Who’s listening to your employees?

A survey of more than 3,000 employees indicates that employees think their concerns and complaints are more likely to be heard by workgroup supervisors than by organisational management.

Research undertaken by Professor John Benson from the School of Management’s Centre for Human Resource Management, in collaboration with Associate Professor Michelle Brown from the University of Melbourne, found that employees see the greatest opportunities for voice at the workgroup level.

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Who’s listening to your employees?

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“Historically, unions have been the major channel by which workers could express grievances” said Professor Benson.

“However, over the last twenty years, organisations have been introducing more internal communication channels that encourage workers to share their concerns directly with their supervisors.”

Professor Benson recommends that organisations pay close attention to the voice opportunities they provide to employees.

“It’s not enough to just create new communication channels” he points out. “Employees have to recognise and value the voice opportunities an organisation provides.”

The research team asked employees at a large public sector scientific research organisation to describe their perceptions of voice opportunities at the workgroup level (e.g. “My supervisor is willing to listen to work-related problems”) and at the organisation level (e.g. “I can make my views known to [organisation’s] management”). Employees reported more opportunities to express voice to their workgroup supervisors than to organisational management.

But not everyone in the organisation perceived the same level of voice opportunity. First, employees were most likely to perceive opportunities for both workgroup and organisation-level voice when they were highly committed to the organisation.

“That relationship is consistent with theories about how organisational voice operates” explained Professor Benson.

“Dissatisfied employees can either express voice or they can leave. Employees who are more attached to their organisations are more likely to try and change the things they don’t like.”

Second, employees who were members of a union perceived the lowest opportunities for voice at the organisation level. This finding surprised the research team.

“We expected union membership to enhance perceptions of voice, especially at the organisation level” Professor Benson said.

“Unions are most visible at the organisation level, and unions negotiate the employment conditions that affect employees on an organisation-wide basis.”

The researchers suggest that the negative relationship between union membership and perceptions of organisational voice may indicate that union members are either more dissatisfied with their employer or that they have higher expectations for voice than non-union members.

“Employees who were members of a union perceived the lowest opportunities for voice...”

Voice opportunities are especially important at the workgroup level. Organisation-level issues are settled at upper levels of the organisation’s hierarchy, which may be psychologically and physically distanced from an individual employee. But employees interact with their co-workers and their supervisor on a daily basis, and these interactions have a big impact on whether an employee perceives the organisation as a good place to work. Therefore, management needs to ensure that supervisors are well-trained in communication and collaborative decision-making skills.

Professor Benson suggests that the research findings are important for unions as well as organisations.

“The challenge for unions is to encourage their members to see union officials’ involvement in organisational decision-making as providing strong employee voice at the organisation level.”

Unions might be able to use Internet and e-mail technology to help members make the connection between official union activity and their personal opportunities for voice.


If you would like to learn more about the project and its results, contact:

Professor John Benson
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CHRM Newsletter
Issue 2, March 2010
What is CHRM?

The Centre for Human Resource Management (CHRM) was established in 2008 and is housed in the School of Management on UniSA’s City West campus.

CHRM brings together researchers with expertise in human resource management (HRM). CHRM members address major HRM related challenges in the South Australian and international contexts. The Centre’s primary objective is increasing the quality, quantity and impact of research in HRM and developing industry collaborations.

What’s New at CHRM?

CHRM researchers had a strong presence at the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management held December 2009 in Melbourne, presenting papers on motivation, psychological contracts, employee recruitment, organisational commitment, and employee retention.

CHRM is celebrating the receipt of a new Discovery Grant funded by the Australian Research Council. The grant will support a three year project focusing on mature age workers (see Page 4 for details).

CHRM bids farewell to Professor and CHRM Co Director Prashant Bordia. Professor Bordia is moving to the Australian National University in Canberra. He will be missed by his CHRM colleagues, and we wish him success in his new adventure.

We hope you enjoy reading the CHRM Newsletter. You can learn more about CHRM, its people and its activities at our website: www.unisa.edu.au/chrm

Professor Carol Kulik
Centre for HRM
Director

CHRM-ASHRR Forums

Since 2008, CHRM has been the South Australian research partner for ASHRR – the Australian Senior Human Resources Roundtable.

