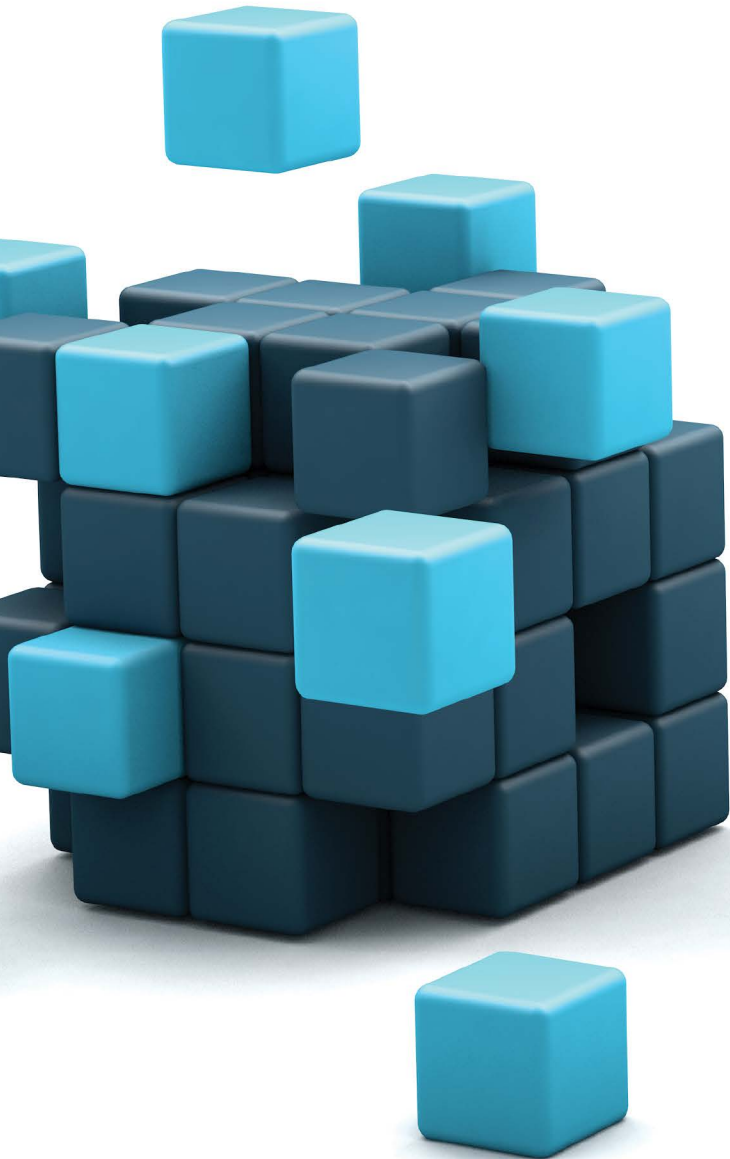


The Higher Education Workplace

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HR Communities of Practice

Building Competencies and Solving
Problems Through Group Think

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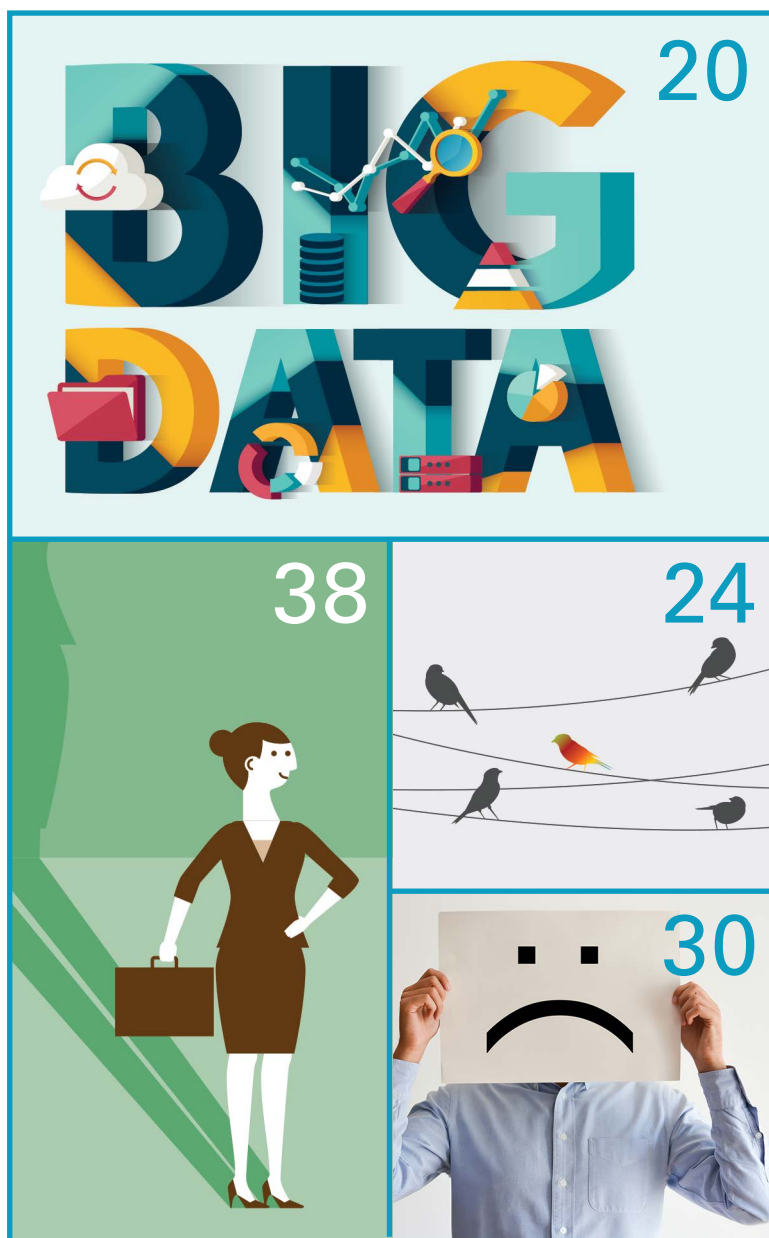
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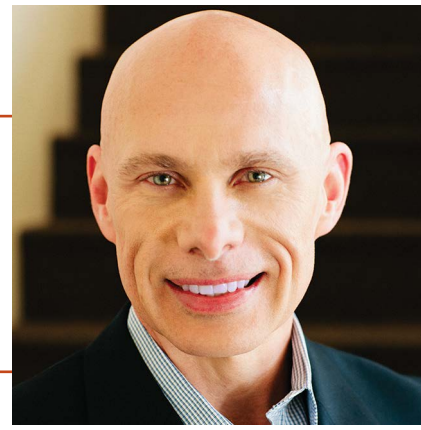
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The FLSA Roller Coaster Ride Continues

By Andy Brantley, CUPA-HR President and Chief Executive Officer



Tuesday, November 22, 6 p.m. EST ...

I'm standing in my kitchen, catching up with my parents and my sons who had just arrived from out of town for the Thanksgiving holiday, when my phone starts ringing. On the other end is CUPA-HR's chief government relations officer, Josh Ulman. While Josh and I frequently talk — sometimes every other day, sometimes every day and sometimes hourly — we rarely talk during the evening, so I knew something of importance must be happening. Sure enough, he was calling to let me know that a U.S. district court judge from Texas had issued a preliminary injunction postponing the effective date of the changes to the Fair Labor Standards Act.

From Judge Amos L. Mazzant:

"... the Department's Final Rule ... is hereby enjoined. Specifically, Defendants are enjoined from implementing and enforcing the following regulations as amended by 81 Fed. Reg. 32,391; 29 C.F.R. §§ 541.100, 541.200, 541.204, 541.300, 541.400, 541.600, 541.602, 541.604, 541.605, and 541.607 pending further order of this Court ... With the Final Rule, the Department exceeds its delegated authority and ignores Congress's intent by raising the minimum salary level such that it supplants the duties test. Consequently, the Final Rule does not meet [Chevron's test for deference] and is unlawful."

I couldn't help but flash back to our May 2014 meeting with the Secretary of Labor and his staff to discuss potential changes to the FLSA. We emphasized in that meeting and every subsequent meeting with Department of Labor decision makers that we supported a much-needed and long-overdue change to the salary threshold. We even went so far as to recommend a change to somewhere in the low to mid \$30,000s.

But the preliminary and final regulations went too far. When the preliminary regulations were shared with us and we were given just a few short weeks to respond, you and hundreds of your colleagues rallied with us to provide data to DOL that outlined the impact and the magnitude of a salary threshold increase of more than 100 percent. When our request for reconsideration was ignored, you

worked with us to shift our efforts to compliance ... the challenging and daunting task of changing the status of thousands of employee positions from exempt to non-exempt even though the duties clearly met the duties test for exempt status; the very difficult task of identifying additional funds to ensure that some employees remained in exempt-status positions; and the even more difficult task of explaining all of these changes to other campus leaders and the entire campus community.

Like many of you, I have mixed thoughts regarding the injunction. It would have been welcome news six months ago, but issuing it just a week prior to the implementation deadline creates even more work and confusion and puts all of us in limbo for an unspecified period of time. In the meantime, you and your colleagues have had to make even more difficult decisions. If changes had not been made, did you indefinitely postpone implementation? If communications had already occurred, did you send additional communications to postpone implementation? If changes had already been made, did you stay the course or did you reverse some or all of those changes? In summary — what a mess, with no end in sight!

So what happens next? Will an appeal by DOL overturn the order granting the preliminary injunction? Since the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals very rarely overturns preliminary injunctions, probably not. What happens then could take several forms, but it is likely that this will drag past the inauguration of President-elect Trump. If that is the case, where will the FLSA mess fall on the priority list?

Far be it from me to predict anything these days. One thing that is certain is that the CUPA-HR national office will immediately share information with you as soon as we receive it. But for now, hang in there — and know that we are here to help!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Brantley". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Andy Brantley | CUPA-HR President and CEO

New EEOC Wellness Rules Kick in January 1

January is almost upon us, and now is the time to make sure you'll be in compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)'s new wellness rules that take effect on New Year's Day.

The new rules — which include new incentive limits regulations, a new notice requirement pertaining to health-related inquiries and a new definition of what's "voluntary" — were issued by the EEOC last spring and affect wellness programs that make medical inquiries and conduct medical exams, with perhaps the most common example being wellness plans that contain health risk assessments.

Complying With the ADA

Here's the problem the new rules were meant to address: When the ADA was passed in 1990, it said it was permissible for employers to conduct medical inquiries and examinations of employees as part of "voluntary health programs" (a.k.a., wellness programs). The problem was that the terms "voluntary" and "health programs" were never clearly defined. The new rules do just that. Here's what employers need to know — and come into compliance with — now.

What's "Voluntary?"

The EEOC states a voluntary health/wellness program that includes medical inquiries and exams is one that:

- does not require participation;
- does not deny access to health insurance or benefits to an employee for non-participation;
- does not retaliate against, interfere with, coerce, intimidate or threaten any employee who does not participate or fails to achieve certain health outcomes;
- provides a notice that explains the medical information that will be obtained, how it will be used, who will receive it, and the restrictions on disclosure (see Notice Requirement section below); and

- complies with the rule's incentive limits (see Incentive Limits section below).

What's a "Health Program?"

An employee health program (i.e. wellness program) that includes medical inquiries and exams is one that must be reasonably designed to promote health or prevent disease. For that to be the case, it must:

- have a reasonable chance of improving the health of, or preventing disease in, participating individuals;
- not be overly burdensome, a subterfuge for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act or other laws prohibiting employment discrimination, or highly suspect in the method chosen to promote health or prevent disease;
- not exist merely to shift costs to employees based on their health;
- not be used only to predict an employer's future health costs;
- use the health information collected from participants to provide follow-up information or advice to those participants or design a program that addresses at least some conditions identified; and
- not impose unreasonably intrusive procedures, an overly burdensome amount of time for participation, or significant costs related to medical exams on employees.

