Allied Academies
National Conference

Myrtle Beach, South Carolina
April 13-16, 1998

Academy of Managerial Communications

Proceedings

Affiliates	*Journals*
International Academy for Case Studies	*Journal of the International Academy for Case Studies*
Academy of Entrepreneurship	*Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal and the Entrepreneurial Executive*
Academy of Accounting and Financial Studies	*Academy of Accounting and Financial Studies Journal*
Academy of Managerial Communications	*Academy of Managerial Communications Journal*
Academy of Educational Leadership	*Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*
Academy of Marketing Studies	*Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*
Academy of Strategic and Organizational Leadership	*Academy of Strategic and Organizational Leadership Journal*
Academy of Free Enterprise Education	*The Journal of Entrepreneurship Education*
Academy of Information and Management Sciences	*Academy of Information and Management Sciences Journal*
Academy for Studies in Business Law	*Academy for Studies in Business Law Journal*

Allied Academies, Inc.
An International Non Profit Association
of Scholars and Practitioners

PO Box 2689, Cullowhee, NC 28723
Voice 704-293-9151; FAX 704-293-9407
www.alliedacademies.org

Volume 3, Number 1 1998

Proceedings of the Academy of Managerial Communications

April 13-16, 1998
Myrtle Beach, South Carolina

Jo Ann and Jim Carland
Co-Editors
Western Carolina University

The Proceedings of the
Academy of Managerial Communications
are published by the
Allied Academies, Inc., PO Box 2689, Cullowhee, NC, 28723.

The Academy of Managerial Communications is an affiliate of the Allied Academies, an international, non-profit association of scholars whose purpose is to support and encourage the exchange of knowledge.

Proceedings of the Academy of Managerial Communications

Table of Contents

FIRM REPUTATION AND STOCK PRICE 1
Gary H. Jones, Truman State University
Beth H. Jones, Western Carolina University
Philip L. Little, Western Carolina University

DO COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES OF ACCOUNTING GRADUATES MATCH EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS? A SURVEY AMONG EMPLOYERS OF THE 100 TOP ACCOUNTING FIRMS 7
Lynn Wasson, Southwest Missouri State University
Mari Brandenburg, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

RETHINKING THE COMMUNICATION OF EMPLOYMENT-AT-WILL: WHAT TO DO? 17
Patricia Borstorff, Jacksonville State University
W. Mark Hearn, Jacksonville State University

DILBERT AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: WHAT BOTH CAN TEACH US ABOUT MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION 26
Pamela R. Johnson, California State University, Chico

CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF A NATIONAL INSURANCE FIRM: RESTRUCTURING AFTERMATH 32
Mari Brandenburg, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Frank Slavinski, St. Francis College

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF SELF-MANAGED TEAMS 33
Deborah M. Barnes, Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Dale E. Yeatts, University of North Texas

THE “DRESSING DOWN” OF THE MARKETING EDUCATION CURRICULUM 34
Bill McPherson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

STATUS OF INTERNET USAGE AMONG VARIOUS SCHOOL DISTRICTS 35
Bill McPherson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
John Olivo, Bloomsburg University

INDEX 36

FIRM REPUTATION AND STOCK PRICE

Gary H. Jones, Truman State University
Beth H. Jones, Western Carolina University
Philip L. Little, Western Carolina University

ABSTRACT

A study is proposed to test empirically whether a good corporate image serves as an intangible asset which can help protect an organization in times of economic crises. We propose using data from stock markets crashes to examine the question of whether companies with better reputations suffer less severe declines in market value, i.e., display more stability. If this holds true, it would support the idea that good corporate reputations provide a "reservoir of goodwill" which buffers companies from market decline in times of economic turmoil. The support of this premise would underscore the importance of reputation management.

INTRODUCTION

Although a number of studies have addressed ways in which organizations might build a good reputation, the consequences of corporate reputation have been less well examined empirically. What is the value of a solid reputation once secured?

> It has been suggested that reputation can serve as something of a reservoir of goodwill, both in the accounting sense (where reputation is assigned a dollar value when a firm is sold, note Davis, 1992; Bromley, 1993, citing Davis, p. 166), and in a public relations sense, where it is implied that communities will tend to give highly reputable firms the "benefit of the doubt" (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; McGuire et al., 1988 [by implication], Patterson, 1993).

This study will examine the value of corporate reputation by empirically testing the premise that a good reputation serves as an intangible asset which can help protect the organization in times of corporate crises--in public relations terms, the "reservoir of goodwill" presumption.

RESEARCH QUESTION

For our purposes *reputation* will be operationalized using the Fortune's "most admired corporations" survey rating. The *crisis*, or the event from which the buffer is to protect the company, will be three significant one-day stock market declines that have occurred in the past 15 years: October 19, 1987 (508 points, or 22 percent of value), October 13, 1989 (190 point drop, or 7 percent of value); and March 8, 1996 (171 points, 3 percent). The selection of these three events will allow for determination of reputation effects across a range of decline severity. The final measurement issue concerns the actual *degree of economic harm* suffered by the 250-350 companies in this study relative to their respective reputations. This will be determined by percent change in stock price.

The question is: Can reputation serve to protect a company against short-term economic loss in the event of a major, sudden, general economic shock (in this case a major stock market crash or decline)?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The importance of reputation as an area of inquiry is underscored in the literature by its numerous suggested benefits. First and foremost, reputation has increasingly come to be recognized as an asset. (Bromley, 1993; Brouillard, 1983; Caminiti, 1992; Hall, 1992; Holmes, 1995; Sobol, Farrelly & Taper, 1992; Weigelt & Camerer, 1988). As an asset a solid corporate reputation has a number of potential advantages. It can signal publics how a firm's products, jobs, strategies and prospects compare with other firms. It can signal product quality, may enable premium prices, enhance access to capital markets and attract investors (Bromley, 1993; Frombrun & Shanley, 1990). A good reputation can help attract better job applicants, retain them once hired and maintain employee morale (Brouillard, 1983; Sobol et al., 1992). Building on a admirable reputation, a firm may have a more sustainable competitive advantage (Camaniti, 1992; Frombrun and Shanley, 1990), a better-protected "ecological niche" (Bromley, 1993), and a higher probability of generating desired returns on investment (Knipes, 1989; Riahi-Belkaoui and Pavlik, 1992). A reputable firm may charge higher prices for its product and services (Brouillard, 1983; Sobol et al.). Sobol, Farrelly and Taper (1992) summarized many of the advantages of a good reputation under the four categories of labor, finance, product/service sales and community (note especially pp. 58-79).

> Although less commented upon in the literature, it is generally presumed that reputation can provide some protection for the organization in times of trouble; it can, theoretically, provide the company with resource "slack" in the event of adversity—a crisis or sudden economic downturn. In this regard, some have considered reputation using an inoculation metaphor (Caminiti, 1992; d'Alessandro, 1990). In her 1992 *Fortune* article, for example, Caminiti quotes a marketing consultant with Yankelovich that "Exxon 'never developed the kind of strong reputation that could have inoculated it against something like the Valdez spill'" (p. 77). Burgoon, Pfau and Birk (1995) find evidence that issue/advocacy advertising can inoculate against "attitude slippage" following exposure to a persuasive attack on behalf of an opposing position.

