

Influences on Professional Behavior of Agricultural Communications Staff

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This study examined the daily influences that affected the behavior of agricultural communications personnel as professional communicators. It focused on the conditions that the employees perceived as influencing their behavior and how these phenomena related to the total communications process of the department. The researcher used Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory method of qualitative research. The findings of this study suggest that changing organizational needs are affecting the professional behavior of communications personnel. The relationship between agricultural communications departments and their clientele, both internal and external, is changing because of budget-slashing priorities common throughout institutions of higher education.

Introduction

In order to examine how perceptions of professional behavior by agricultural communications personnel affects the total communications process of their department, a researcher requires a thorough interpretation of the department's environment. This interpretation, in turn, requires an analysis of all events, experiences, and relationships that affect communication, and so demands a qualitative research agenda that differs from the empirical research method that is typically applied to test environments.

Prominent methods of research assume there is an empirical reality that can be uncovered through a process controlled by the researcher, who maintains an objective separation from the study's

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topic. However, qualitative research seeks not to control but to uncover its topic. As one proponent puts it, qualitative research is the one systematic approach in the social sciences that leads us into those separate realities which others have learned and which they use to make sense out of their worlds (Spradley, 1980). Thus, proponents of qualitative research agree that truth in the fields of human affairs is better approximated by statements that are rich with the sense of human encounter rather than propositional statements of lawful relationships (Stake, 1978). The grounded theory method of Strauss and Corbin emphasizes the human element, allowing the researcher to make inferences from observations of the subjects' behavior, their artifacts, and their conversations (Spradley, 1980).

Purpose

In the past 25 years technology has increasingly changed the work environment. The human-to-technology relationship requires increased professional skills from the communications employee, and budget conditions often interfere with the adaptation process. This study was guided by questions designed to examine how individuals perceive themselves in the work environment:

1. How do individuals perceive the impact of technology on their status as professionals?
2. Do individuals perceive a shift occurring within the organizational structure?
3. What major factors contribute to changes that are occurring in agricultural communications departments?

Research Participants

The participants in the study included members of an agricultural communications department, administrators who were directly responsible to the department, and administrators who were responsible to several areas of their division. Thirty-three persons participated in structured and nonstructured, open-ended interviews. Six of these had secretarial responsibilities to the department, three had administrative responsibilities directly and indirectly related to the department, and the balance were professional staff who performed specific communication responsibilities. To obtain the data for this study, the researcher had to protect the anonymity of the subjects. Therefore, the fictional names "Pine Creek University," located in the community of "Silver" were adopted.

Research Design

According to Spradley (1990), ethnography always implies a theory of culture. This theory assumes that shared beliefs and

knowledge among individuals in a shared environment constitutes a community. The researcher's observations suggest that an agricultural communications department constitutes a credible community. After reviewing the data collected by the researcher, objective third parties confirmed the researcher's conclusion.

This study began in August 1991 through correspondence with 15 agricultural communications departments of land-grant universities throughout the United States. Each department received a letter of explanation outlining the research intent. Additionally, a list of questions about the different types of communication technology maintained within the department was included. The department head was also asked if he/she would allow the researcher to study the department. One willing department, typical among agricultural communications departments with regard to the clients it served and the communications services it offered, was chosen. Data collection began in January 1992 and ended by April 1992. Participant observation, interviews, and an examination of documents relevant to the department's communication's technology were the collection methods used. Together these methods provided the "emic and etic qualities" that Cockrell found necessary to allow a researcher to draw inferences from a study.

Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory method was chosen to evaluate the data collected. They define this method as follows:

A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship to each other (p. 23).

According to Spradley, grounded theory can be developed in any substantive area of human experience (1980). Thus, an ethnographic approach to discovering grounded theory provided, in Strauss and Corbin's terms, an "excellent strategy."

Research Setting

The agricultural communications department selected typifies most departments today. The population of the "Silver" community, where the "Pine Creek University's" agricultural communications department is located, is about 25,000 people and mostly rural in nature. The town is similar to most land-grant university towns in that the student population adds one-third to one-half to the census during the school year. Agriculture is the primary focus of the department, with a recent influx of urban programs.

Three years prior to the beginning of this research, agricultural communications employees were situated in three departments, each responsible to only one of the units in the division. As part of an overall consolidation plan, all of the communications personnel were combined to form a new department, responsible to the whole division. With the new administrative structure in place, employees experienced problems with the administration of the budget and the change in responsibilities of the department with regard to percentage of time allowed for the different clientele. These problems created some stress in the employees who had been accustomed to working for a specific program area. During the researcher's visits to the department, he discovered that about 50 percent of the employees accepted the change in structure and about 50 percent experienced difficulties with the change.