Incentive Limits

To be classified as voluntary, the incentive limits health programs must abide by are:

- 30 percent of the total cost of the self-only version of the plan in which the employee is enrolled — when the employer requires the employee to be enrolled in a particular health plan in order to participate in the wellness program;
- 30 percent of the lowest-cost major medical self-only plan the employer offers — when the employer

offers more than one self-only health plan and does not require the employee to be enrolled in a particular health plan to participate in the wellness program; and

- 30 percent of the total cost to a 40-year-old non-smoker purchasing self-only coverage under the second-lowest-cost silver plan available on the state or federal exchange in the location that the employer identifies as its principal place of business — when the employer does not offer a health plan, but offers a wellness program that is open to employees.

Notice Requirement

To ensure employees' participation in a health program is voluntary, the final rule has added a new notice requirement for employers. In a nutshell, the EEOC says that the notice must clearly explain what medical information will be obtained, how the information will be used, who will receive the information and an explanation of disclosure protections.

Employers can use the EEOC's sample notice to satisfy the requirement (you can find it at <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/regulations/ada-wellness-notice.cfm>). You'll want to take note of the areas in brackets — [space for company-specific info] — that the agency has left blank for you to fill out. But, for the most part, it's a plug-and-play document.

In a separate document (available at <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/regulations/qanda-ada-wellness-notice.cfm>), the EEOC answers some key questions about the notice requirement. Some of the answers worth noting are:

- **If an employer already provides a notice under HIPAA, does it need to issue this wellness notice?** Not if the HIPAA notice provides all of the information required under the final wellness rule.
- **Can a third-party provide the notice?** Yes, but the employer will ultimately be the one held responsible for making sure it's issued.
- **Must the notice include the exact wording in the EEOC sample?** No. As long as the notice tells employees, in a language they can understand, what information will be collected, how it will be used, who will receive it and how it will be kept confidential, the notice is sufficient.

- **When should employees get the notice?** The requirement kicks in on the first day of the plan year that begins on or after January 1, 2017, for the health plan the employer uses to calculate the incentive. The rule doesn't require employees to receive the notice at a particular time, but they must receive it before providing any information and with enough time to decide whether to participate in the wellness plan.
- **Do employees have to sign the notice?** No. Signed authorization or acknowledgement of receipt isn't required.
- **In what format can the notice be provided?** Any format that will be effective in reaching employees being asked to participate in the wellness plan is sufficient. It may be provided in hard copy or as part of an e-mail sent to all employees with a subject line that clearly identifies what information is being communicated. Be careful not to issue the notice with a lot of other wellness information that may cause employees to ignore or misunderstand the contents of the notice.
- **What notice must an employer provide to a spouse?** Under the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, employers are required to obtain prior, knowing, written and voluntary authorization from a spouse before requesting current or past health status info in relation to a program that offers health or genetic services.

Applicability Date

The final rule applies as of the first day of the first plan year that begins on or after January 1, 2017, for the health plan used to determine the level of incentives permitted under the rule.

This article was authored by Christian Schappel and originally appeared on HRMorning.com on October 5, 2016. It was reprinted here with permission.

Cognitive Scaffolding for Graduate Students

Faculty members play a critical role in how ethnic and racial minorities and women interpret the rigors of graduate school, according to a new study presented at the 2016 meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Analyses of 29 student and alumni interviews and focus groups in four doctoral programs in sciences and engineering suggest that faculty mentors' reframing of student experiences of struggle or failure, honestly discussing the way social identity affects one's experiences in academe and validating students' competence and potential — what the paper calls “cognitive scaffolding” — all support persistence and wellbeing by warding off isolation and a sense of not belonging. According to the paper's author, Julie Posselt, an assistant professor of education at the University of Southern California, “Ph.D. students, maybe counterintuitively, see faculty as a last resort for academic support” and feel safer approaching

peers and postdoctoral fellows. Graduate students often worry that professors “will judge them negatively if they show signs of weakness,” she said, but “when faced with doubts about their ability to make it, they benefited greatly from faculty support,” in the form of cognitive scaffolding.

Professors help students reframe their struggles and self doubts, focusing on growth and the long term rather than the stress of immediate experiences and perceived failures, Posselt said. “Also very meaningful to students was honest talk about the ways that race and gender affect their experiences in the academy; they appreciated frank conversations about this from both same-race and same-gender faculty as well as mentoring across social identity.”

This brief first appeared in Inside Higher Ed on October 31, 2016. It was reprinted here with permission.

New Bloomberg BNA Report Finds HR Professionals Have Influence at the Top of Their Organizations

Recently released results from Bloomberg BNA's *HR Department Benchmarks and Analysis 2016-17* study found that of the organizations surveyed, half had HR officials (either vice president of HR or director of HR) who report directly to the organization's chief executive. Another 20 percent of the organizations surveyed reported that the HR head reports to the organization's chief operating officer or senior vice president. Seventy percent of respondents characterized their HR department as fully or substantially involved in the key business decisions of their organization.

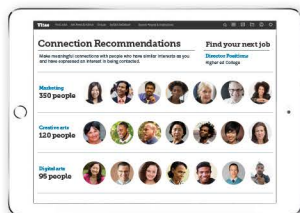
The study also found that the median ratio of HR staff to total employee headcount climbed to an all-time high of 1.4 FTE HR employees per 100 workers. Sixty percent of those surveyed had HR departments with at least one specialist in their HR group. Common specialties included benefits, employment and recruiting, training and development and compensation.

The survey included more than 550 organizations covering a broad cross-section of U.S. industries.

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Rethinking Cultural Competence

The Integral Role of Strategic HR Practices

By Edna Chun and Alvin Evans

In the fall of 2015, student demonstrations calling for more inclusive campus climates and learning environments swept college campuses across the nation. Student demands identified the need for enhanced cultural competence learning and expanded diversity education. And while many colleges and universities have adopted inclusive excellence as a framework for addressing diversity and inclusion, institutions have struggled with how to coordinate and integrate the realization of cultural competence throughout the many dimensions of the campus ecosystem.

Little agreement exists on who is responsible for the attainment of cultural competence or how it is to be attained. Even the notion of cultural competence is often seen as a kind of politically correct jargon, outside the rigors of the disciplinary canon and beyond the dominant mainstream discourse. The vagueness of the term causes further confusion due to its overlap with similar terms such as “intercultural competence” and “multicultural competence.” The definitional waters are further muddied when cultural competence is stripped of its uncomfortable social and historical implications of inequality, privilege and social stratification.

Yet in today’s interconnected global society, cultural competence is a critical skill needed by students to pursue careers in a diverse workforce. Cultural competence enables students to work collaboratively across differences, participate as citizens in a diverse democracy and bridge demographic boundaries to develop new knowledge and innovative solutions to intractable problems.

What Is “Cultural Competence?”

What does “cultural competence” mean? Following an extensive review of research in this area, we paraphrase the definition offered by Pope, Reynolds and Mueller in their 2004 book *Multicultural Competence in Student Affairs* — “cultural competence” is the awareness, knowledge and skills needed to effectively communicate, collaborate and

engage with others who are different from oneself in meaningful ways through interactions characterized by reciprocity, mutual understanding and respect.

Moving a step further, in our new book *Rethinking Cultural Competence: An Ecological Framework for Student Development*, we propose an alternative term — diversity competence — to address the range of educational experiences and multilevel interactions that occur on college campuses, as this term offers a more nuanced perspective that brings social identity to the forefront and overcomes views of membership in cultural groups as fixed rather than fluid and evolving.

Students’ Experiences With Diversity on Campus

In a survey we conducted of recent college graduates now working as professionals, most respondents reported that their experiences with diversity on campus were accidental or that they had to seek them out. For example, “Marjorie,” a white female graduate of a Midwestern undergraduate college, recalls the limited conversations or discussion of diversity she encountered as a student. In her words, “I don’t know if as an undergrad we really talked about it a lot. I can’t think of anything that we really discussed in any of my courses or my positions. I know in the job I have now I am learning more and more about diversity in the workplace.”

Or consider how “Tanya,” an African-American graduate of a large Midwestern public research university, described her own identity formation due to the role of a faculty member in her cross-cultural psychology course: “[The class and my professor] helped me become more aware of racial identification ... I never really [thought about it] before I took this class. [The class and my professor] helped me become more confident in my own identification.”

These observations underscore the ways in which recruitment of diverse and talented faculty and staff from a global community impact the educational experience. As

inclusion cultivates excellence

Tanya's narrative illustrates, during the formative developmental period during college, faculty can play a critical role in the process of students' identity formation and cognitive growth. Faculty often serve as mentors and role models for students from diverse groups. Through the curriculum and in classroom settings, faculty can promote intellectual perspective-taking that strengthens intergroup learning and diversity competence.

HR's Contributions to Cultural Competence

Given the centrality of cultural competence to the educational process, how can human resources contribute to its attainment? In the paradigm shift from a transactional to a strategic HR function, HR professionals in higher education are uniquely positioned to strengthen the development of both organizational capabilities and individual competencies that contribute to cultural competence. Though often relegated to more traditional, operational silos, HR represents a key leverage point in the value chain that originates with the need to create a welcoming campus environment that supports student learning.

HR can help institutions close the gap between espoused values of diversity and inclusion and culturally responsive processes in the areas of faculty and staff recruitment, total rewards strategy, organizational learning and employee relations. Indeed, HR is poised at the dynamic nexus of an institution — between its organizational strategy and its talent. In this strategic location, HR can work with diversity leaders to connect the dots between what an institution says about diversity and inclusion and what it does.

Despite the potentially significant contributions of HR to workforce development and campus climate, HR's role has often been confined to staff and administrative functions without recognition of the benefits of partnership with the academic enterprise. At the same time, the proliferation of approaches to diversity and cultural competence on college campuses has often resulted in redundant, overlapping and piecemeal programs. In an era of shrinking resources, consolidated diversity planning by the academic and administrative sides of the house will enable colleges and universities to capitalize on HR competencies and expertise in realizing the educational benefits of diversity. A focus

on the needs of students preempts more narrowly focused administrative objectives and places HR squarely on a broader organizational playing field aligned with academic mission and institutional values.

Recruitment and Talent Management

Due to the centrality of the faculty role in students' experiences around diversity, HR, in alliance with academic units, can help build a winning faculty talent strategy that addresses the needs of students from diverse

HR professionals in higher education are uniquely positioned to strengthen the development of both organizational capabilities and individual competencies that contribute to cultural competence.

backgrounds and learning styles and provides students with the diversity competencies necessary for success in a global society. In addition, with the rapid growth of the new majority of contingent and part-time faculty, HR can forge leading-edge workforce strategies that enhance an institution's diversity talent pipeline.

Total Rewards and Organizational Learning

In the development of a comprehensive total rewards strategy, HR's expertise in the design of innovative direct and indirect compensation programs will strengthen the employee value proposition and promote the attainment of competencies that reflect institutional values and mission. Further, working in collaboration with diversity leaders, HR professionals possess the knowledge and skills to facilitate comprehensive organizational learning programs that build diversity competence across the institutional spectrum.

In these concrete ways, HR processes and programs will contribute to the long-term processes of cultural change and help foster a welcoming institutional culture characterized by dignity, fairness and respect. However, to accomplish these integrative aims, HR leaders must themselves possess the strategic competencies that enable

inclusion cultivates excellence


them to facilitate the attainment of organizational diversity capability. As agents of culture change and talent management specialists, HR leaders will have optimal impact when the structure and design of their role transcends traditional administrative silos and supports synergistic contributions to institutional goals.