Another assertion is that corporate reputation represents a positional capability which could, along with other organizational resources, contribute to a firm's sustainable long-term competitive advantage (Hall, 1993). Unfortunately, few empirical studies have actually demonstrated hypothesized benefits of corporate reputation.

Based on the considerations outlined above, this study tests the following primary hypothesis:

H_1 The higher a firm's reputation the less relative economic loss that firm will suffer in cases of economic crisis.

The economic events studied will be the stock market crash of October, 1987, and the large one-day market declines of October, 1989 and March, 1996. A company's relative economic damage will be measured by corporate common stock price loss and reputation will be operationalized according to results of *Fortune* magazine's annual corporation reputation surveys. It is therefore hypothesized that companies with higher reputations will suffer significantly lower stock price declines the day of the market plunge, and will exhibit significantly less of a price decline two weeks after the initial drop (H_{1a} and H_{1b}, respectively). Further, in the case of the historic 1987 crash, it is hypothesized that stock prices of the more highly reputed firms will exhibit less of a decline 90 days after the market collapse (H_{1c}).

There is another issue which must be addressed. Several scholars have suggested that corporate reputation as measured by the *Fortune* survey is a biased construct. Despite the fact that five out of the eight attributes of this reputation measure are non-financial in nature (discussed below), these researchers found evidence that considerations of a company's financial well-being may have influenced respondents overall perception of the corporations being evaluated, thus creating a confounding bias or financial "halo effect" (Brown & Perry, 1994; Fryxell & Wang, 1994). Nevertheless, there exists general consensus that reputation serves as an independent construct, even if the degree of that independence from financial measures is sometimes questioned. One way to test for this possible bias is to test for correlation between *Fortune's* reputation measure and a purely financial measure of corporate health in a given year. Then, if multicollinearity is not too high, include the financial measure in the model. One highly regarded and widely used measure of financial soundness is Standard and Poor's (S&P) earnings and dividend rankings for common stocks. These rankings—actually, grades—are determined by averaging performance over a ten-year period and are computed by measuring corporate earnings and dividends, then adjusting for growth, stability with long-term trend, and cyclicality. (*Standard & Poor's Security Owner's Stock Guide*, 1987).

Q_{1a}: Are the variables corporate reputation and corporate financial rating significantly correlated?

Because past studies have indicated lack of clear relation between reputation and long-term financial performance (McGuire et al., 1988; Sobol et al., 1992), and, more importantly, because reputation does consider a number of non-financial attributes, it is suggested that, while corporate reputation and corporate financial rating might be correlated, they will have differing relationships with the dependent variable. Therefore, the following research question is raised:

Q_{1b}: Is there a difference between the relationship of corporate reputation with company stock price decline and corporate financial rating with stock price decline in cases of economic crises?

The second research question involves industry groups. For purposes of market reporting and analysis, corporate stocks are typically classified as belonging to one of eight major industry groupings. As listed daily in *The Wall Street Journal*, these groups are: basic materials, consumer cyclicals, consumer non-cyclicals, energy, financial, industrial, technology and utilities. Corporations in different industry groups exhibit differing degrees of interaction with aspects of their external environment, for example, an unexpectedly positive federal unemployment report might have immediate repercussions in a consumer-cyclical industry like automobiles, but very little effect in the utility category. So it was in the case of the 1987 stock market crash. An analysis conducted by *The Wall Street Journal* a week after the 1987 crash confirmed that the stocks of different industrial sectors were affected differently (Slater, 1987). This analysis, however, was by individual sector (e.g., toys), not category (e.g., cyclicals), and considered neither reputation nor financial rating as variables. This raises the following research question:

Q_2 In cases economic crisis, is there a difference in stock price decline when firms are examined by industry category?

METHODS

VARIABLES

DEPENDENT: STOCK PRICE DROP: The dependent variable in this study will be the percent change in the company's common stock price from the closing price the day before the major market decline to the closing price at the following selected points in time:

a) the day of the decline
b) two weeks after the decline
c) 90 days after the crash (for 1987 data only)

INDEPENDENT: 1. CORPORATE REPUTATION RATING: The independent variable "reputation" was measured by *Fortune* magazine's annual survey of corporate reputations. These surveys have been conducted every fall since 1982, with summary results published within the first quarter of the following year. In these surveys, executives, outside directors and corporate analysts were asked to rate the ten largest companies in their industry on eight attributes: quality of management; quality of products or services; long-term investment value; innovativeness; financial soundness; ability to attract, develop, and keep talented people; community and environmental responsibility; and use of corporate assets. The industry groups surveyed are the largest in the *Fortune 500* and *Fortune Service 500* directories of U.S. industrial and non-industrial corporations.

2. STANDARD AND POOR'S (S&P) GRADE for earnings and dividend rankings for common stocks. This variable measures the financial soundness of a company, and is probably best described by quoting directly from S&P: "In arriving at these rankings [S&P uses] a computerized scoring system based on per-share earnings and dividend records of the most recent ten years. . . Basic scores are computed for earnings and dividends, then adjusted as indicated by a set of predetermined modifiers for growth, stability within long-term trend, and cyclicality. Adjusted scores for earnings and dividends are then combined to yield a final score. . ." (*Standard & Poor's Security Owner's Stock Guide*, 1987, p. 7).

3. INDUSTRY CATEGORY: Fortune's reputation data set contains as many as 40 very specific industry groups. These will be consolidated into seven more general industry categories using *The Wall Street Journal* classifications: Basic materials; Consumer, cyclical; Consumer, non-cyclical; Financial; Industrial/manufacturing; Technology; and Utilities.

STATISTICAL TESTS

The main objective of the statistical analysis is to determine the effects of three independent variables on percent change in stock price. Two of the independent variables in the study are qualitative (defined as categorical or ordinal). Specifically, S&P grade is ordinal and industry group is categorical. The other independent variable, reputation rating, is quantitative (defined as interval- or ratio-scaled). The dependent variable, percent change in stock price, is also quantitative. In the situations where the dependent variable is quantitative and independent variables are both quantitative and qualitative, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) is appropriate (Kachigan, 1986; Pedhazur, 1982; Wildt & Ahtola, 1985).

ANCOVA results will show whether reputation rating, industry group, and/or S&P grade has a statistically significant effect on stock price change. It also provides R-squared information which measures how much of the change in the dependent variable is being explained by the independent variables.

Where ANCOVA's F-test shows that one of the qualitative independent variables (grade or group) has a significant effect overall, a post hoc comparison test will be used to determine exactly where the differences are, specifically, Duncan's Multiple Range test (Huck, Cormier, and Bounds, 1974, p. 68-9).

These statistical tests will be repeated separately for each of the three dependent variables: one-day, two-week, and 90-day (1987) drop in stock price, in each of the three years studied.

SUMMARY

In summary, we propose to test whether, in proportion to their positive strengths, corporate reputations do provide a reservoir of goodwill. This will be accomplished by testing whether or not this quality helps insulate companies from loss in times of economic crisis. Three stock market drops will be studied so that the significance of the reputation variable can be examined across economic crises of varying severity. Additionally, by statistically comparing Standard & Poor's financial grade with the *Fortune* gauge of reputation across several hundred companies in three recent years, this study will contribute to the understanding of the relationship between these two measures of corporate well-being.