ASHRR is a network of senior HR executives whose aim is to facilitate a more effective dialogue between HR practice and research. The CHRM-ASHRR partnership sponsors twice-yearly events, forums in which local senior HR practitioners and HR academics can network and debate emerging HR issues.

The next CHRM-ASHRR forum will be on Wednesday 24th March 2010. At this forum Dr Gerry Treuren (School of Management, UniSA) will lead a discussion on ‘Making businesses environmentally aware: The HR challenge’. The forum will also include presentations from Mr Bob Cooper (HR Manager, AdelaideAqua) and Dr Sally Russell (Griffith Business School, Griffith University).

CHRM Seminars

The CHRM Practitioner Seminars, coordinated by Dr Gerry Treuren, showcase industry best practice exemplars and provide an opportunity to forge links between practitioners and CHRM community.

The seminars attract students from the undergraduate and postgraduate HRM programs, past students and interested practitioners. Several interesting seminars have been planned for 2010 and include:

March 24, 2010 ‘The Baulderstone Safety Journey’ presented by Mr Chris Reynolds, General Manager, HR, Safety & Corporate Relations, Baulderstone Pty Limited.

March 25, 2010 ‘Getting serious about greening the workplace’ presented by Dr Gerry Treuren and Dr Sukhbir Sandhu, School of Management, UniSA and Dr Sally Russell, Griffith Business School, Griffith University.

May 21, 2010 ‘Designing and implementing Organisational Development programs aiming to change the face of local government and to cultivate high potential leaders’ presented by Ms Michelle Holland, Manager of Organisational Development, City of Salisbury Council.

If you are able to join us, please visit our website for full details and updates www.unisa.edu.au/chrm
The new environmental skill shortage

Employers are beginning to face a new type of skill shortage: finding people with the skills to build green workplaces.

Organisations need the advanced research and development skills used to design and implement environmentally clean technologies. They also need the people management skills to support and maintain environmentally-efficient business practices in the workplace.

What does this mean for HR? HR practitioners will play a central role in managing this skill shortage, developing and retaining the skilled workforce needed to implement workplace sustainability, and managing the changes in employee practices and behaviours required to reduce environmental impacts.

But that could generate a spillover skill shortage directly within the HR profession. The demand for environmentally skilled employees will increase the demand for HR practitioners with skills in managing employee retention and large-scale organisational change efforts.

HR will be a strategic partner in tomorrow’s green workplaces, collaborating with line management and technical experts in identifying zero-footprint work practices and training and coaching the workforce in adopting these new work arrangements.

Managing for environmental change creates a whole new ball game for HR practitioners.

If you are interested in learning more about the role HR plays in managing environmental change, join us at an upcoming CHRM event (details on Page 3). For more details, contact:

Dr Gerry Treuren
gerry.treuren@unisa.edu.au

What CHRM is working on

Working against type: Mature-age workers

Demographic challenges are creating a new urgency around the management and retention of mature age workers (45 years of age and older). The proportion of mature age workers in the Australian population is increasing but labour force participation rates are low in the older age categories.

Workplaces are not always friendly to mature age workers. Mature age workers are sometimes stereotyped as less competent than their younger colleagues, and this can make it more difficult for a mature age worker to find suitable employment. Further, once on the job, a mature age worker may find it difficult to work with younger supervisors and coworkers who endorse traditional age stereotypes.

Mature age workers who are aware of age stereotypes may fear that their behaviour will inadvertently confirm their colleagues’ negative expectations. These anxieties can interfere with performance and, in the long run, lower the motivation of a mature age worker and lead to a general disengagement from work.

Professor Carol Kulik is embarking on a three-year project examining the experiences of mature-age workers in the job market and on the job. The purpose of the project is to identify organisational policies and practices that create and maintain age-friendly work environments.

If you would like to learn more about the project, contact:

Professor Carol Kulik
carol.kulik@unisa.edu.au

Would you like to receive future copies of our newsletter and updates on CHRM’s activities? Please join our mailing list by emailing sanjee.perera@unisa.edu.au