Following are three key recommendations from our study of cultural competence that pertain to HR's strategic role:

- 1) **Build an overarching academic and administrative structure for diversity competence.** This holistic infrastructure requires the active engagement of HR in helping to build multilevel support for the development of diversity competence across administrative and academic domains. Such institution-wide efforts involve agreement on a common definition of diversity competence and its articulation in the mission statement and strategic planning documents. Identification of the value of diversity competence will then necessarily be reflected in HR programs such as recruitment, retention, total rewards strategy, organizational learning and employee relations.
- 2) **Draw upon the conceptual principles of inclusive excellence as the driver of diversity and cultural competence.** The four tenets of the inclusive excellence change model focus on student intellectual and social development, consideration of the cultural differences students bring to the educational experience, purposeful use of institutional resources to support student learning, and the importance of a welcoming campus community engaged in the processes of diversity organizational learning. In each of these areas, HR can provide expertise in the organizational change process through the design and implementation of practices that address equity, enhance intergroup relations and promote a culture of inclusion.

- 3) **Strengthen faculty and staff recruitment, hiring, rewards and recognition and evaluation processes to identify the importance of diversity competence.** The inclusion of diversity competence in position descriptions and job postings will ensure that faculty and staff have the knowledge and skills needed to engage across difference through meaningful interactions characterized by respect, mutual understanding and reciprocity. Similarly, rewards and recognition programs that specifically recognize diversity contributions reinforce the value of diversity through best practices and role models that support institutional goals. By including diversity competence in evaluation criteria, performance expectations can be further calibrated with institutional objectives.

Collaboration and Integration

The attainment of diversity competence by faculty, staff, administrators and students will benefit from the strategic contributions of HR professionals working as partners across the institutional continuum. As colleges and universities give increased attention to the importance of diversity learning outcomes, HR can make a significant contribution to the educational value chain through integrative processes and programs that contribute to the creation of inclusive working, living and learning environments. 

***Edna Chun** is chief learning officer for HigherEd Talent, a national diversity and HR consulting firm. Prior to this, she served for two decades in HR leadership roles at several institutions, including the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Broward College. She can be reached at edna.chun@gmail.com.*

***Alvin Evans** is higher education practice leader for HigherEd Talent. Prior to this role, he served for 15 years as associate vice president for human resources at Kent State University. He can be reached at alevans.1617@gmail.com.*

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The New Era of Unionization at Private Universities

Changes Are Coming Post-Columbia

By Josh Ulman, Christi Layman and Basil Thomson

Following the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB)'s August 23 decision in *Columbia University*, which held that student workers at private institutions are employees entitled to collective bargaining and other rights and protections under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), colleges and universities have seen a rapid increase in union organizing efforts employing disparate approaches and increased union activity on campus from student workers and other employees.

History Behind the *Columbia Decision*

The first time the NLRB considered the question of whether students should be considered “employees” for purposes of the NLRA was in 1972 in a case involving Adelphi University. In *Adelphi*, the question before the Board was whether graduate teaching and research assistants should be included alongside faculty in the petitioned-for bargaining unit. The Board in this case ruled that “the graduate teaching and research assistants ... are primarily students and do not share a sufficient community of interest with the regular faculty to warrant their inclusion in the unit.” Shortly thereafter, in 1974, the Board went one step further in a case involving The Leland Stanford Junior University. In that decision, the NLRB held that certain university research assistants were “primarily students” and thus “not employees within the meaning of Section 2(3) of the Act.”

Then, 25 years later, in the fall of 2000, after a petition from the United Auto Workers (UAW) seeking to represent graduate teaching assistants, graduate assistants and research assistants at New York University, the Board under a Clinton administration revisited the issue. In its decision, the Board used the common-law agency test to rule that the petitioned-for unit were employees within the meaning of the NLRA because they perform services under the control of and direction of the university for which they are compensated — rejecting “the contention

of the [e]mployer and several of the amici that, because the graduate assistants may be ‘predominantly students,’ they cannot be statutory employees.” The Board’s decision in this case paved the way for New York University to recognize the UAW union — becoming the first private university to do so.

Shortly following NYU’s recognition of its graduate assistants, the Board, under a Bush administration, returned to its 30-year precedent in a case involving Brown University and overruled NYU. In *Brown*, the Board declined to assert jurisdiction over graduate teaching assistants, “including those at Brown [because they] are primarily students and have a primarily educational, not economic, relationship with their university.” Despite the Board’s ruling in *Brown* and NYU’s subsequent withdrawal of recognition of the UAW, graduate students continued to push for collective bargaining rights and in 2011, NYU grad students once again petitioned for representation by the UAW. Although the regional NLRB official in this case dismissed the petition based on the *Brown* ruling, the NLRB announced it would use the grad student appeal to revisit the 2004 decision. However, before such review could take place, NYU chose to voluntarily recognize the UAW — and the appeal to the NLRB was withdrawn.

Then in late 2014, the Graduate Workers of Columbia (GWC), an affiliate of UAW, filed an election petition seeking to represent both graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants at the university. The regional director dismissed the petition based on the NLRB’s 2004 ruling in *Brown*. On December 23, 2015, the Board announced that it would review the rejection of GWC’s bid, setting up the backdrop for the NLRB to reverse its 2004 *Brown University* decision. On August 23, 2016, the Board issued a 3-1 decision in *Columbia University*, ruling that graduate and undergraduate students who perform work at private institutions as part of their education may be considered in

certain cases employees under the NLRA — effectively requiring private institutions to collectively bargain with student assistants in some circumstances.

CUPA-HR and six other higher education associations filed amicus briefs on December 16, 2015, in the *New School* case and on February 26, 2016, in *Columbia University* arguing that the Board should not overturn its decision in *Brown* and that student workers should not be considered employees under the NLRA.

The Post-Columbia Rush to Organize

In *Columbia*, UAW filed a petition to represent a bargaining unit comprised of doctoral students, graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants and all graduate research assistants at the university. The exact contours of this approximately 3,000-student bargaining unit are laid out in the regional director's October 31 decision announcing an election vote for December 7-8. This large single-bargaining-unit approach to organizing seen in *Columbia*, however, is not the only method unions are using to organize students.

Less than a week after the *Columbia* decision, UNITE HERE, a union seeking to organize teaching assistants at Yale University, filed 10 separate election petitions for graduate assistants in 10 academic departments at the University — essentially creating 10 different and independent units that the university will have to bargain with if the NLRB decides these are “appropriate” units. While in the past, the Board might have rejected such units as inappropriately “fracturing” the workplace, in its 2011 decision in *Specialty Healthcare* it announced it would allow unions significantly more control over the scope of a bargaining unit and thus opened the door to this method of organizing. The Board's regional director held hearings on the Yale units in October, and a decision could be issued in December, although any decision could be appealed to the full Board (for an unknown reason, one unit, the department of comparative literature, has since withdrawn its petition).

While the Board is likely to find the units appropriate, whether or not UNITE HERE's approach is successful in organizing or creates sustainable bargaining relationships remains to be seen. Some graduate students already have reportedly expressed concern with the micro-union approach, and in October Yale's Graduate Student Assembly expressed disapproval by voting 44 to 17 against

the micro-units strategy. The Assembly's vote has no legal consequences, but does indicate a heightened level of concern that could undermine UNITE HERE's efforts.

Another approach that unions are taking with regard to student unionization can be seen at Harvard University, where UAW and the university announced an election agreement defining who is eligible to vote along with other logistical details like specifying the process for an NLRB-supervised election and setting up a vote on November 16-17 (university officials and union organizers are still working through challenged ballots before the votes can be counted). This strategy helps ensure that an election will happen quickly, which can be important to the union as it generally files its petition for election when union support is at its zenith. Remember, during the four years following the 2000 ruling in *New York University*, only the graduate workers at NYU won union recognition — at Cornell, an election was held and the union lost while other universities' graduate students who held union votes were never able to count the ballots, as they were impounded pending appeal by the universities. Graduate students at Cornell and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) made a similar deal with Cornell University in June (anticipating the NLRB's August decision) setting the terms for an election that included restrictions on anti-union campaigning and a mandate that the election be conducted via the American Arbitration Association as opposed to the NLRB. No date has been set as of yet.

On other campuses that are not so far along in the process, we are seeing student organizations vetting national unions in an effort to affiliate with the union that has the best shot at successfully organizing students and representing their interests at the bargaining table. At Northwestern University, the Northwestern University Graduate Workers invited representatives from AFT and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) to make their case for why they should represent them. Earlier this fall, graduate workers at the University of Chicago faced similar deliberations and voted for AFT as their choice to organize for collective bargaining. Princeton graduate students have also opted for AFT.

What May Lie Ahead: Student Athletes?

While the NLRB declined to assert jurisdiction over certain student athletes in the *Northwestern University* decision, the issue is far from resolved. In August 2015, the

on the hill


NLRB issued a unanimous decision dismissing a representation petition filed by a group of Northwestern football players seeking to unionize. The decision came 16 months after the Board's regional director in Chicago, Peter Ohr, ruled that the Northwestern players receiving football scholarships are employees and have a right to organize under the NLRA. Northwestern appealed the director's decision to the full Board, arguing that evidence which clearly shows the players are primarily students and not athletes was ignored.

After considering the arguments of both parties in the case and various amici, the Board took the unusual step of declining to assert jurisdiction, reasoning that doing so would not promote labor market stability “due to the nature and structure of NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS).” The Board noted that under the statute, the agency “does not have jurisdiction over state-run colleges and universities, which constitute 108 of the roughly 125 FBS teams [and that] every school in the Big Ten, except Northwestern, is a state-run institution.” Thus, the Board would only have jurisdiction over a small portion of the league, creating inconsistent labor relations rules among the various teams. In all of its past cases involving professional sports, the Board noted that it was able to regulate all, or at least most, of the teams in the relevant league or association.

The Board's decision did not definitively resolve the issue of whether college athletes are employees and have a protected right to unionize under the NLRA. NLRB officials were quite clear that the ruling should only be applied to the details set forth in the *Northwestern* case and left open the possibility that this issue could be reexamined in the future. Following the Board's decision, that same August, labor lawyer David Rosenfeld filed a charge against Northwestern, alleging the school was guilty of “unfair labor practices” and citing the

Northwestern team handbook, an exhibit during the 2014 hearing, which he obtained from the NLRB through a Freedom of Information Act request. As a result of this charge, on September 22 of this year, NLRB associate general counsel Barry Kearney responded in an advice memorandum to regional director Ohr. He declared that rules in Northwestern University's football handbook, which restricted players' social media use and media appearances and prohibited discussion of the athletes' health, were “unlawful.” However, Kearney also referred to Northwestern's scholarship football players as “statutory employees” when concluding that it would not “effectuate the policies and purposes of the NLRA to issue complaint in this case,” as Northwestern has changed the handbook to allow players more freedom to speak with the media, discuss health issues and post on social media.

The charge in this case was also filed against the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as an alleged joint employer of Northwestern's scholarship football players. Kearney did not address whether or not the NCAA is in fact a joint employer but did state that “given our conclusion that it would not effectuate the policies and purposes of the NLRA to issue complaint in this case, and to therefore dismiss the charge against Northwestern, the charge should also be dismissed against the NCAA.”

Although Kearney's memo was specific to Northwestern, it remains to be seen if the findings could apply to the 16 other private universities that play in the FBS as well — as the memo does not have the force of law. 

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To learn more about the future of unions on campus, check out CUPA-HR's free, on-demand webinar “When College Students Unionize,” presented by labor and employment attorney Jonathan Fritts and former NLRB member Harry Johnson. The webinar explains the basics of the *Columbia* decision, the NLRB's election process, how a bargaining unit might be defined and what an organizing drive on your campus might look like. Access the webinar at www.cupahr.org/events/webinars.