[Editors' Note: The full text of the completed paper is available from the authors.]

REFERENCES

Bostdorff, D., & Vibbert, S. (1994). "Values advocacy: Enhancing organizational images, deflecting public criticism, and grounding future arguments". *Public Relations Review, 20*, 141-158.

Bromley, D.B. (1993). "*Reputation, image and impression management*". Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Brouillard, (1983). "Corporate reputation counts". *Advertising Age,* 54(2), M46.

Brown, B., & Perry, S. (1994). "Removing the financial performance halo from *Fortune's* "most admired" companies". *Academy of Management Journal, 37*(5), pp. 1347-1359.

Burgoon, M., Pfau, M., & Birk, T. S. (1995). "An inoculation theory explanation for the effects of corporate issue/advocacy advertising campaigns". *Communication Research, 4,* 22, 485-505.

Caminiti, S. (1992). "The payoff from a good reputation". *Fortune*, (February 10) 74-77.

d'Alessandro, D. F. (1990). "Image building; why is it so difficult?" *Vital Speeches*, *56*, pp. 636-641.

Davis, M. (1992). "Goodwill accounting: Time for an overhaul". Journal of Accountancy, 75-83.

Fombrun, C., & Shanley, M. (1990). "What's in a name? Reputation building and corporate strategy". *Academy of Management Journal*, *33*, 233-258.

Fryxell, G. E., & Wang J. (1994). "The fortune corporate 'reputation' index: Reputation for what?" *Journal of Management*, *20*(1), 1-14.

Hall, R. (1992). "The strategic analysis of intangible resources". *Strategic Management Journal*, *13*, 135-144.

Hall, R. (1993). "A framework linking intangible resources and capabilities to sustainable competitive advantage". *Strategic Management Journal*, *14*, pp. 607-618.

Holmes (1995). "Reputation management: Earning a reputation and leveraging it for success". *Reputation Management, 1*, 9-16.

Huck, S., Cormier, W., & Bounds, W. (1974). *Reading Statistics and Research*. Harper & Row: NY.

Kachigan, S. K. (1986). *Statistical analysis: An interdisciplinary introduction to univariate & multivariate methods*. New York: Radius.

Knipes, B. J. (1989). "Corporate reputation and strategic performance". *Dissertation Abstracts International*, *49*, 2304A.

McGuire, J. B., Sundgren, A., & Schneeweis, T. (1988). "Corporate social responsibility and firm financial performance". *Academy of Management Journal*, *31*, pp. 854-872.

Patterson, B. (1993). "Crisis impact on reputation management". *Public Relations Journal*, *49*(11), pp. 46-47.

Pedhazur, E. J. (1982). *Multiple regression in behavioral research: Explanation and prediction*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Riahi-Belkaoui, A., & Pavlik, E. L. (1992). *Accounting for Corporate Reputation*. Westport, Connecticut: Dryden.

Slater, K. (1987). "Not all industries suffered alike in stock market's cruelest month. *The Wall Street Journal*, (November 2)., Sect. 2, p.31.

Sobol, M. G., Farrelly, G. E., & Taper, J. S. (1992). *Shaping the Corporate Image: An Analytical Guide for Executive Decision Makers*. New York: Quorum.

Standard & Poor's Security Owner's Stock Guide. (1987). New York: Standard & Poor's Corporation.

Weigelt, K., & Camerer, C. (1988). "Reputation and corporate strategy: A review of recent theory and applications". *Strategic Management Journal*, *9*, 443-454.

Wildt, A. R., & Ahtola, O. T. (1985). Analysis of covariance. Sage University Papers, Series: Quantitative applications in the social sciences., 12. (Series Editors, J. L. Sullivan and R. G. Niemi. Series No. 07-012). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

DO COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES OF ACCOUNTING GRADUATES MATCH EMPLOYER EXPECTATIONS? A SURVEY AMONG EMPLOYERS OF THE 100 TOP ACCOUNTING FIRMS

Lynn Wasson, Southwest Missouri State University
Mari Brandenburg, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

A survey among managers of the top 100 accounting firms of the United States revealed pertinent information for students and educators regarding which communication competencies are adequate among entry-level, professional-track accounting graduates and which are not. The survey included seven communication competencies: speaking one-on-one, speaking to groups, writing memos and business messages, preparing reports, listening, nonverbal communication, and electronic proficiency. Managers perceived listening and report writing skills to be especially low among job candidates, while skills in computer software and hardware use were generally high. Managers further indicated that during the multiple interview process used to select the best candidates, poor oral communication and questionable human relations skills were major factors for candidate rejection. Despite reports that the need for traditional communication skills is on the decline as technological skills become primary criteria for success, employers continue to stress the critical importance of communication competencies as the basis for entry to the accounting field as well as for success and continued professional growth. Survey results have implications for curriculum planners, teachers, and advisors, as well as for students who seek to enter the accounting profession.

INTRODUCTION

The job market for entry-level, professional-track employees is tight, and employers continue to be increasingly selective in their hiring choices (Cook & Finch, 1994). With the rapidly changing business environment resulting from technology advancements, downsizings, mergers, and globalization, employers are under increasing pressure to hire only the best and brightest. Additionally, employers are increasingly critical about the quality of job candidates and new hires (In These hard Economic Times, 1992; Anderson, 1993).

The literature does not clearly delineate current employer expectations for job candidates entering professional-track positions in accounting. Available research of employer expectations is often dated, over five years old; thus, it may not reflect the current emphasis employers place on technology and related shifts in work place success criteria. While all professional fields appear to have an insufficient amount of research literature addressing employer expectations, the field of accounting, one of the most popular business majors, was the focus of this study. Criticisms sometimes target the skill levels of those who prepare to enter the accounting field as well as the instructors who provide the preparation and readiness to succeed. Therefore, the purpose of this report was to reveal current employer expectations for entry-level, professional-track college graduates holding a Bachelor of Science degree in Business with a major in accounting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early studies indicated that excellence in written, oral, listening, and interpersonal communication skills are essential to success in the accounting field. These same skills have also been acknowledged among accounting employers as lacking (Andrews & Koester, 1979; Andrews & Sigband, 1984; Anderson, Harwood, & Hermanson, 1980). A few studies have indicated that communication skills may be even more important than technical skills for career advancement in accounting firms (Bennett & Olay, 1986; Andrews & Sigband, 1984). For example, Andrews and Sigband (1984) indicated that newly hired accountants possessed adequate technical skills but were often unable to communication the results of their technical procedures in a clear and concise manner.

A study by Dinuis and Rogow (1988), in which three rounds of the Delphi method was used among panel members of Big Eight partners and managers, emphasized nonverbal factors of communication. The Big Eight employers indicated the most important entry-level qualities they used to identify the "stars" they sought to hire were appearance and presence, leadership, and attractive personal characteristics. Each of these qualities is primarily displayed through nonverbal communication cues.

Early studies of the 1970s and 1980s were indicators for action to be taken by educators in the preparation and training of students seeking a career in accounting. The goals appeared clear; that is, increase the emphasis on all aspects of communication skills so new employees may more readily meet the requirements of their professional work and their employers. However, the goals may not have been achieved, nor have employers' requests been given adequate attention by professional institutions of accounting.