The office setting of the department had ample available space and provided sufficient work areas for personnel. Technological equipment was integrated into the office setting and enabled the employees to provide sufficient services in many of the communications areas of work. However, there were some communications inadequacies that hindered the ability of some units to fulfill the clients' expectations. For instance, the department was housed on the first floor of one of the primary administration buildings. Most major clients of the department were located at such distances from the department that it was inconvenient for them to use the department's services. Additionally, a recent change in the department's name created some confusion for the clientele. Many workers recognized and were troubled by these difficulties.

Analysis of Data

Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory method was applied to analyze the data from the perceptions of the personnel within the Pine Creek University agricultural communications department. This method attempts to formulate a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This formulation requires the researcher to remain involved in the interpretation of the data.

From the beginning of the research process, data were analyzed through open coding, described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data. The researcher located conceptual labels taken from the information gathered during the interviews. Each label was written on a sheet of paper, and these sheets were examined for similarities, then grouped accordingly and categorized.

In the next step of the analysis process, relationships between the categories and subcategories were recognized through the process of axial coding. Categories, or phenomena, were coded into a paradigm in accordance with an analysis of (1) the causal conditions that gave rise to the phenomenon, (2) the context in which a specific set of properties related to the phenomenon, (3) the strategies devised to respond to the phenomenon, and (4) the outcomes of the action/interaction strategies (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The last step in the analytic process was selective coding. From an evaluation of the previous analysis, the core category was identified. The other categories were combined into the core category by using the coding paradigm—thus relationships developed between the categories to the core category and to each other (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The findings of this study took into account the conditions perceived by the researcher and the employees as influencing the daily routines of the agricultural communications personnel, the relationship of these conditions, and the impact they had on the employees' job performance.

From the data, the core category was determined to be "influences on professional behavior patterns." Five other categories were determined to be important to integrate into the core category:

1. Influence of budget constraints on the department.
2. Climatic factors as determined by cultural conditions.
3. Value from technology integration.
4. Stress factors interfering with job performance.
5. Factors that affect production efficiency.

Influence of Budget Constraints

A shared belief among the departmental employees was that a decreasing budget led to loss of personnel, increased workloads, and heightened expectations. Also, the employees believed that improper planning had compounded these conditions. For example, the increase to a broader-based clientele had created some confusion for the employees because of changes in their responsibilities. At the same time, employees were faced with higher expectations in the newly unified department. However, higher expectations meant facing an increase and diversification in work assignments without time to adjust to new responsibilities. These expectations also made additional technology a high priority for the department, but employees were skeptical that they would be given the equipment to help them meet their new expectations.

Climatic Factors

The employees' motivation was affected by the organizational changes within their division. Historically, each employee had been accountable to a single unit. The consolidation of the department united all communications personnel, who previously were serving individual units. The new mission of the department brought about a change in focus from a narrow-based clientele to a much wider-based clientele. In other words, the cultural conditions of the department caused individuals to change their allegiance from a single unit to an all-encompassing division. Acceptance of the change was occurring slowly. For some, the change offered more opportunities to expand their experiences. However, for others, the new system of personnel interaction created confusion because previous work environments had not dictated a need for cross-sectional involvement.

Technology Integration

The predominant opinion of the employees was that technology was a tool helping to enhance their professional performance. This tool offsets increased responsibilities by adding efficiency to their work habits. Some employees called technology a "helpmate," similar to another worker to assist them with their production chores. Because of increasing pressures applied to the employees to produce, they believed that technology relieved some stress by increasing job turnover and still maintaining, or increasing, quality. The initial costs may be high, but the long-term benefits, at this time still inconclusive, were believed by the employees to outweigh any negatives that may exist. These employees believed that they must stay on the "cutting edge." Several of them used this term when describing the proper way to match available resources to the experience and knowledge of the user. These people were very conscious of quality, and the suggestion of technological integration motivated and improved their professional behavior.

Stress Factors in Job Performance

Stress factors in job performance were enhanced by changes in the organizational structure. There were several degrees of stress within the department, and the significance of stress on professional behavior was influenced primarily by the degree of individual acceptance of change. Decreasing budgets necessitated changes. Because of these changes, expectations were increasing; therefore, the need to increase professional knowledge and skills was fast becoming a priority of the department. At the same time, professional conferences and other training opportunities were fewer due to budget limitations. These limitations were discouraging to the professionals, who believed that

the administrators had other priorities that targeted other interests, meaning less resources available for professional development.