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Five Reasons Your Workplace Wellness Program Might Be Failing

And How to Get It Back on Track

More and more employers are implementing wellness initiatives with lofty goals in mind. They set out to create healthier, happier populations and increase workforce productivity — all while lowering per-employee healthcare costs and saving gobs of money. And while a workplace wellness program can start out with the best of intentions, it can sometimes end with lackluster results — budgets wasted on excessive incentives, little to no engagement after the first few months, and zero positive impact on employee morale, culture, productivity and everything else we desire to gain from our wellness efforts.

So, is workplace wellness hopeless? Not at all. But here are five reasons a wellness program might fail — and some tips on how to avoid becoming a workplace wellness casualty.

The Games Aren't Really Games

“Gamification” is so 2010. Lots of organizations tried to gamify wellness, said their “oohs” and “ahhs,” and then quit innovating. But the “games” aren't really games — they're typically just simple challenges, usually with a “get more XXX and you win” approach. There's no strategy, no loss-aversion, no true gaming mechanics. One-dimensional, steps-based contests may promote short-term participation for a subset of the population, but no one wants to do the same contest over and over again, nor does one contest suit everyone. If I'm a marathon runner, I don't care about a “walking challenge.” If I haven't worked up a sweat in 15 years, I'm not going to join a running or steps-based contest. Contests or games have to be relevant and personalized, and you have to mix it up.

Solution: Make the games more interesting and social. Implement an easy-to-use platform that includes a multitude of games and other interactive, engagement-driven wellness tools — building social contagion through competition, cooperation, camaraderie and friendly rivalry. The focus should remain on actual long-term habit improvement instead of short-term activity completion, promoting continued participation in future contests and

challenges. That does *not* mean longer contests. In fact, any challenge that lasts longer than four weeks is likely to lose engagement.

Programs Are Too Focused on Incentives

A common complaint in the wellness industry is that employees dive in, do what it takes to get their goodies, and then they're out. That's not improving long-term health habits. If your goal as an employer is to truly achieve health habit improvement (and the cost savings that come with it), it's imperative to rethink the emphasis that your program places on incentives — especially if it's focusing too heavily on cash incentives (and/or coercive punishments, such as premium penalties or dropped coverage).

Solution: Fix the root of the problem by improving the actual wellness program. Make it more inclusive, more engaging and more encouraging of actual health-habit improvement, so that people are engaging for reasons other than the incentives. Make it socially interactive and fun to participate in so that rewards become an ancillary “bonus” instead of a necessity to force utilization and conformity. Improving long-term health habits will lead to the health improvements (and medical cost savings) organizations so desperately seek.

Solution #2: Be creative. If and when rewards are used, give your people some credit — not everyone's driven solely by monetary inducements. And you better believe that those who “earn” a cash prize for completing a one-time activity (like a health assessment or biometric screening) will expect an even larger cash prize the next time you ask them to complete the same task. This cycle is not sustainable. Focus instead on recognition-based rewards (trophies, certificates), experiential rewards (vouchers for kayaking, theme park tickets, rock climbing lessons) and rewards tied to philanthropic efforts that contribute to a greater good (donations made on behalf of winners, running a 5K that supports a cause, picking up litter on the roadside). And, with this approach, punishments for

non-conformity become pointless — saving already overburdened wellness administrators from having to put on that dreaded bad-guy hat.

Over-Rewarding the Already Healthy

Lots of programs claim to be customizable and personalized, but not many truly are. And, since most contests are based on the same old things (steps!), and most incentive plans are based on healthy outcomes (BMI<25), the already healthy tend to rise to the top and win every competition (and “earn” most incentives without making any real effort). This often discourages the average Joe and Jane, for whom the program is exponentially more important, from playing along in future contests.

Solution: Think outside the steps-based box. Your goal should be to involve as many employees as possible — regardless of their baseline skills or abilities. Offer contests and challenges that cover a wide variety of metrics and leverage an assortment of tools and gaming mechanisms, allowing the competition to be relevant and inviting for all employees and all engagement preferences.

Doing the Bare Minimum

Too many organizations are still using an annual biometric screening or health assessment as a wellness program in and of itself ... and expecting this bare minimum approach to drive results. Biometric screenings, health assessments and wellness coaching can be great tools for setting baselines and tracking health measurements over time, but these initiatives carry extreme limitations when implemented improperly. For starters, education on its own does not lead to action (for most of us, at least). In an effort to revive their flailing clinical initiatives, many employers are introducing annual steps campaigns but, as described in the previous section, this is not an all-encompassing or progress-driven wellbeing program.

Solution: Make biometrics and health assessments a small component of a more comprehensive, socially charged system. Sure, use screenings and assessments to measure your employees’ baseline stats and uncover the major/chronic issues, but don’t over-test and don’t stop when the testing’s done. Get people involved in sustainable health habit improvement through personalized, socially engaging activities. Place greater emphasis on progress than outcomes, and applaud reoccurring healthy behaviors over one-time accomplishments. Recognize achievements and use experiential or trophy-value rewards instead of


boring (and ineffective) cash incentives, and watch as your program drives continuous competition and sustained self-improvement. Leverage the power of positive peer rivalries and varied competitions to get all kinds of different employee demographics involved.

After a year or so, reissue your screening or health assessment to track participants’ progress — employees who actively participated should notice improvements (in both measurable stats and in how they feel!), thus proving the program’s value and decreasing healthcare costs over time ... which is the whole point, right? Bonus: you’re likely to boost employee morale and productivity in the process.

“Doing Wellness” for the Wrong Reasons

Over-stressing of outcomes data and ROI overshadows precious progress. While data is useful and necessary in a number of ways (giving employees a baseline with which to track improvement, tracking overall performance of the program, justifying the cost of employee wellness programming), you can’t expect drastic health outcomes in the first couple of years of a wellness program. That’s especially true when most programs start with an assessment, screening and risk-based coaching. And particularly when overall claims analysis is subject to so many external contributing factors besides just the quality of the wellness program. It takes time and lots of strategic planning to establish an effective program. Rushing and focusing on the wrong things makes for a recipe for failure.

Solution: Strive for more than “just” healthcare cost savings. Focus instead on engaging employees in social health habit improvement and expanding your definition of wellness success. Focus on Value on Investment (VOI) instead of pure ROI — look at reductions in sick time, happier people, more productive people, better sense of culture and job satisfaction, boosted retention (and recruiting abilities), improved overall morale, better focus and “presentness” at work and an improved work/life balance.

Keep these five issues (and more importantly, the solutions) in mind, and your workplace wellness program has a real shot at thriving — resulting in the productive, cost-saving workforce you’ve desired from the get-go. 

This article was authored by Danna Korn and originally appeared on TLNT.com. It was reprinted here with permission.

Innovative Mentoring Program Promotes Networking, Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing

An Overview of CU Boulder's Infrastructure and Safety Mentor Program

What do you envision when you think of mentoring in higher education? The first thing that probably comes to mind is a faculty/student mentor/mentee relationship. While mentoring is common on the academic side of the house, it has not widely taken hold in the administrative realm in most institutions. But at the University of Colorado Boulder, an award-winning mentoring program initiated in the facilities management department in 2012 is blazing a trail. In fact, due to its success and popularity over the past four years, the program expanded in the fall of 2016 and is now offered to all four campus departments that report to the vice chancellor for infrastructure and safety. The program is now called the Infrastructure and Safety Mentor Program (ISMP) and is offered to almost 600 university staff.

Why Mentoring?

CU Boulder's facilities management department employs more than 500 people and provides a diverse array of services and programs to the university through five divisional areas — utility and energy services; business services; planning, design and construction; operations; and human resources. Four years ago, when a campus-sponsored mentoring program in which many facilities management staff members participated was discontinued, Andrew Mead of the department's HR division and a group of facilities management staff decided to create their own department mentoring program.

The Facilities Management Mentor Program (FMMP) was designed to provide CU Boulder staff an opportunity for professional and personal development and ongoing learning. This same goal statement applies to the expanded ISMP and now provides even more opportunities to more campus staff in a variety of programs and services. The program focus still includes the key elements of enhanced employee engagement, increased retention, career and personal skills development, knowledge transfer and

improved departmental functioning by developing staff through various activities and opportunities. Says Mead, "The program provides an engaging and enriching career and personal development experience for participants, with the goal of equipping people for a lifetime of self-managed learning."

The mentor program is a voluntary program in which mentors and mentees are partnered according to their specific areas of interest, such as enhancing personal and professional skills and abilities, career development or leadership skills. Participants can choose who they would like to be paired with or can request that the program match them up with someone. Once the mentors and mentees are paired, it is up to them to develop a plan of action, with support from Mead as the program manager. The program runs each year from September to May, with mentors and mentees meeting at least two hours per month (however, most choose to meet more often).

Success From the Get-Go

From the very beginning, the program has seen high levels of management commitment and employee involvement. To date:

- 64 mentor/mentee teams have completed the program;
- All levels of staff from each of the infrastructure and safety areas are represented;
- 32 percent of current participants are alumni of the program;
- The majority of department managers and directors have served as mentors in the program; and
- The participation rate has increased every year since the program's inception, with 27 teams participating in the 2016-17 session.

“Having our top leadership actively participate in the program has provided a great resource and has set a great example for our employees,” says Mead.


Adds David Danielson, CU Boulder’s assistant vice chancellor for facilities management, “The mentor program has far and away exceeded my expectations. Past participants have expressed an enthusiastic endorsement of the program, as it has proved to be an unbelievable growth experience for our team members both professionally and personally. Mentors and mentees participate in the program because they genuinely want to help each other learn, network and ultimately succeed in their goals. With the expansion of the mentor program, I anticipate even greater opportunities for employee development and engagement.”

Benefits Realized

The program has helped increase employee engagement, facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing, and expand participants’ knowledge, skills and abilities. It has helped

facilitate the transfer of learning into practice, helped build employees’ confidence, helped identify and engage emerging leaders, and helped build and extend networks both within the specific campus departments and across the entire university.

Two Keys to Success

According to Mead, the success of the mentor program has exceeded his (and senior leadership’s) expectations. When asked what advice he would give to other organizations looking to implement a similar program, he says that leadership support and perceived value are paramount to success and sustainability. “Support from and participation of organizational leadership must be present from the beginning,” he says. “And employees must see the benefit and value in participating. The program must be well thought out, well planned and well administered in order to provide that benefit and value. If these two elements are in place, chances are you’ll see great participation, great enthusiasm and great success.” 

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HARNESSING THE POWER OF



FOR SOUND HR DECISION MAKING

BY CURTIS POWELL

The cost of higher education has come under intense scrutiny over the past several years. While many colleges and universities have made significant investments in academic, residential and/or research facilities to recruit and retain the best faculty and students, continuing to provide competitive compensation and benefits in order to attract and retain high-quality faculty and staff must also remain a priority. Salary and benefits costs make up more than half of many educational institutions' operating expenses, and the contributions of faculty and staff to organizational success is perhaps the most important lever to achieve a competitive advantage. The challenge then for many human resources leaders is to contain costs while developing a high-performing workforce.

One way to address this challenge is by using big data to discover relationships among workforce data, uncover options for streamlining business transactions and understand whether complex interdependencies (e.g., among pay, benefits and organizational culture) are aligned with the strategies of your organization.

The U.S. workforce is aging at a rapid pace. According to data from the Department of Labor, the number of American workers age 55 and older hit a record 35 million in 2016, while the number of individuals age 16 to 24 in the labor market was at its lowest level. Today's typical workplace employs individuals from four different generations, and the ways in which organizations hire and retain the four cohorts of employees might need to be different to ensure competitive success. For example, keeping older workers might require retention programs that include part-time or project-based work, while retaining younger employees may require new approaches and programs that provide them with instant rewards, career advancement and workshift flexibility. Thus, it's critical to know which HR programs, practices, services, communication strategies and technological advances appeal to each cohort of worker. It's also important to understand the most effective pay practices, benefits, professional development and engagement programs that will optimize the organization's competitiveness in a dynamic and competitive marketplace.