According to Northey (1990), in 1987 the American Institute of CPAs moved to abolish the essay portion of the professional examination that helped assess written communication skills. Accounting firms as well as accounting academics expressed outrage. In 1989 chief executive officers of the eight largest public accounting firms fought back and put communication skills at the top of the list of three general skills needed for success in the accounting field.

According to the most recent reports, accounting employers continue to highly value certain communication skills (Ray, Stallard, & Hunt, 1994; LaFrancois, 1992), yet communication weaknesses continue to challenge the field (LaFrancois, 1990; Half, 1995). Half (1995) states that the most prevalent failing of accountants is the inability to effectively communicate. By failing to incorporate the non-technical skills of communication into their overall professional performance, CPAs short change their career potentials and may inadvertently mislead their clients.

Moncada, Nelson, and Smith (1995) argue that written communication skills remain to be the most important for work in accounting. These researchers identified 15 different types of written communications in accounting including various report types, business letters, memorandums, documentation, and electronic messages. Likewise, Northey (1990) identified extensive and varied writing requirements among their 689 survey respondents. Northey's results identified writing as the key communication skill required for success.

Currently, the type of task requiring communication skills may have changed, yet the need for communication skills has not (Northey, 1990). Writing in the form of reports and documents may have once seemed to be the major communication task for accountants, but marketing and selling services have become increasingly important to the success of today's accounting firms (*The Practical Accountant*, April, 1997). The most recent evidence of specific types of communication competencies for accounting may be that which is provided in a collection of editorial statements published in *The Practical Accountant* (April, 1997). Accounting firms are reported to be building service specialties and re-engineering their firms (through mergers, acquisitions, expansions, and restructuring) for better positioning and financial success. To the extent these claims are true, requirements for communication skills will include negotiating skills and interpersonal communication to manage people in changing situations. Accounting professionals will also need increased advisory and consulting skills, which require good oral communication. Additionally, good oral communication skills are needed during dialogues with clients that result in productive business relations and will require well-developed interviewing skills, overcoming barriers to communication, and building productive business relations.

This information, as reported in *The Practical Accountant* (April, 1997) needs to be further verified by a formal survey results, as the editorial reports were professional declarations or opinion statements rather than conclusions from systematic research. Consequently, the following research questions were posited to provide evidence of continuing and formal support (or lack of it) for the opinions expressed by writers in the accounting field:

1. What qualities do employers most value in their entry-level, professional-track employees?
2. Are technical skills of the profession, people skills, or some other criteria most important for selection and success?
3. By what process are employees identified who match the expectations and needs of the employer?
4. How may institutions of higher education better prepare students to rapidly adapt and achieve success in the work place and in the profession?

METHODOLOGY

The 100 top employers in the accounting field, as defined by the criteria used in the field and listed in the Business Phone Book USA (1997), were selected to participate in the survey. Major employers in the accounting field were selected because they often serve as models for other firms, may set recruiting standards, and attract and hire the largest number of candidates.

A pilot study conducted the previous year as well as guidelines provided by Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld, and Booth-Kewley (1997) were useful in developing a reliable survey instrument and for providing feedback when collecting and processing information which would provide answers to the research questions. The survey, as revised after the pilot study (see Appendix), was mailed to managers of the respective firms. A follow-up contact to non-responders was completed by fax. Of the 100 surveys mailed to accounting managers, 25% were returned and useable in the study.

FINDINGS

Items 1 - 3 covered comprehensive communication skills. Items 4 - 6 addressed electronic communication tools. Item 7 covered general communication skills expected for the future, and items 8 - 13 focused on hiring practices of accounting employers. Item 14, the final item, was reserved for written suggestions to instructors to better prepare students for entry-level, professional-track accounting positions.

Comprehensive communication skills. Item 1 of the survey asked, "As you interview applicants, what is your assessment of their communication skill proficiency?" Managers were asked to rank communication skill proficiencies in seven areas: 1) Speaking one-on-one or interaction skills; 2) business presentation skills or speaking to small groups; 3) written communication skills, memos and business messages; 4) report writing skills; 5) listening skills; 6) nonverbal communication skills, such as professional demeanor, manners, dress, and business etiquette; and 7) electronic, meaning the use of computing software and hardware. A scale of 0 (significantly lacking) to 5 (significantly above expectations) was used to evaluate each item. Table 1 presents the mean proficiency level of each of the seven communication skills.

Table 1
Employer Assessment of Communication Skill Proficiencies
Among Entry-Level, Professional-Track Job Applicants (Scale 1 to 5)

Communication proficiency	Mean of expected proficiency
Speaking one-on-one / Interaction	3.0
Business presentations / Speaking to small groups	2.0
Written communication (memos & business messages	2.1
Report writing	2.1
Listening	2.7
Nonverbal communication	3.0
Electronic communications	3.7

As shown in Table 1, four of the seven proficiency skills (business presentation skills, written communication skills, report writing skills, and listening skills) were below the mid-range value of 3. These skills may be significantly lacking or were less than expected by employers. Speaking one-on-one and nonverbal communication skills including professional demeanor, manners, dress, and business etiquette, were generally as expected (mean, 3.0), while electronic skills were slightly above expectations (mean, 3.7).

Item 2 of the survey asked, "How do you assess the human relations skills of an applicant (the ability of the individual to get along with and work well with other employees)? Candidates were provided six choices as well as an "other" category in which remarks could be added. Results indicated that 84% (21) respondents assess human relations by combining opinions of multiple interviewers formed during the interview, while 48% (12) of the respondents indicated that the candidate is judged by general communication skills demonstrated during the interview. Only 12%

(3) of the respondents assessed human relations skills through a pre-employment test and only 16^ (4) depended on comments provided by references. Respondent-supplied remarks indicated assessment of human relations skills was accomplished through behavioral interviewing techniques and by tracking candidate interactions among small groups beginning with pre-recruitment meetings.

Item 3 asked which of the seven listed communication skills are necessary in order for newly hired accounting professionals to become productive in the company as quickly as possible. A scale of 0 (Not at all important) to 5 (Critical to productivity) was used for respondents' indication of the extent of necessity. Table 2 shows the mean levels of perceived necessity of each skill.

Table 2
Communication Skills Perceived to be Necessary to Become Productive as Quickly as Possible

Communication proficiency	Mean of perceived importance
Speaking one-on-one / Interaction	4.2
Business presentations / Speaking to small groups	2.4
Written communication (memos & business messages	3.7
Report writing	3.4
Listening	4.4
Nonverbal communication	4.0
Electronic communications	4.5

As Table 2 indicates, all skills but one received ratings above the midrange between "not at all important" (0) and "critical to productivity" (5). "Business presentation skills/speaking to small groups" was perceived to be the least important among the choices (mean, 2.43). However, an ability to use computing software and hardware (electronic) was perceived to be the most necessary skill (mean, 4.5). Listening skills (mean, 4.4), speaking one-on-one (interaction skills) (mean, 4.2), and nonverbal communication skills (mean, 4.0) also received relatively high ratings.

Electronic communication tools. In Item 4, participants were asked which of six software applications, other than specialized accounting software, they required for their newly hired employees holding a Bachelor of Science in Accounting. All respondents (100%) expected spreadsheet applications; 80% (20) respondents require word processing applications; 28% (7) require database applications; 16% (4) require presentation software applications; 12% (3) require graphics applications, and 8% (2) checked the "other" category.

