learning about the new work concepts and analyzing the unit's work; redesigning elements of the work; and making changes and ongoing adjustments. "Finally, at a macro level, we need to evaluate the projects. We want to learn which ideas can be used more broadly at Harvard," he says.

Bill Murphy, director of labor and employee relations for Harvard, who is on the steering committee for the project, notes that at Harvard the pilot projects have taken a variety of approaches, although all the recommendations have emphasized skill training and better communications.

New Work at work

In BSG, NWSH has resulted in a reorganization of the work of most staff members. Employees who both answered questions and processed paperwork have now split into two teams, each focusing on one area. BSG has established levels within each team, so that employees can move up as they gain skills. In the future, the department plans to compensate staff as they acquire more complex skills.

To prepare for such a large change, BSG began by holding a wide-open daylong session, where staff could discuss every aspect of the department and the work.

"Some of the things identified as problems were 'low hanging fruit' that could be easily addressed," says Echavarri. Though the changes were small, making them was important.

"It showed that the department was serious about listening to employees," says Hoppie.

A core group of BSG staff from all levels has continued to discuss how to address the more fundamental issues. The reorganization of jobs began last October, just before the University's benefits open enrollment period, and Echavarri can already point to some successes. "Our customer service team answered more calls, and calls were answered more quickly than the year before," she says.

As for the processing team, Hoppie notes there's no backlog: "It feels good to be able to

say that!”

Staff are also beginning to see improvements in their own jobs. Paul Rizzi used to review data transactions and analyze problems – “pretty dry,” he says. Now he trains his coworkers, who come to him with systems questions. “Sometimes [an answer] becomes the topic of my next training. It's a lot more fun.”

At FAS’s Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, the changes have been less structural in nature, but according to staff, no less profound. The Center got involved with NWSH when they were anticipating an office move and wanted see if they could improve workflow as part of the transition.

“It’s been much more than transferring offices,” says Steven Bloomfield associate director of the Center. “It’s been about management and professional cooperation that embraces community, honesty and democracy in the workplace.”

The process at the Weatherhead Center began in much the same way as at BSG, with a cross-departmental group that initially even included one faculty member. But rather than redesign jobs, the Weatherhead Center team focused on the workplace environment. Staff perceived secrecy around decision-making, felt isolated within their own compartments of the Center and saw few opportunities to advance.

One of the major outcomes has been a biweekly meeting at which all staff members – and topics – are welcome. The meeting used to be limited to upper staff. “They’d meet and we all wondered, ‘What are they doing in there?’” says Amanda Flohr-Egile, director of web communications.

Flohr-Egile admits that when the meeting was opened to all staff last spring, she doubted the extent to which people would participate – but they have. “We’ve discussed salaries, and other kinds of difficult issues.” Such discussions have helped foster confidence in the meetings and have lead to a cultural change at the Center, say Bloomfield and Flohr-Egile.

The Center compiled a list of staff members’ skills, from Japanese to database programming, in order to put them to better use. Internal communications has been strengthened through the Center’s intranet, where all meeting agendas and notes are now online, along with information about who handles what tasks in the Center.

“The intranet helped to build a community here,” says Bloomfield.

In a sign that the openness is having an effect, the number of Center staff who have been promoted or reclassified has increased. Still, despite the enthusiasm for the process, the Weatherhead Center didn’t redesign their work to include teams. “We developed a consensus about the things we were ready to embrace and have left others for the future,” he says.

In fact, of the five pilots, only BSG has begun implementing a team approach. In two of the pilot sites, the changes are on hold due to leadership changes, while the other pilot sites, have taken different approaches to addressing the concerns of employees.

And therein lies a major criticism of new work systems: that the changes are too slow and too particular to each department to have widespread appeal across such a diverse and decentralized workplace as Harvard.

Camlin notes that some of these challenges stem from the very goals of the project. “We’re not just changing the work people do, but also changing the roles we play – the notion of staff versus manager.” He says that staff are as just as likely to resist taking on responsibilities as managers are to giving them up.

Alex Chisholm, who worked at the Graduate School of Education and is now writing case studies based on the pilots for the HUCTW, is thoughtful when asked about the lengthy process. “A lot of places around the University pride themselves on being egalitarian. So, it’s a challenge to delve further into that. It’s more than just getting input. It’s building something new together.”