Fortunately, data analytics capabilities can interrelate workforce data to answer the questions that will provide leaders with more effective workforce strategies to better engage employees and improve the overall productivity of the organization.

Rensselaer's Objectives for Using People Analytics

From observations I've made throughout my career, it seems that HR professionals have good intuition about what will work, and what won't, in implementing sound initiatives related to acquiring, developing and retaining talent, improving productivity and maximizing organizational results. Their professional experience, instincts and daily interactions with employees often provide good insight to inform their strategies. However, today's workforce is incredibly diverse, so HR leaders need very specific information to support their decision making. This is why big data analytics are not just an opportunity — they are an imperative for human resources today.



By mining multi-dimensional data, HR is more proactive, predictive and decision-making oriented.

Workforce analytics vary by organization but in general, organizations, through their business intelligence functions, use them to diagnose key drivers of business performance. Some of the main purposes of using workforce analytics include:

- Assessing costs and consequences of important employee behaviors (such as turnover);
- Utilizing job boards and social media performance statistics and applying them to accurately predict job posting success;
- Acquiring the best available talent; and
- Optimizing the workforce and cultivating new organizational leadership through proactive strategies to attract, develop and compensate employees.

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's division of human resources sought to harness the power of data analytics through a collaborative project with Rensselaer professor Peter Fox, who led a team of graduate students in analyzing data on HR trends and practices at the institution over a 10-year period, from 2004 to 2014. Data fusion, regression, classification, cluster analysis, time series analysis and other

statistical techniques were used to visualize, assess, analyze, manipulate and aggregate big data to make this kind of data volume tractable. The effort focused on seven major areas — compensation, benefits, training, job performance, paid time off, disability leave and compensation claims. The goal was to use data analytics to determine factors that could lead to validation of the effectiveness of current HR programs, services and policies and how these factors have supported the retention of Rensselaer's most productive talent.

Data analytics can interrelate workforce data to answer questions that will provide leaders with more effective workforce strategies.

Members of the HR management team (representing the areas of benefits, retirement, employee relations, compensation, employment, environmental health and safety and operations) were looking for data that would help them answer the following questions:

- Is there a connection between paid time off used and employee healthcare cost?
 - Do Rensselaer's professional development programs impact performance, promotion and retention in the desired way?
 - Can future leaders be identified by comparing data of high performers with low performers?
 - Are there correlations among training, violation of rules and environmental health and safety issues?
 - What benefits do employees value most and what kind of education is required to help them understand the value?
 - What kind of behaviors are related to unsatisfactory work performance?
 - What factors increase an employee's engagement and productivity?
 - What are the job competencies that determine an employee's success in the job?
- How do we compensate employees and for what results and performance so as to retain the most productive employees?
 - Do employees understand the retirement plan and know its value?
 - What type of professional development programming will improve the leadership skills and performance of employees?
 - What incidents and behaviors are related to unsatisfactory job performance?
 - What behaviors are critical in building a greater awareness of a culture of safety?
 - What is critical to influence employees' job satisfaction?
 - What is important to increase engagement among employees?

A Learning Curve

As Rensselaer's HR team began to articulate key questions, the reality of the diversity, heterogeneity and forms of data became apparent. Importantly, the aforementioned guiding questions invoked the need for an integration of previously isolated data sources. HR team members needed to shift their mentality in order to think beyond their traditional analyses, moving away from low-dimensional means (spreadsheets, bar charts and line plots) to multi-dimensional arrays. It also became apparent that the data needed to be cleaned and changes in the data collected over time needed to be traced.

As the working collaboration between the data analytics team and specific HR managers developed, an important shift from the analytics team driving the process to HR leaders driving the process was necessary. This change was important so that the HR leaders, who are the subject matter experts, could make robust interpretations from the results. To facilitate this, Professor Fox and his team slowly increased the dimensionality of the data. Subsequently, when additional factors were added (either variables within a data set or another entire data set), the HR leaders and data analysts were in sync. All too often data analytics professionals or services quickly overwhelm customers with sophisticated predictive and prescriptive models that are nearly impossible to intuitively understand. As previously noted, HR professionals' intuitions must be valued and included in a people analytics process.

One benefit of the close collaboration of the analytics and HR teams was the establishment of better data management practices for HR's internal data collections — in essence a list of dos and don'ts for the curators of individual data sets, with an eye toward their use in people analytics.

Findings

The sheer number of findings from the study was at first overwhelming and required dedicated time to assess and validate. Overall, there were 125 discoveries, many of which were expected, but nearly 50 of which were deemed to be significantly impactful — and a few that were just plain startling (and that we likely never would have uncovered if not for the data analytics study). A few of the findings and plans of action resulting from these findings are as follows:

Performance Management

Arising from the performance ratings analytics, we found that non-exempt employees age 21 to 24 need the greatest attention for improvement in performance rating. A similar finding was obtained for non-exempt employees with less than one year of service (which is a significant share of Rensselaer's overall employment population). The results suggested that we need to pay more attention to generational differences and perhaps alter our performance management approach for younger employees in order to capitalize on the values and strengths they bring to the workplace.

Compensation Claims

An example of a detailed finding within compensation claims was that employees whose occupation is environmental specialist and who have less than one year of service had the most workplace accidents. Demographically, this finding applies to 94 percent of employees in this job category. As a result, we're reviewing how we communicate and train on various aspects of safety measures, such as wearing personal protective equipment, using proper tools for the job, reading and understanding chemical material safety protocols, etc.

Talent Management

Benchmarking data gathered on performance, skills, job experience and other factors helped us identify and create a plan to track high-potential employees who will be able to fill senior management positions when they become vacant.

Faculty Retention


Related to faculty retention, the study found that when faculty members are part of a major research initiative and/or reside in a successful academic department, the retention rate is higher. Therefore, the institution is reassessing the ways in which it engages faculty members.

Paid Time Off

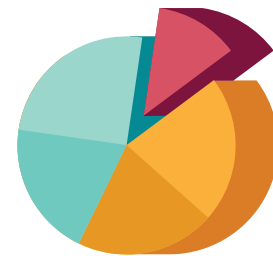
Data revealed that when there is a high usage of paid time off by an employee, most likely the employee will separate from the university within an 18-month period. This data point has informed our retention and early recruitment strategies.

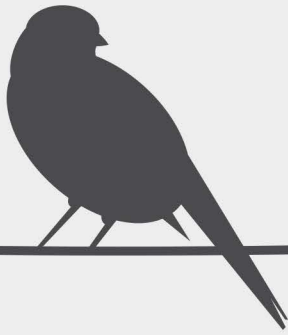
The Challenge

In order to excel in today's complex business environment, HR leaders are challenged to make good business decisions with confidence. To do so, they need the right data. But the reality, according to the Visier white paper *From HR Metrics to Workforce Analytics: Five Key Workforce Insights That Every Employer Should Capture for Greater Business Impact*, is that the most commonly measured workforce metrics are of very little help to HR professionals and business leaders in achieving real insight into maximizing their human capital investment. Says the author of the paper, "In order to make better business decisions about their workforce, leaders should see the connections in their workforce data and examine comprehensive workforce topics."

By doing just this, Rensselaer human resources has paved the way for people analytics to become part of its routine practice. By mining multi-dimensional data, the HR function is now more proactive, predictive and decision-making oriented. 

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Employee Resource Groups

A Key Differentiator for Organizations

By Skip Spriggs and Beatriz Cantada



Employee resource groups (ERGs) have greatly evolved since their initial introduction during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. They started as groups of like-minded people who came together for purposes of collaboration and protection in terms of social and civil rights issues and then began to form within companies to bring together employees with common interests for social and networking purposes. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ERGs began to be more formally recognized by organizations, but they were still largely viewed as social and networking groups. It wasn't until about 20 years ago that ERGs began to make stronger contributions to employee engagement and the business.

Today, organizations are much more aware and supportive of ERGs as an engine for employee engagement and business contributions. However, only adept organizations have greatly evolved their thinking and realized that these groups can be business partners uniquely positioned to impact an organization. With the right value proposition and other key success factors, ERGs can create a significant competitive advantage in areas including business engagement, employee engagement, talent development, reputation and community outreach — all of which create compelling cases for organizations and academic institutions to consider pursuing and leveraging ERGs.

A Recipe for Success

There are several key factors that can make or break an ERG program. First, an ERG program must have a **defined value proposition** which clearly states the expectations and the focus points for each ERG. The value proposition dictates what each group is trying to accomplish and helps leaders and administrators understand the benefits the ERGs bring to the organization. Another foundational element for success is a **well-articulated program** that clearly defines roles, guidelines and processes. This is necessary to help members focus their energy in productive ways to create the biggest impact.

In addition to a defined value proposition and a well-articulated program, **senior-level support and engagement** are crucial to the success of an ERG program. Not only does this support engage and energize employees, but it also promotes learning for leaders and development for ERG participants. Also important is a **shared mission** that resonates with the members of an ERG and the organization. This shared mission is important to driving buy-in, support and value for all involved parties.

ERGs can create a significant competitive advantage in business engagement, employee engagement, talent development, reputation and community outreach.

The final two factors that are foundational for successful ERGs are a **well-defined action plan** and **targeted outcomes**. An action plan that aligns closely to the value proposition creates accountability for driving the value and continued growth of the program. Targeted outcomes help an ERG measure and demonstrate success and give leaders and members a clear line of sight to the added impact of the program.

It's important to note that ERGs that have all of the components outlined above may still have differing levels of maturation and engagement. Generally, it takes five to seven years to get a program positioned, structured, staffed and operational. ERG programs develop in stages, and it can take time to "get it right" from a strategic and qualitative perspective. This process is similar to the stages that any new departments or teams go through — when new leaders come in they often bring with them new

approaches, and it takes time for team members to tailor activities accordingly. The same is true for ERGs.

Understanding ERG Maturation

In order to better understand how employee resource groups take shape at different organizations, we'll discuss TIAA and Dartmouth College as case studies, as both have strong, successful programs in place.

TIAA

The TIAA employee resource group program started in 2009, and today there are eight ERGs with more than 3,700 employees participating (approximately 34.5 percent of the employee population). TIAA's eight ERGs are: African-American and Caribbean; women; military and veterans; LGBT; Latino and Hispanic; Asian-American; young professionals; and employees with disabilities and caregivers of individuals with disabilities. Each ERG has a minimum of four chapters in offices including Charlotte, New York City, Denver and Lewisville, Texas, with oversight by a national leadership team and one or two executive sponsors. Most have also extended accessibility to employees working at alternative work stations and regional chapters to include employees in field offices which service

TIAA customers across the country.

Beyond the eight groups referenced, TIAA's human resources team is always keeping its ear to the ground for other areas that may be important to employees and

clients in terms of demographic, economic, technological, social or other developments. Examples of groups the company is tracking for interest include multi-generational, remote workers, emerging leaders and working and single parents.

Following are some examples that help illustrate the kinds of contributions TIAA's employee resource groups make to the organization and how TIAA leverages the unique strengths of its individual ERGs.

Understanding the Value Veterans Bring to the Workforce

By working closely with the military and veterans ERG, TIAA learned more about how military roles can translate into business roles. This kind of collaboration helps the organization recruit and hire veterans, while better ensuring a strong fit between the individual and the new job, thus ultimately leading to higher success rates. Military personnel and veterans have a unique

understanding of the skills learned in service, and these insights are extremely valuable to TIAA and its success in pursuing candidates with this kind of background.

Learning How to Engage Young Professionals Through Technology

Another example centers around the young professionals ERG and its partnership with TIAA's technology organization to help explore workplace tools that are engaging and productive for the company's younger employees. Due to compliance issues that come with being part of a highly regulated industry, TIAA employees cannot use social media sites like Facebook or Twitter for company purposes. However, the company knows that these kinds of networking tools are important to today's workforce; therefore, TIAA's young professionals ERG is helping leadership explore alternative tools that fit the compliance requirements while also providing innovative ways for employees to connect and communicate. The young professionals ERG also provides generational perspectives on 403(b) products, and the group has consulted on digital customer concepts for millennials.