Item 5 asked the extent which entry-level accounting employees would communicate using electronic mail or groupware/meeting support software. On a scale of 0 (Not al all) to 5 (Daily use), respondents indicated a mean of 4.2 for electronic mail and a mean of 3.2 for groupware/meeting support (shared files).

Item 6 asked respondents, on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 5 (daily use), to indicate the importance in company communication that commercial network services played. Network services include America Online, CompuServe, Microsoft Internet Explorer, Netscape, and the like. The average response was 2.8, indicating that the use of these services play only a very moderate role in company communication.

General communication skills and the future. Item 7 asked whether respondents anticipate a change in requirements for communication skills over the next year or two for entry-level professional accounting employees. Of the total responses, 1 respondent checked "Yes," 5 checked "No," 16 checked "About the same", and 3 checked "Don't know." Overall, most respondents expect communication skill requirements to stay about the same for the next year or two.

Hiring practices. Item 8 asked respondents to indicate the number of interviewers a candidate generally meets with during the hiring process. The range of available responses was from one to five or more. Results indicated that the average number of interviewers that a job candidate will meet is 3.8.

Item 9 asked, "What types of pre-employment testing are used by your company for entry-level professional accounting employees?" Options provided included physical examination, simulated performance test, psychological test, drug test, no test, and other. Eighty-four percent of respondents (21) indicated no pre-employment testing was used; only 8% (2) used a psychological test, and 8% (2) used "other" and wrote in personality profile and crucial background check.

Item 10 sought an answer to the question, "What types of background checks/information are typically completed or collected for entry-level professional accounting employees?" Item choices were work experience, transcript/grade point, degree/certification, none, and other. Eighty-four percent (21) do a transcript/grade-point check; 60%(15) check work experience; 52% (13) check the degree or certification area; 16% (4) do not check, and 4% (1) checked other and wrote in "references." Table 3 presents the results of Items 9 and 10.

Table 3
Pre-Employment Tests and Background Checks Used by Employers
For Entry-Level Professional Accounting Employees

Type of test of check	Percent and (number) of employers using test
Pre-employment testing	
Physical examination	4% (1)
Simulated performance test	0%
Psychological test	8% (2)
Drug test	4% (1)
No tests	84%(21)
Other	8% (2)
Background checks	
Work experience	60% (15)
Transcript / grade point	84% (21)
Degree / certification	52% (13)
No background check	16% (4)
Other	4% (2)

Item 11 asked how much weight is placed on applicant-supplied, personal references. Respondents used a scale of 0 (Not relevant) to 5 (Essential for the hiring decision). The mean response was 2.2, indicating a low weight placed on personal references provided by the applicant.

Item 12 asked, "What are the major factors that form a basis for candidate rejection after the FIRST interview?" Item 13 asked the same for the SECOND interview. Table 4 presents the list of choices that were available to respondents and the percentage of respondents who selected each.

Table 4
Factors That Form a Basis for Candidate Rejection
After First and Second Interviews

Reason for rejection	After first interview	After second interview
Inadequate, inaccurate, or unsupportable applications materials	24% (6)	24% (6)
Inadequate communication skills		
Oral communication	88% l(22)	68% (17)
Written communication	36% (9)	40% (10)
Listening skills	60% (15)	60% (15)
Nonverbal communication	60% (15)	56% l(14)
Questionable human relations skills	72% (18)	72% (18)
Lack of prior experience (relevant internship or previous employment)	24% (6)	24% (6)
Insufficient accounting knowledge or preparation	48% (12)	48% (12)
Unsatisfactory results on pre-employment tests	8% (2)	0%
Other	12% (3)	12% (3)

As Table 4 indicates, communication skills represent the major factors for rejecting a candidate after both the first and second interviews. Questionable human relations skills (defined as interpersonal communication skills, ability to work well with others, and the ability to perform well as a team member) and inadequate oral communication skills were the most frequently stated reasons for rejection of a candidate.

Suggestions to instructors. Item 14 asked, "What would you suggest colleges and universities do to better prepare students for entry-level professional accounting positions in your firm?" Respondents' suggestions were grouped into two major categories. One category addressed the need for job candidates to possess a more realistic understanding and experience with actual situations of the profession. Typical statements included, "Graduates need to be exposed to more real-life situations," "Relate academic to the real work and attempt to bridge the gap," "Somehow students should be made to understand a career in accounting versus a job with a paycheck at the end of the week," "Teach them to work," and "Teach them to think." The second major category of respondents' suggestions covered communication skills. Typical comments regarding communication included, "Provide increased training in oral and written communication," "More human relations skills," and "Enhance requirement for business communications courses."

DISCUSSION

Based on the survey results, interpersonal skills, including speaking, listening, writing, and team interaction skills among entry-level, professional-track accounting employees may be insufficient to meet employer expectations in the accounting firms. On the other hand, technology skills of candidates are generally as expected or above employer expectations. These results indicate that higher education may be meeting the electronic skills needs of employers by adequately preparing students, but more emphasis and attention needs to be given to interpersonal and communication skills. However, business colleges that have reduced the requirements for these "soft skills" may be moving in a direction not well supported or appreciated by the practitioners in the field of accounting.

The fact that employers may not be experiencing the quality of job candidates they desire is not entirely the responsibility of educators. Accounting firms participating in this survey give very few pre-employment tests (84% do none) and depend most heavily on transcripts and grade point averages (84%) as a means to check background. While bright candidates may be at least partially identified by grade point average, variations exist among colleges, programs, and courses. High grades at one institution are not necessarily equivalent to high grades at another institution. The same is true when comparing programs and even similar courses across institutions and time periods. Employers should test job candidates in order to identify skill competencies among job candidates that match their job criteria and expectations. Additionally, evaluation of a candidate's human relations and communication skills may not be adequately evaluated during the traditional series type short interviews. More extensive assessment of skills may be possible through the process of behavioral interviewing.

Behavioral interviewing is recommended because the process focuses on the candidate's past job performances. The assumption is that actual behaviors and interactions with co-workers and supervisors, regardless of the type of work performed, are more likely to predict future behaviors than any other factor (Willis, 1997). Interview questions such as, "During your summer employment as a sales associate, did you ever encounter an irate or dissatisfied customer? Describe that situation and how you reacted to it." Additional behaviorally anchored questions pertain to various areas of interpersonal interaction and actual job performance. The information revealed is considered far richer than information about a candidate's goals, hopes, and aspirations, which are ideal rather than realistic representations of the candidate.

The overall results of this survey indicate that educators can improve the professional preparation of their accounting students by increasing the focus on communication and interpersonal skills. At the same time, employers could experience a better match for their expectations if they would administer pre-employment testing and use behavioral-anchored interviewing skills to help identify the "stars" they seek.

Future research should query managers in other professional fields, including marketing, finance, and information systems, where the communication competencies may differ from those of the accounting field. Additionally, periodic updates of employer expectations are important for all fields in which College of Business students enter. Employer expectations and needs are a primary driving force for defining the educated workforce, and such information is vital in order to meet the demands of modern work places.