Internal communications was poor inside both the department and the division. The budget planning process was damaged because the employees felt "left out" of the plan, thus creating various "mood swings" among the personnel. In some, this exclusion caused a lack of interest in attempting communicating between sections. Others, however, saw the budget crisis as an opportunity to enhance their professional standing. Creativity became paramount to them, the driving force behind their professional motivation.

Factors Affecting Production Efficiency

The production efficiency of the agricultural communications department was affected by conditions changing the way services were provided. The employees perceived an increase in production expectations because of the consolidation of the unit. The additional expectations, employees believed, hindered efficiency because they were operating with a larger workload in proportion to a smaller budget. They believed that technology that would provide support for any weakness that occurred during the production process must be available to maintain quality. Teamwork was very important to the personnel, and they believed that the most effective way to increase teamwork was to provide funding for newer technology and for maintenance of existing technology. Planning and training were weak links in the production scheme, according to the employees, but they hoped that effective evaluation methods would increase quality and professionalism and create a better communications network that would in turn enhance efficiency.

Influences on Professional Behavior Patterns

Since departmental personnel were faced both with factors that they *could* and *could not* control, their professional behavior was affected both positively and negatively. The budget, a factor that could not be controlled, was causing employees to re-evaluate their professional behavior. Taking a positive perspective, some employees believed that they focused more on their work, which became more challenging because of broader responsibilities. Employees taking the opposite perspective dwelled on the possible loss of personnel and the probability of less technological improvement.

All employees were increasingly aware of the effect the consolidation into a divisional unit had on the production efficiency of the department. Therefore, they discussed ideas about procedural changes that would enable them to become more diversified in their communications work. Some people specifically noted knowledge

and skill-based areas—such as enhancement of creativity—increased diversification of production and internal teamwork, which allowed for more cross-sectional work, and produced a more complete communications package for a client. Two people emphasized cross-sectional work as a key factor in the department's survivability. Not everyone accepted this idea. Some people were having great difficulty accepting the change in their normal (or traditional) responsibilities. Several said this was a result of not being informed about the plan the administrators had for the department. Employees who still had loyalty to their former units perceived realignment as a personal affront. Their resistance will continue to be a stress factor in the workplace until they accept the organizational change.

Conclusions

It is becoming a predominant practice among higher education institutions to offset budget losses via attrition. This practice increases the workloads of the remaining employees. This study occurred in a communications department where budget constraints were increasing; thus, efforts to reduce expenditures were causing stressful conditions throughout the department, affecting the performance of the employees.

Several key areas prominently increased stress. Divided perceptions of administrators influenced the behavior of the employees. Employees who believed they were negatively perceived tended to dwell more on the changes from the normal, or traditional, environment. These employees had a tendency to feel threatened by any intrusion on their normal routines. Changes in the organizational structure also influenced the professional behavior of employees. Those who feared the unknown had great difficulty accepting changes. Others, who welcomed changes, tended to view them as an opportunity to expand their professional skills.

For the most part, technology was accepted as a tool that acted as a "helpmate" in the production process of the department. It provided a mechanism to expand internal and external communications, and should be included in the strategic planning process of the organization. However, administrators should be made aware of the belief that technology replaces personnel.

The most prevalent problem area in the workplace concerned communications. Impaired communications between administrators and communications personnel caused a breakdown in operations, resulting in decreased production efficiency. Lack of communication also caused confusion for employees who were not informed of the priorities and plans of the organization. When employees were

informed and made to feel a part of the process, they believed their efficiency and creativity dramatically increased.

The researcher recommends that a plan that includes communications personnel should be developed to implement goals and objectives for the division's communications needs. Additionally, cross-sectional work should be increased to provide greater service to the clientele and enhance the image of the department. The resulting image enhancement would give proof of the value of the agricultural communications department.

Finally, the researcher noted that the term "professionalism" had different meanings throughout the department. However, as communication skills within a department improve, the discrepancy in the practical understanding of the term should decrease.

Implications

In the researcher's opinion, the kinds of aforementioned influences on the professional behavior of employees may be found within many other types of work environments—in higher education institutions as well as industry-related settings. A contemporary world of work, dominated by top-down decision making and constant pressure from multiple external sources, is often not conducive to maintaining a secure, confident, and effective work force. The author realizes that the inherent parameters of the research method used in this study prohibit extrapolation of its findings to other groups and settings. However, the phenomena observed in this study do, indeed, exist and so must be addressed if communicators are to keep pace with an increasingly technological workplace.

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