Delivering Specialized Financial Education to Clients

TIAA leadership recently engaged the company's LGBT ERG to partner with the marketing department and its institutional business to develop a financial education program that one of its university clients requested so that it could better understand the unique financial issues its LGBT faculty and students encounter. Additionally, all TIAA ERGs are involved in providing specialized financial literacy training programs in communities the company serves, which helps the organization to engage key external audiences.

Solving Business Challenges Through Collaboration and Innovation

A unique example of how TIAA has put ERGs to work is the recent creation of the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Incubator. The D&I Incubator is a think tank comprised of members from various ERGs that business areas can leverage to create unexpected and innovative ideas and solutions to their business challenges. This program produces creative solutions for the business while fostering a diverse and inclusive environment — opening an avenue for diversity and inclusion to further influence and strengthen the overall organization. It also increases visibility between leaders and ERG members and champions mobility by allowing leaders to learn more about talent that exists outside of their own business units.

Looking Down the Pike

Since its ERGs are continually evolving, TIAA is constantly looking for ways to leverage their expertise and engage them in the goals of the organization. As for what's next, TIAA is focused on continuing to shore up and fine tune the basics of its ERG program; increasing the business partnership with its various ERGs; building a stronger, more reliable connection to talent development; and looking for potential opportunities for new ERGs in order to meet the growing needs of the company's increasingly diverse workforce and client base.

Dartmouth College

Having a robust recruitment plan for underrepresented faculty and staff won't be successful unless there is also a strong retention plan in place. With the goal of increasing the retention of diverse talent, Dartmouth College provides institutional support (both monetary and staff time) for its employee resource networks (ERNs). Established ERNs on campus are the Black Caucus, Native American Council, Latinx Hispanic Council, LGBT Network, International Employee Network, Veterans Network, Asian & Pacific Islander Caucus and EmpowHER (faculty and staff women of color). In addition, two off-shoot programs, Experience Dartmouth (ED) pair program and ED ambassador program, were created as a result of feedback from members of the ERN community. The ED pair program partners newly hired underrepresented faculty and staff with a member of the Dartmouth ERN community to facilitate a smooth transition to campus and the Upper Valley community. The ED ambassador program is an electronic database of faculty, staff and community members who have volunteered their contact information to potential applicants looking to move to Dartmouth College and the Upper Valley region.

The ERN program is housed in the institution's office of institutional diversity and equity (IDE), and its mission is "to contribute to the personal and social development of its members so that they can thrive and be successful and engaged members of the Dartmouth community."

History and Programming

The Black Caucus was the first "affinity group" to be established at Dartmouth (although it's not clear when the group first came to be, documentation of its meetings and gatherings date to 2001). Depending on the makeup of its volunteers, the group ebbed and flowed for almost a decade before re-establishing itself in 2010 under the umbrella of ERN. In 2010, with a budget of only \$2,000, IDE undertook an initiative to formalize and expand the ERNs.

At the time, the LGBT Network was the only active group, holding a standing monthly gathering at a local inn. Now, there are eight recognized ERNs on campus.

Throughout the year, Dartmouth's ERNs organize programs and events — which are open to everyone in the community — as a way of connecting ERN members with the rest of campus. Each year, the ERN program hosts a summer softball tournament and community barbecue, as well as family-friendly multicultural learning events at a local museum and the Vermont Institute of Natural Science. Additionally, each year during Veteran's Recognition Week at Dartmouth, the Veterans Network ERN coordinates an open house with the local VA and veteran benefits administration with the goal of providing health and benefits information to veterans on campus.

Evolution of the Program

Dartmouth's ERNs in the earlier stages focused on community building through social gatherings. However, many of the networks have expanded their objectives to include networking, connecting with alumni and offering professional development opportunities. For instance, several ERNs recently partnered to sponsor a mixer with a Dominican-American journalist, while others hosted a dinner with an award-winning poet and educator whose work explores the intersections of race, gender and sexuality.

In early 2016, the college's president and provost embarked on an inclusive excellence initiative to assess existing programs and recommend short-term and long-term goals to ensure Dartmouth's commitment to being an inclusive institution where differences are celebrated, recognized and valued. Three working groups were established focusing on students, faculty and staff. Members of the ERNs were invited to participate in all three committees. As a result of the recommendations from these working groups, Dartmouth leadership increased the ERN budget from \$14,000 in 2015 to \$60,000 in 2016. With this increased financial support, the ERN program will continue to grow and evolve — and will look for new and innovative ways to support various groups on campus and contribute to the university's business objectives and strategic goals.

Challenges of Implementing and Sustaining an ERG Program


While employee resource groups are incredibly valuable, there can be challenges, so it's best for leaders to be aware of some of the pitfalls in advance. Developing

organizational understanding of the program, securing the support of senior leadership and getting the right volunteer leaders in place for the groups are critical steps that can be difficult to get right. Other challenges include creating the space and capacity needed to allow ERG work to get done (for example, integrating it into performance and development plans), and ensuring the ERGs understand how to move beyond networking to true business partnership.

Resources, both time and funding, are a hot topic and a key challenge related to ERGs. Organizations should be realistic about the resources needed to execute an impactful program. TIAA has found that developing and operating an effective ERG program requires a minimum of a half-time employee and more realistically an employee's full job. At Dartmouth, two full-time employees — the director of equal opportunity/affirmative action and the program coordinator in the office of institutional diversity and equity — oversee the ERN program (in addition to their other duties).

Paying Dividends

Employee resource groups, if done right, can be of great value to an organization. These groups can serve as an advisory board to inform organizational leadership how to build better retention programs, improve retention rates and reinforce a respectful and supportive work environment. ERGs can offer insight into how to creatively provide resources or services important to multicultural groups, and they can serve as a mechanism for ongoing dialogue between faculty and staff and the institution in creating an inclusive and welcoming community.

But in order to make these kinds of contributions, an organization's ERGs must be well-organized, fully supported (and utilized) by institutional leadership, goal-oriented and mission-driven. Only then will they realize their full potential. 

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A smiling man with glasses and a mustache, wearing a light blue button-down shirt, is the central focus. He is in a classroom or office setting with other people blurred in the background. An orange banner is at the top left, and a blue banner is at the bottom.

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Is Pay Compression Creating Unhappy Employees in Your Organization?

By Jim Fox and Mike Verdoorn

Every organization, no matter the size or type, runs the risk of pay compression. Pay compression occurs when there is only a small difference in pay between employees regardless of their skills or experience. The two most prevalent pay compression scenarios are a) when a subordinate is paid more than his or her supervisor based on regular (not overtime) pay and b) when a less tenured employee is paid more than a more senior tenured colleague in the same job. With the increased discussions around minimum wage and the now stalled changes to the

Fair Labor Standards Act overtime rules, pay compression is likely to become even more of an issue. What may seem like simple changes to the salary floor or other levels will have a cascading impact across the salary structure.

Pay compression can have a negative effect on morale, retention and overall organizational culture. In some cases, it can even generate legal action in the form of equal pay claims. So what can human resources professionals do to identify, resolve, reduce and prevent pay compression in their organizations?

Two Types of Pay Compression

Of the two kinds of pay compression mentioned above, the tenure form is the most common — or at least it has been recently. This is because many organizations have held pay increases to a minimum for existing employees but must offer competitive salaries to attract new talent. As a result, many new employees' salaries exceed those of longer-tenured individuals in the same or similar positions.

The supervisor compression situation is typically most evident in pay systems where the take-home pay of individuals in lower-level jobs is higher than that of these employees' first-line supervisors (usually due to labor contracts or market forces). It's important to remember, however, that this form of pay compression only occurs when the standard rate of the supervisor's pay is less than her or his subordinates when calculated for the same hours of work — it is not considered pay compression when employees' take-home pay exceeds that of their supervisors due to overtime.

Causes of Pay Compression

Regardless of the form it takes, pay compression is a symptom of an incorrectly administered pay system and/or a pay system that is not keeping up with the salary movement in the market.

As an example, some non-exempt jobs are paid in a step system, where an employee receives a step increase and/or a schedule increase at regular intervals, as long as that employee has not exceeded the maximum of the position's pay range. Supervisor pay, on the other hand, is more likely to be part of an administrative pay schedule, which is most likely not governed by union negotiations or other restrictions. In addition, the supervisor pay schedule is more likely to be an open range with only minimums, midpoints and maximums, and movement is based on performance or some criteria other than years of service/step increases. Since salary increases for many non-exempt employees are dictated by labor contracts, management or administrators may try to hold pay increases down for the supervisory/management group, especially when the budget is tight. In such situations, pay compression will become apparent after only a few years of this pattern of conflicting pay schedule adjustments.

We have also seen pay compression emerge in recent years as organizations broaden pay ranges, creating a greater degree of overlap between adjacent pay ranges. About 30

years ago, pay ranges for most organizations used 25-35 percent spreads from minimum to maximum. This was generally sufficient because the work was tightly controlled and highly specific, and this approach made it easy to establish around seven to 10 steps from minimum to

Pay compression can be costly to fix, and the damage to employee trust and morale can take years to resolve.

maximum for employee pay growth. However, over the last three decades, we have seen the development of broadbanding, skill-based pay, competency-based pay, and a shift toward pay being a reflection of actual pay in the market. These continuous changes have impacted the foundation of salary structures through broader and more overlap of pay ranges.

It is still common for organizations to employ a progressive range spread, where non-exempt jobs have narrower salary ranges, close to 30-40 percent, and expand to 60 percent range spreads for managers. When doing the math, we see that if the range spread is broadened, the minimum will be lower and the maximum will be higher than in the past. If this is done for both subordinate and supervisory pay ranges, or if it is only done for supervisory pay ranges, the pay ranges of subordinate and supervisor begin to overlap. Thus, a new supervisor, if paid at the minimum of that position's pay range, could easily be paid less than the longer-term subordinate.

How to Combat Pay Compression

So what is the solution to pay compression? There is definitely no quick or easy one. Simply put, jobs need to be placed on the same internal hierarchy and priced together. This sounds easy enough, but it involves the adaptation of a job evaluation system or internal hierarchy that is common to all jobs. While internal equity has always been an important consideration for valuing jobs within a salary schedule, it has not always been deemed important across different schedules. However, if the approach mentioned above is applied correctly, there will be one hierarchy across

all jobs in the institution and one pay schedule. Then, when market data is introduced, and internal equity is merged with the market data, the pay structure of grades and ranges will dictate pay ranges that will, for the most part, create a significant pay difference between the subordinate and the supervisor, provided that the overlap between ranges is reduced.

Establish Internal Equity

Since most organizations already have salary ranges in place, it will take some effort to establish the internal equity link between the jobs of the supervisor and subordinate. This can be accomplished in the next round of pay adjustments or over time, depending on the severity

Pay compression is a symptom of an incorrectly administered pay system and/or a pay system that is not keeping up with the salary movement in the market.

of the problem, or it can be accomplished by adjusting the differences between the ranges and the range spread. Ideally, there should be at least a five percent difference between adjacent pay ranges, calculated at the midpoint of the range. Normally there will be a two-grade difference between the grade of the subordinate and the supervisor. If this is the case, a broader salary range will not create significant pay compression issues.

If this pattern is established and maintained, the supervisor/subordinate form of pay compression should be resolved. And if the pattern of internal equity is maintained for the other jobs that are above the supervisor, the cost will be relatively low to maintain this solution. The solution to the other form of pay compression, where a more senior employee is paid less than, equal to or nearly equal to a newer employee in the same job title, is generally costlier and requires a different way of managing pay and pay schedule adjustments. Recall that this form of pay compression usually emerges when a current employee

does not receive an increase in pay that is matched by the market movement. When a vacancy is filled, the new employee who is less constrained by current pay administration practices receives a salary offer that is sufficient to attract them to the job, but also may set off pay compression issues.