Results of this study should be taken with caution, as the results may not be generalizable. The current study addressed only the top corporations identified by the accounting profession, as determined by number of employers and financial success.
However, top national firms may not be representative of smaller, regional, or specialized service accounting firms. A study and comparison of firms along other criteria may be useful to those who wish to enter the field and to those who prepare students for success in the field. Additionally, the return rate is considered only moderate (25%). The accounting firms that did not reply may be significantly different from and not adequately represented by the current results. Additional studies are needed to confirm the results of the current results.

CONCLUSION

In summary, employers are most critical of job candidates' "soft skills," which focus on people and relational skills. Job candidates are called upon to demonstrate more effective communication skills in particular. Educators are called upon to provide more "real world" experiences and to increase the training in oral and written communication skills for those wishing to enter the field. Employers, however, may be doing too little to identify the best and brightest candidates for their job requirements. Pre-employment testing and improved hiring processes may bring more favorable results. Technical skills were perceived to be generally acceptable among accounting firms.

The current study provided indications for educators, curriculum planners, and students. Results of the study also provided educators with helpful information as they select the course work and strategies to increase students' professional marketability. Results should be useful to employers to assist them to more adequately meet their expectations, needs, and recruiting goals of the accounting field.

REFERENCES

Anderson, B. E. (1993). Background checks: Legality versus liability. *HR Focus*, *70*(3), 4-5.

Anderson, J. G., Harwood, G. B., & Hermanson, R. H. (1980). Selecting the right applicant. *Journal of Accountancy*, 102-106.

Andrews, J. D., & Koester, R. J. (1979). Communication difficulties as perceived by the accounting profession and professors of accounting. *Journal of business communication, 16*(2), 33-42.

Andrews, J. D., & Sigband, N. B. (1984). How effectively does the 'new' accountant communication: Perceptions by practitioners and academics. *The Journal of Business Communication*, *Spring 1984*, 20.

Bennett, J. C., & Olney, R. J. (1986). Executive priorities for effective communication in an information society. *Journal of business communication, 23(2), 13-22.*

Business Phone Book USA: The National Directory of Addresses and Telephone Numbers (1997). Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, Inc.

Cook, E. D., & Finch, B. (1994). Qualities employers seek in new accounting employees. *Journal of Education and Business, 69*(3), 136-39.

Dinuis, S., & Rogow, R.. (1988). Application of the Delphi method in identifying characteristics big 8 firms seek in entry level accountants. *Journal of Accounting Education*, *6*, 83-101.

Edwards, J. E., Thomas, M. D., Rosenfeld, P., & Booth-Kewley, S. (1997). How to conduct organizational surveys: A step-by-step guide. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Half, R. (1995). Successfully managing your career requires good communication. *Journal of Accountancy, 180*(6), 96-97.

In these hard economic times look for 'soft skills' before you hire (1992). *Profit Building Strategies for Business Owners, 26*(6), 23-24.

Jerris, S. I., & Pearson, T. A. (1996). Benchmarking CPA firms for productivity and efficiency. *The CPA Journal*, *66*(7), 64-67.

LaFrancois, H. A. (1990). How do the skills of your new-graduate accountants match the skills you need? *Journal of Career Planning and Employment*, *51*(1), 17-73.

LaFrancois, H. A. (1992). The marketing of an accounting graduate: Characteristics most desired by CPA Firms. *Journal of Education for Business, 67*(4), 206-209.

Moncada, S. M., Nelson, S. J., & Smith, D. C. (1995). Written Communication frequently composed by entry-level accountants. *New Accountant*, 26-28.

Northey, M. (1990). The need for writing skills in accounting firms. *Management Communication Quarterly, 3*(4), 474-495.

Practical Accountant (The) (1997, April). 24-41.

Ray, C. M., Stallard, J. J., & Hunt, C. S. (1994). Criteria for business graduates' employment: Human resource managers' perceptions. *Journal of Education for Business, 69*(3), 140--144.

Willis, D. (1997). The do's and don'ts of behavioral interviewing. *Logical Options*. http://www.logop.com/library.behave.html.

RETHINKING THE COMMUNICATION OF EMPLOYMENT-AT-WILL: WHAT TO DO?

Patricia Borstorff, Jacksonville State University
W. Mark Hearn, Jacksonville State University

ABSTRACT

To protect themselves from litigation resulting from employee claims of wrongful discharge, up to 60% of employers in the United States have incorporated into their application forms and other employment materials strongly-worded employment-at-will disclaimers. Potential employees may perceive these statements as offensive or threatening. Companies may need to rethink their policy of using strongly worded employment-at-will disclaimers especially in tight labor markets.

This article seeks to provide guidance that will lead to better informed decisions in evaluating one's employment-at-will philosophy and practices. The current status and legal considerations of employment-at-will are discussed. Survey results (conducted by the authors) of potential job applicants reactions to at-will statements are reported. Factors to consider when using at-will disclaimers, such as the language, prominence, and placement, are presented. Finally, possible alternatives to the direct communication of at-will are offered.

INTRODUCTION

As organizations throughout the country face the challenge of staffing for the 21st century, they are finding that the playing field has recently undergone rapid and significant changes. Unemployment rates have fallen and the numbers of newly created jobs and wage rates have increased while fewer people are entering the job market. The confluence of these trends requires an increased vigilance in the process of attracting and recruiting potential employees by organizations (Saltzman, 1997).

In order to attract and retain the best and brightest workers, organizations must develop and use recruiting materials that communicate with prospective employees positively and effectively. However, to protect themselves from litigation resulting from employee claims of wrongful discharge, up to 60% of employers in the United States have incorporated into their application forms and other employment materials strongly worded employment-at-will disclaimers (See Figure 1).

Potential employees may perceive these statements as offensive or threatening. By using language designed to afford post-employment legal protection, businesses have risked offending, and in some cases, discouraging the very applicants they want most to attract. Companies may need to rethink their policy of using strongly worded employment-at-will disclaimers especially in tight labor markets. Relatively little research has examined applicants' reactions to selection procedures and several authors (Schwoerer and Rosen, 1989; Wayland, Clay, and Payne, 1993) have called for more research on applicant attitudes about selection methods and practices.

This article seeks to provide guidance that will lead to better informed decisions in evaluating one's employment-at-will philosophy and practices. To do so, we will first review the current status and legal considerations surrounding employment-at-will. We also examine the reactions, perceptions and evaluations of potential applicants to the communication of employment-at-will disclaimers. Factors to consider when using at-will disclaimers, such as the language, prominence, and placement, are presented. Finally, possible alternatives to the direct communication of at-will are offered.

Employment-at-will generally is defined as the right of the employer to terminate an employee without giving a reason and the right of an employee to resign when he or she wants. Some 78% of American private-sector employment relationships are said to be "at the will" of the employer (Summers, 1996). To protect themselves from litigation resulting from employee claims of wrongful discharge and to communicate their "at-will" status, employers in the United States have incorporated into their application forms and other employment materials strongly worded employment-at-will disclaimers.