Practice Good Salary Management

Salary management consists of two things — salary range adjustment and employee salary movement. While we do not know where this idea originated, it has been around for many years, and most compression issues stem from the lack of consistent application and review of these concepts.

When most salary ranges were managed with steps it probably made sense; but if you don't have steps, it doesn't make sense at all. That is, when salary ranges are moved by a standard factor, such as a "cost of living" adjustment, then everyone on the salary range moves up by the same amount. If the salary range has steps, and an employee also moves up a step, then most everything is kept in sync — especially if new employees are hired at the first step without exception.

However, when you move from steps to open ranges and adjust ranges and employee pay at the same amount, the problems begin. This is because an employee who is hired at the minimum of the range will remain at the minimum of the salary range regardless of what adjustments are made to the ranges. Then, when a new employee is hired, that individual's pay is usually at least as high as the more senior employee.

There are two solutions to pay compression — the ongoing solution and the one-time solution. The permanent solution involves adjusting the ranges by an amount that is less than the total salary budget and competitive with market figures (i.e. salary structure adjustments, employment cost index and accounting for consumer price index changes) or adjusting the ranges every other year, then adjusting employee pay at an amount that is greater than the salary structure adjustment. Regardless of how you determine these salary adjustments for your institution, this will keep the pay compression issue at bay. This may seem like a foreign concept, but the private sector has been doing it this way for years.

This solution recognizes that the purpose of a salary range is to guide overall hiring rates to be reasonably competitive with the market and to control top-end salaries. It should not be used to adjust employee pay. If it is considered in this perspective, an adjustment of the salary ranges should not necessarily trigger a salary increase for any employee, unless the employee is at the minimum and performing at below-average levels of performance. Administration and management often say that they cannot afford this solution. However, what we are finding now is that these same organizations have hired new employees and have a pay compression problem that is seriously affecting morale and increasing turnover.


Once these salary management principles are in place, the compression fix is a one-time (or phased) and potentially costly one and involves reviewing the seniority of all employees in their current positions and adjusting pay accordingly. When we have performed this analysis for clients, the cost is usually significantly more than if the organization had followed the previously described salary management principles which may have prevented the issue in the first place. The solution usually involves adopting some form of an algorithm that specifies how employee pay should be adjusted. For example, one model follows these guidelines:

- An employee receives an X percent pay increase for every year of service up to a certain number of years.
- For every two years of service after that, they receive an X percent pay increase up to a certain number of years.
- For every three years of service after that, the employee receives an X percent increase up to the maximum of the salary range.

This will normally spread pay out over about a 20- to 30-year career, but the timing can be adjusted at any point. For example, some organizations have capped increases at the midpoint instead of the maximum. The correct solution is dependent on the money available, as well as how the organization wants to manage pay adjustments in the future. It should be noted, however, that unless the organization adopts the first solution in the future, pay compression will quickly re-emerge.

A Costly Problem to Fix, But Costlier Still to Ignore

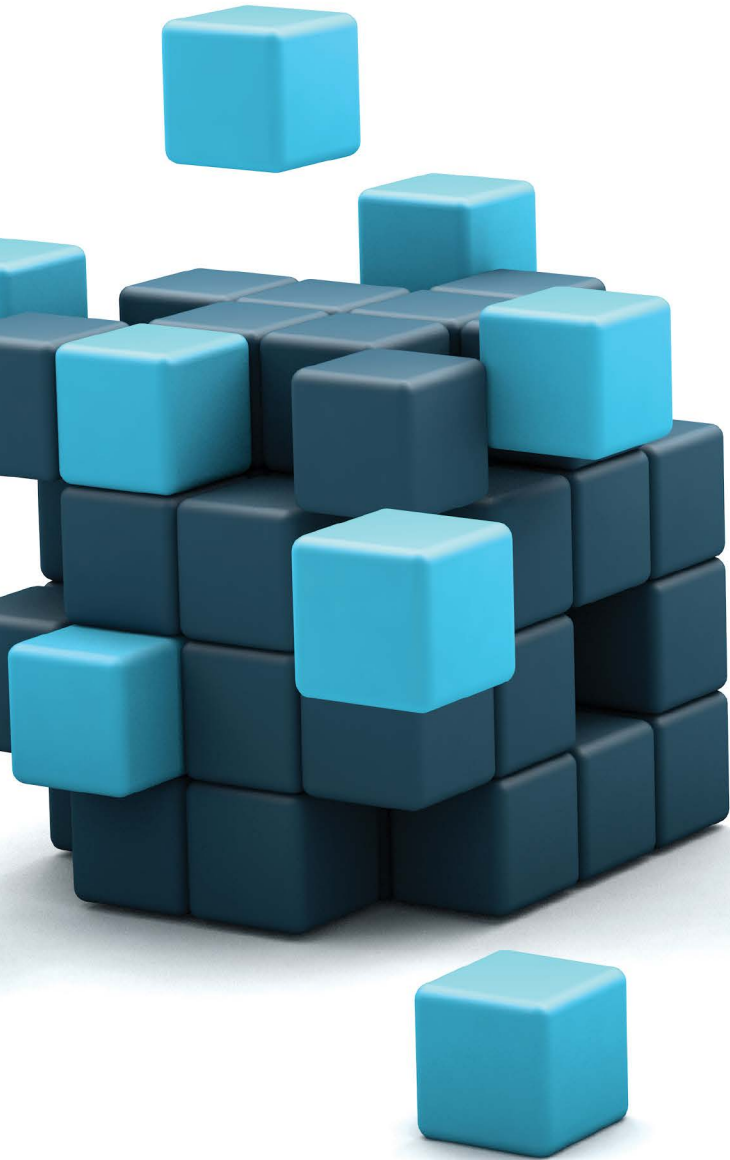
Pay compression is a tough issue with which many organizations struggle. It is costly to fix, and the damage to employee trust and morale and organizational culture can take years to resolve. In one case with which I am familiar, a 2,000-employee organization estimated that it would require \$11 million to substantially reduce or eliminate pay compression over a three-year period. The organization never totally eradicated the problem, as other priorities emerged — seven years later, pay compression is still an issue there.

While pay compression may not ever be totally eradicated in an organization, with constant vigilance, education efforts and improved internal equity and salary management practices, its negative effects can be substantially reduced. 

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Building HR Competencies (and Solving Problems) Through Group Think

In 2015, the University of Wisconsin System implemented its own human resources function, separate from the State of Wisconsin. This new autonomous way of doing HR changed a number of dynamics and gave the university the opportunity to rethink a whole range of policies and procedures and how it could best administer them. Out of this HR redesign was born the HR Communities of Practice office. Located at UW-Madison, the office serves to foster the development of learning communities through which HR practitioners can build their knowledge, skills and abilities to enhance their work in service to the campus community.

We spoke with Harry Webne-Behrman, interim director of this new office, to learn more about the communities of practice concept and how the model is being applied at UW-Madison.

Q: Can you start by explaining the communities of practice concept and the role of the Communities of Practice office?

A: Communities of Practice (CoPs) have become important aspects of the UW-Madison learning terrain over the past decade, thriving in a number of areas. CoPs within UW-Madison human resources have formed around various HR-related competencies, challenges and needs and enable individuals to share resources and knowledge with an eye toward building those competencies, finding solutions to those challenges and addressing those needs. Some CoPs have emerged organically from members of the HR community itself, while others have been catalyzed and organized by the new CoP office. We are evolving to an HR business partner/consultative model at UW-Madison, and we have several hundred HR people distributed across colleges, divisions and departments as well as centrally located within the office of human resources. The CoPs help ensure a common base of knowledge, especially around our identified facilitative competencies — managing change, collaboration, ethics and integrity, execution and problem solving.

The HR communities of practice office fosters essential knowledge sharing and helps facilitate the HR cultural transformation we're embarking upon, with the goal of effective partnerships and a sustainable, competency-based learning program for a diverse campus HR community. The CoPs are largely peer-organized and peer-led, but our office (which consists of three FTEs) supports these groups by coordinating training, providing resources and creating learning pathways.

Q: What was the impetus for implementing the CoP model at UW-Madison?

A: The university's traditional human resources model was very much rooted in transactional functions and central control of those functions. When we were granted autonomy from the state of Wisconsin, we had the opportunity to reevaluate how we were "doing" HR. Shared governance is highly valued at UW-Madison — not just for faculty but also for staff — so we made a commitment to approach the HR function in a way that is much more in partnership with the campus community. However, we quickly realized that there had never been

an expectation that was consistently applied in hiring or training HR people on campus to behave in that way. There was no learning program in place for our HR people that supported delegation of authority and the whole notion of "partnership" — not only for how the HR folks in the various colleges might interact with their customers, but also how central HR interacts with HR staff across campus. So we wanted to create a program that would nurture the development of those business partner/consultative skills, and do so in a way that was contextually relevant and specific to what the campus needed.

We also wanted a program that would foster competency-based learning pathways for all HR professionals throughout their careers. The CoP model is beneficial because it allows individuals to identify the competencies that they see as priorities for themselves and then build up their skill sets in those areas.

Q: How are the various CoPs formed and what groups are currently in place?

A: In a few cases they've come into being through grassroots efforts, when HR folks on campus have identified a competency gap and have come together to share resources and learn as a group. In those instances, the CoP office serves as a resource and a catalyst. In other cases, central HR leads the effort. For example, we recently implemented electronic timekeeping campus-wide, and that's required a big culture shift, especially for faculty. So central HR formed an "e-time" working group so that HR staff who were charged with implementing and facilitating this transition could learn from one another about the strategies for success (some of which are technical, some of which are social) and get coaching on how to manage the change.

There are currently several CoPs on campus, with about 200 individuals participating in one or more. The HR Design/Academic Units CoP is currently looking at how we're implementing the new HR system in the various colleges. Within that CoP, there are several working groups. One working group is looking at how we can better welcome new HR staff and has created an onboarding program, which the CoP office is now putting into place. Another working group is focused on HR-related concerns around the university's animal research technicians (titles, compensation pathways, hazardous pay, wide pay ranges). Other CoPs have formed around payroll and benefits,

social justice issues, global professionals and more. Most CoPs are fluid and organic — some groups disband after addressing concerns, some fold into other groups, and some are long-term.

Q: What kinds of learning events and opportunities are available to these groups?

A: The HR Communities of Practice office facilitates many different kinds of learning for the CoPs. We've hosted shared viewing of some of CUPA-HR's webinars. We hosted a day-long conference for the first time for our HR folks this past December and had more than 250 attendees. We're currently developing a pilot learning cohort that will launch in early 2017. The cohort will consist of 12-18 people that will work together to develop their HR competencies in partnership with peer mentors and the CoP office. We're developing attributes of each competency at "developing," "cultivating fluency" and "mastering" levels. This pilot will be our first foray into putting that learning and assessment into practice.

During the spring 2017 semester we'll be doing a brown-bag series on different HR topics. We also have a CoP website (www.ohr.wisc.edu/cop), where we've been organizing learning resources, a central calendar of HR-related campus events and key resources for new HR professionals. And we're currently exploring how we might be able to build a virtual community to enable our CoPs to share knowledge and resources that way.

Q: What benefits and outcomes have you seen since implementing the communities of practice model?


A: We're seeing a whole different attitude and mindset and a spirit of collaboration emerging among our HR staff across campus. Many of our HR people are realizing that the CoP model and our office is an incredibly beneficial resource to them in supporting their aspirations about how they really want to do HR here. Our office is becoming a trusted partner to our HR folks as they're coming to realize that we can help them manage processes and reach executable outcomes. The concept of learning and development is also gaining new status on campus with our HR staff — they see that they can and should be learning

in order to do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Once several of our learning initiatives launch over the next few months, I'm expecting to see some more tangible results.

Q: What challenges have you encountered?

A: The whole idea of having competencies on which people will be assessed has presented challenges and has elicited a variety of reactions. Some people are excited about it because they want to learn and want to be able to demonstrate that learning and have accountability for it, but others have some anxiety around it. And our emphasis on interpersonal skills and HR's transformation into a consultative partnership model — some people take to that idea easily, others not so much. Some people are of the mindset that they just need to perform their tasks, not make mistakes and just get the job done, and that they don't really need all these other skills. But what these individuals fail to take into account is that if they're problem solving and collaborating and communicating really well, that's going to have a profound impact on the error rate. And if you create relationships with people who can honestly say to you "I don't know how to do this," then you aren't going to just be reacting when they do it incorrectly, you're going to be proactive and help them get it right the first time. Also, people are just so busy with all the "have-tos" that many feel like they just don't have time to think about learning.

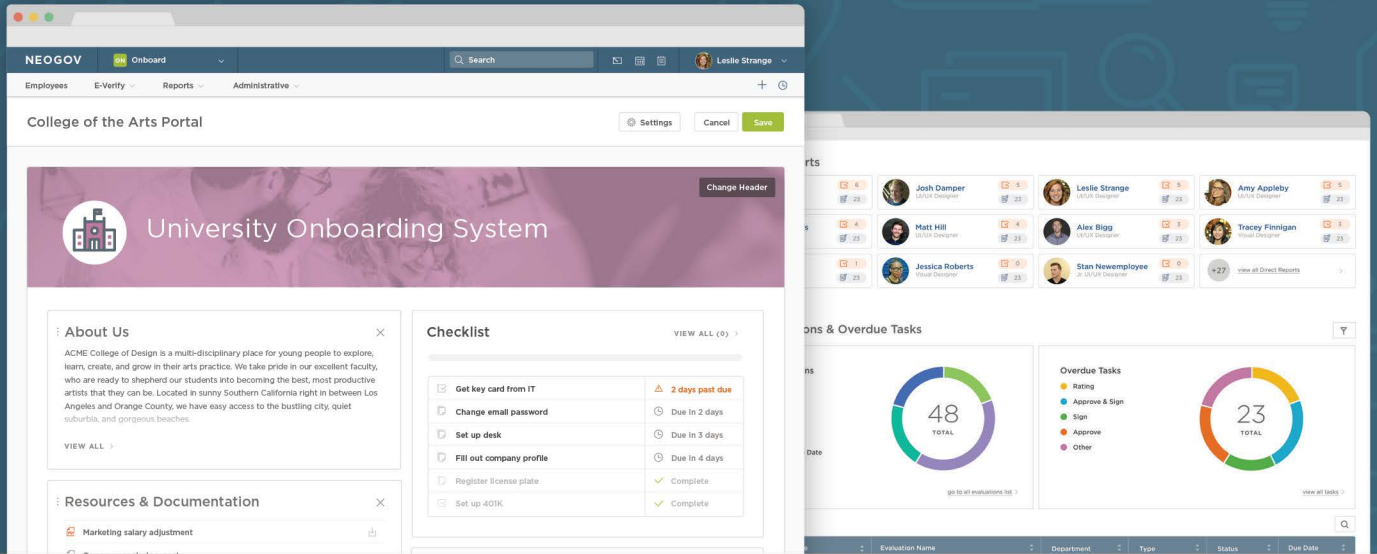
Q: Would you say the communities of practice model is easily replicable for other HR organizations?

A: Absolutely. The concept is pretty straightforward, the cost is minimal and the benefits of HR folks coming together as peers to learn and expand their skill sets and competencies are immeasurable. 

*If you'd like to learn more about University of Wisconsin-Madison's HR Communities of Practice, contact **Harry Webne-Behrman** at harry.webnebehrman@wisc.edu. Or, if you're attending the CUPA-HR Spring Conference March 26-28 in St. Louis, Missouri, plan to attend Webne-Behrman's session "It Starts With Trust: Developing the HR Communities of Practice Office at UW-Madison."*

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Let Your Employees Flex Their Muscles

Why Strengths-Based Development Is Good for Business

“Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish on its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid.” – Albert Einstein

Think for a minute about something you do really well. How do you feel when someone notices or compliments you on that thing you do well? Proud? Confident? Strong? Capable?

Now think about something you don’t do so well. How do you feel when someone points out that weakness? Self-conscious? Sub-par? Unmotivated? Demoralized?

Using this example, it’s easy to see how the conventional approach to personal and professional development — which is to maintain strengths, but fix weaknesses — may not produce the desired results. This is why many organizations are taking a strengths-based approach to development, enabling employees to identify and develop talents, focus on strengths and manage around weaknesses.

What Is Strengths-Based Development?

Psychologist Donald O. Clifton is credited with founding the strengths-based psychology movement in the 1950s ... and it all began with a simple question — “What will happen when we think about what is right with people rather than fixating on what is wrong with them?” Clifton’s decades of research on strengths and success led him, along with researcher and author Tom Rath and a team of scientists at Gallup, to create the online StrengthsFinder assessment. Since its release in 1998, the Clifton StrengthsFinder has become the world’s best-selling strengths assessment tool. The idea behind strengths-based development is simple — when people are allowed and encouraged to utilize and build upon their strengths, as opposed to trying to “fix” their weaknesses, they perform better, are more confident, are happier and are more engaged.

What Are the Benefits of Focusing on Strengths?

Gallup has done extensive research on strengths-based development and has studied hundreds of workgroups that are using strengths-based interventions to examine the effects those interventions are having on workgroup performance. In one such recent study, which included 49,495 business units with 1.2 million employees across 22 organizations in seven industries and 45 countries, Gallup researchers examined six outcomes of the strengths-based approach: sales, profit, customer engagement, turnover, employee engagement and safety.

As Brandon Rigoni and Jim Asplund of Gallup report in the *Gallup Business Journal* article “Strengths-Based Employee Development: The Business Results,” “On average, workgroups that received a strengths intervention improved on all of these measures by a significant amount compared with control groups that received less-intensive interventions or none at all.” The study found that 90 percent of the workgroups that received strengths intervention had performance increases at or above the following ranges:

- 10 percent to 19 percent increased sales;
- 14 percent to 29 percent increased profit;
- 3 percent to 7 percent higher customer engagement;
- 6 percent to 16 percent lower turnover for low-turnover organizations and 26 percent to 72 percent lower turnover for high-turnover organizations;

- 9 percent to 15 percent increase in engaged employees; and
- 22 percent to 59 percent fewer safety incidents.

Writes Rigoni and Asplund, “Almost seven in 10 employees (67 percent) who strongly agree that their manager focuses on their strengths or positive characteristics are engaged. When employees strongly disagree with this statement, the percentage of workers who are engaged in their work plummets to 2 percent.”

Other studies have proven that when individuals work within their areas of weakness, they can only improve slightly; but if they work within their areas of strength, they can grow exponentially. Becky Carter, human resources specialist for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is seeing this in action with IANR’s workforce. The Institute is rolling out strengths-based development for all of its 1,100+ employees, infusing the practice into performance management, team building, onboarding and leadership training. What results has Carter seen? “When people are operating in their strengths zone, they are more energized and excited about their work and are making a bigger impact on their own performance and the overall mission of the IANR,” she says. “They learn their roles faster and adjust to change more quickly, they are more precise and more productive, and they are more engaged and innovative.”

Adds Carol Ott Schacht, leadership consultant for IANR, “Research has shown that people who focus on using their strengths look forward to coming to work; are more likely to tell people they work for a great company; have more positive than negative interactions with coworkers; treat customers better; achieve more on a daily basis; and are three times more likely to report having an excellent quality of life.”

How to Move Toward a Strengths-Based Environment

Like any change, getting people on board with strengths-based development may take some time. The key is to start small and infuse elements of it where you can, for example in the realm of performance management, as IANR has done. The Institute is moving away from annual performance evaluations and toward more frequent and meaningful conversations which, says Carter, are more like work strategy sessions. “We’re emphasizing the need for managers to recognize the strengths their employees bring

to the table and to be more affirming of those strengths and how they can be used and developed to the benefit of both the employee and the unit.” Human resources also created a five-question conversation guide for managers to use during these conversations. Questions include: “What accomplishments have you had since the last time we met?” “What will you accomplish before we meet again?” “What are your natural strengths and talents, how can you further utilize them in your job, and how can we help you further develop them?” “What challenges are you currently facing?” and “How can I help you be your best?”

Onboarding is another area in which a strengths-based approach can be easily infused. At IANR, every new hire takes the Clifton StrengthsFinder. Says Carter, “Not only does this help identify these new employees’ strengths right off the bat, but it also helps them very quickly start to understand the strengths-based culture we’re building.” Results are shared with the employee’s supervisor so as to inform meaningful conversation between the two. Manager training on the strengths-based approach is also fairly easy to do and can help to begin to shift the mindset around talent development. After managers are trained on the concept, it can be rolled out to all staff.

Findings from the previously mentioned Gallup study uncovered seven strategies common to organizations that accomplished the most with their strengths-based development approaches. According to Rigoni and Asplund, these strategies are:

- **Leadership alignment:** Putting the elements in place for a strengths-based culture, beginning at the top;
- **Manager alignment:** Developing teams and employees from the perspective of strengths;
- **Internal communication:** Generating awareness of and enthusiasm for strengths;
- **Strengths community:** Making strengths an integral and natural part of the organization’s day-to-day operations;
- **Performance management:** Focusing development and recognition on employees’ strengths;
- **Coaching:** Building a network of strengths experts and advocates; and
- **Brand building:** Tying the organization’s strengths-based culture to its larger brand.

Tools for Identifying Strengths

There are some great tools available to help an individual identify his or her strengths and learn how to better use them at work. IANR has had great success using the following (which can all be found with a quick Google search):

Clifton StrengthsFinder

So far, roughly a third of IANR’s workforce has taken the StrengthsFinder assessment. “This is the first step in implementing our strengths-based development approach at the Institute,” says Carter.

Love It or Loathe It

From Marcus Buckingham’s book *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*, this simple exercise, where you record everything you did at work during a given week and note whether you loved it or loathed it, can help you determine what energizes you and what saps your energy at work, and can help you think about how you can infuse more of what you love into your days.


FREE and STOP

Also from Buckingham, this activity can help you free your strengths and stop your weaknesses. By answering a series of questions, you can identify how and where a specific strength helps in your current role and think about how you can use that strength more in your work. Another series of questions helps you think about how you might be able to stop spending so much time on what you don’t like about your job.

Five Clues to Talent

This activity from Gallup can help you identify your strengths by thinking about to which activities you are naturally drawn, which activities energize you and which activities you truly enjoy.

Play to Their Strengths

Letting your employees flex their muscles by using their strengths every day at work makes good business sense. When your organization focuses its attention on what’s right with people instead of what’s wrong, you’ll reap the benefits of more confident, higher performing, happier and more productive individuals and teams. 

To learn more about strengths-based development and how University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources is using the model with its workforce, view CUPA-HR’s free, on-demand webinar “Strengths-Based Development: What’s Right With You” at www.cupahr.org/webinars.

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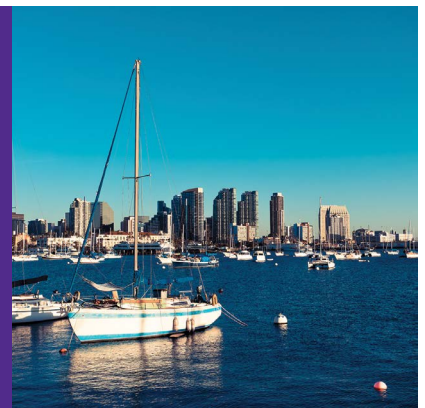


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