Recruiters, human resource managers and executives not only acknowledge the current scarcity of skilled workers, but also predict that the situation will intensify in the next three years. This employment boom encompasses a wide range of workers: those with a technical background or MBA; constructions tradesmen such as electricians, carpenters, pipe fitters; and, secretaries. And, these shortages are being translated into higher wages. In May 1997, hourly wages, as reported by the Labor Department, were up 3.8 percent from the year earlier. (Schlesinger, 1997) Other reports indicate that significantly larger increases are being given. Even hourly workers with minimal skills can find positions that offer signing bonuses, flexible hours, and opportunities to advance. Some manufacturers are so strapped for workers that they are reducing hours, but not pay -- effectively increasing the hourly wage -- to attract the people they need. (Saltzman, 1997)

The phenomena of higher pay and tighter labor markets should lead to more intensive managerial attention to the recruitment and selection of employees who are loyal, motivated, and contributors of the extra effort needed to counterbalance the resultant squeeze on profits. Given that the labor shortage is not just a temporary blip in the nation's employment picture, companies may need to rethink the strategies they use to find and keep good people. In a competitive labor market, recruitment is the first line of defense (Caudron, 1996). While possibly appropriate under loose labor market conditions, the use of strongly worded employment at will disclaimers may be a chink in this defense when labor is tight. This is especially true given the decreasing support of these statements by the courts.

Until the advent of unionism in the early 1920s, employment-at-will was an assumed, absolute management right under U.S. laissez-faire practices and upheld by a 1908 U.S. Supreme Court decision *(Adair v. U.S., 208* U.S. 161). However, with organization of unions and negotiation of contracts providing members immunity from dismissal for other-than cause, and with enactment of the Wagner Act (1935), union members gained the first statutory exceptions from the at-will doctrine. Over the next 30 years, federal and state governments enacted laws providing additional protection from at-will terminations to employees or applicants affected by violation of minimum wage and overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), violation of workers compensation or safety law provisions providing for employee claims or complaints, and imposition of pre-employment lie detector tests. With passage of Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964, an additional group of protected classes gained protection from at-will dismissal for reasons other than cause.

The results of these acts was that perhaps 30% of the U.S. employee population was protected from dismissal for reasons often perceived as capricious or malicious. In the 1970s state courts began expanding the notion of exceptions to include employees whose terminations violated public policy, employees refusing to commit unlawful acts, employees exercising a statutory right or privilege, those reporting statutory violations and members of protected classes other than those identified in Title VII (Buckley and Weitzel, 1988; Flynn, 1996; Saul, 1984).

With so many individuals having rights to protection from dismissal for reasons other than cause, many others came to view their own relationships with their employers as contractual although not expressly defined as such and began to sue. Courts in the 1970s began to make large awards to plaintiffs who contended general language contained in employee handbooks, recruiting advertisements, and other employment literature supported their contention that they were hired as permanent employees and were immune from summary termination. And, application forms have been recognized as evidence of a contractual obligation and have been held to create a legitimate expectation of benefits on the part of the employee in a number of jurisdictions (Jennings, 1988). Sympathetic juries who also lacked employment protection sometimes inflated awards to "teach management a lesson" about fairness and equity.

The climate worsened for business in the 1980s, with courts viewing implied contracts, oral assurances, evidence of employee promotions, and other subjective material as evidence of management's intent to retain the employee. Since that time, courts have consistently acted to protect employees where written or implied employment guarantees could be found. In many cases, courts have rendered judgments in favor of employees by refusing to recognize the employer's right to terminate under the employment-at-will doctrine (Bockanic and Forbes, 1986). According to Vedder and Gallaway (1995, p.8), "During the 1980s, 32 states modified their view of the dismissal decision in the direction of accepting a more expansive interpretation of the constraints on the employment-at-will principle." Also, even when the employer won in court, there was still court costs, attorney's fees, lost work time, tarnished public image, and damaged employee morale (Keppler, 1990).

While courts have held employers to terms of contracts providing employee protection from at-will provisions, courts have also been adamant that employers enter into such contracts freely and have the right to refrain from making any promises to employees concerning how a termination will be conducted or under what conditions employees may be fired. Generally, courts have upheld discharges taken due to business requirements or poor employee performance (Buckley and Weitzel, 1988; Paul and Townsend, 1993). Courts have been less inclined to sustain management in cases where malicious intent or bad faith or retaliation could be demonstrated (Keppler, 1990). In any case, where the employer promises or implies job security in such contracts or other employment documents or communications, he or she is bound by that promise. The conservative position, given the statutes and court decision variations from state to state, would be to assume that at-will employees may have at least limited rights to job security (Manley, 1988).

So, with tightening labor markets and limited court support of employment at will, the case is building against such statements. What do the job applicants say about employment at will usage? The following survey results focus on their reactions.

METHOD

Participants in this study were 222 undergraduate seniors and master level graduate students enrolled in the College of Business at two Southeastern universities. These participants were especially appropriate since most were expecting to graduate and be job interviewing within the next year. The sample consisted of 112 females (50.5%) and 110 males. 168 (75.7%) were Caucasian. 134 (60.4%) were single. 168 (75.7%) were employed, and 153 (68.9%) were 23 or over.

Anonymous survey questionnaires were distributed in a classroom setting to obtain participant reactions to an employment-at-will statement which had been extracted from the employment application of an actual organization. The participants were told to assume that they were applying for a position, and the application form they were asked to complete and sign contained the following employment-at-will statement:

> I understand that this employment application is not a contract of employment. I also understand that if I am hired by XYZ Corp., my employment and compensation may be terminated with or without cause and with or without notice at the option of XYZ Corp. or myself. I understand that no manager or representative of XYZ Corp., other than the President, has the authority to enter into any employment agreement, expressed or implied, for any specified period of time.

Participants read the employment-at-will statement and completed a questionnaire assessing their attitudes towards the statement.

Respondents attitudes and judgments concerning the above “At-Will” statement in an employment contract and the company utilizing such a statement were assessed using eighteen survey items. The reaction to the nine “At-Will” statement items are reported. Response options, using a six-point Likert scale, ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. (See Appendix A: Survey Items)

RESULTS

The survey reveals significant resistance confusion to the strongly worded “At-Will” statement. A majority of the respondents (68.5%) indicate that they would resent having to sign the statement. 80.6% of the respondents think that the inclusion of this statement suggests a lack of “real caring” for employees on the part of the company. And, a significant portion of the respondents (39%) believe the inclusion of the “At-Will” statements in application forms and employment materials is not legal. So, it is not surprising to find that 64.9% would want more money from a company using the above statement.

A substantial number (86.9%) said that they would rather work for a company that did not require signing the above statement. 70.3% felt that a long-term relationship was unlikely with a firm requiring the signing of the “At-Will” statement. An even larger segment (73.9%) of the respondents indicated that the above statement could influence them to have pro-union sentiments. This influence toward unionization is even more compelling given that most (73.4%) of the respondents report having no familial union affiliations. A significant majority (77.9%) felt that both morale would be low and turnover would be high (76.6%) at a company using employment-at-will disclaimers. Finally, over three fourths of the respondents (77%) feel that they would be signing away their rights if they had to sign the above statement.

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among all the variables. Several demographic variables were examined for possible differences in resistance levels. None were found for gender, race, marital status, employment status or work experience.

TABLE 1
Reactions to Employment-At-Will Statement in Contracts
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of All Variables

Variable[b,c]	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Legal to require signing	3.22	1.60								
Used by caring company[d]	2.41	1.19	-.39***							
Would resent signing	2.86	1.52	-.31***	.38***						
Have to pay me more	2.94	1.48	-.27***	.32***	.41***					
Prefer company w/o statement	2.07	1.25	-.20**	.37***	.44***	.42***				
Long employment unlikely	2.77	1.47	-.31***	.45***	.41***	.55***	.50***			
Would push me to union	2.73	1.39	-.18**	.28***	.35***	.45***	.36***	.51***		
Feel like losing rights	2.55	1.37	-.34***	.42***	.51***	.50***	.57***	.66***	.50***	
Would want more information	1.49	0.69	-.07	.18**	.10	.06	.11	.07	.20**	.17**

[a] N = 222 for all variables
[b] All items measured on a six-point scale with response options ranging from Strongly agree to Strongly disagree
[c] See Appendix A for complete question wording
[d] Item was reverse-coded
* p<.05
** p<.01
*** p<.001

DISCUSSION

Based upon this survey's results, potential job applicants appear highly resistant to strongly worded employment-at-will statements and apprehensive about companies that utilize such statements. The results also indicate that the respondents feel that signing an at-will statement would be tantamount to signing away one's rights. The most chilling reaction of respondents is that almost 75% believe that employment-at-will statements could influence them to have pro-union sentiments. The benefits afforded by stating managerial prerogatives under at-will protection could certainly be diluted or negated by having a work force receptive to unionization.

Managers are faced with the decision of adhering to and communicating strongly worded employment-at-will or choosing a softer worded, indirect approach. A manager is faced with a judgment call between maximizing legal protection and presenting the corporate culture as one that is stiff, legalistic, and mistrustful. Careful consideration of the implications leads one to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of such policies in legal, social, and ethical ways. The use of strongly worded employment-at-will statements follow a legalistic solution which includes using a clear and conspicuous written disclaimer, making no promises about any future with the firm, and requiring a signature acknowledging the at-will waiver (Bockanic and Forbes, 1986; Keppler, 1990).

If the at-will statement is to be included in the contract, careful consideration needs to be given to how the employer would prefer that the statement be interpreted. One approach toward understanding message interpretation in the organizational context is through applying descriptive categories. Eilon (1968) offers a set of four dimensions for describing all organizational messages: (1) "kind" of message, such as routine vs. special, and time-triggered vs. event-triggered; (2) areas of organizational activity referred to in the content of the message, such as finance or performance evaluations; (3) importance of the message; and (4) "intent and impact" of the message, such as to encourage or rebuke. The means of constructing the at-will clause in an employment contract will directly affect the message's categorization and subsequent interpretation.

Eilon's dimensions provide the framework for emphasizing at-will (special and important) to de-emphasizing (routine and unimportant). Which path should a company use? The emphasizing approach calls for a "clear and prominent" strongly worded disclaimer of the at-will issue as a means of protecting and reducing the company from the number of risks brought on by employee termination (Hilgert, 1991; Nye, 1988; Panaro, 1988; Witt and Goldman, 1988). (See Figure 1)

FIGURE 1

Strongly-Worded Employment-at Will Statements

In consideration of my employment, I agree to conform to the rules and regulations of Sears, Roebuck and Co., and my employment and compensation can be terminated with or without cause, and with or without notice, at any time, at the option of either the Company or myself. I understand that no unit manager or representative of Sears, Roebuck and Co. other than an Officer of the Company, has any authority to enter into any agreement for employment for any specified period of time, or to make any agreement contrary to the foregoing."

I understand that nothing contained in this employment application or interview, and no UHC policies, procedures, correspondence, or handbooks that I might receive constitute a contract or promise of employment or employment for any specified period of time. I further understand that, except for the provisions of the Employment Arbitration Policy, no UHC policies, procedures, correspondence, or handbooks establish any specific terms or conditions or employment between myself and UHC. I understand that the employment relationship is "at will," which means that if an employment relationship is established, UHC or I may terminate the employment relationship at any time and for any reason, with or without notice or prior discipline."

If the decision is to de-emphasize the message, then the approach would be inductive, as a type of "bad news" , or at least something the applicant will not react to favorably. The goal would be to establish the at-will clause as routine, unimportant, and mutually beneficial. Advice for "pitching" the clause as routine and unimportant includes placing the statement inside a paragraph with other statements versus on its own. Furthermore, it should appear neither first nor last in the paragraph: "Just another tidbit that you might need to know" (Lehman, Himstreet, and Baty; 1996). The mutually beneficial element to the message ("at the option of the prospective employer or myself") helps redirect the intent of the message. The applicant is not just agreeing to accept discharge from the company without notice or cause, but he/she is protecting their right to "pack-up" and leave anytime they want. (See Figure 2)

FIGURE 2

Softly-Worded Employment-at-Will Statements

In life there are no guarantees, and so it is in business. A relationship that either you or I could terminate or dissolve at any time.

I understand and agree that my acceptance of employment does not create a contractual obligation upon the company to continue my employment in the future.

I understand that a acceptance of an offer of employment does not create a contractual obligation upon the employer to continue to employ me in the future.

If any employment relationship is established, I also understand that I retain the right to terminate my employment at any time and that IBP retains a similar right.

Further steps to de-emphasize the statement might include modifying the text of the at-will statement in the employment application to indicate the employee will be treated fairly and with due process, thereby softening perceptions that at-will termination rights provide management the basis for capricious and arbitrary actions. A caveat: this indirect approach may dilute the legal protection intended (Witt and Goldman, 1988).

According to Parks and Schmedemann (1994), the more overt, explicit and verifiable the promise of employment implied in an employee handbook or policy, the stronger the employee (and court) belief in existence of a contract between the employee and employer. To create ambiguity lending itself to interpretation that language in a handbook is not contractual in nature, management should avoid very specific and precise wording that enhances perceptions that a contract exists; include “conflicting cues” such as clear, blunt disclaimers like “this is not a contract;” legalistic language connoting contract language; specific verbs used to convey actions intended by management in favor of passive verbs yielding to imprecise interpretation; and other appearances of contractual obligation by deleting signatory blocks buttressing the perception of a psychological contractual obligation.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The suggestions in this article are designed to assist human resource managers in evaluating their employment-at-will philosophy and practice; they are not intended as specific legal advice. Consultation should be made with lawyers who are knowledgeable in the area of employee-employer relations concerning the application of these ideas. However, it is important to remember that lawyers and recruiters have different priorities.

In summary, many firms believe that they can protect their employment-at-will rights by using appropriate language, application materials, and other company communications while ignoring the issue of applicant perceptions of such literature. From the current study, it appears that strongly worded employment-at-will statements possibly inflict significant damage on a company's ability to attract sufficient qualified applicants who will be committed and loyal to the company. If choosing to protect employment-at-will rights is the option, softly worded statements or an indirect approach could be the avenue to follow. Regardless of which avenue a company chooses, it is wise to note that choosing your work force carefully and then employing good human resource practices can go a long way in attracting, motivating, and retaining productive employees with a minimum risk of litigation.

APPENDIX A: Survey Items

Six point Likert Scale. Response options ranged from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree.

1. It is legal for a company to require applicants to sign the above statement.
2. A company using the above statement would really care for its employees. (Reverse-coded)
3. I would resent having to sign the above statement to get a job.
4. A company using the above statement would have to pay me a higher than average salary if I worked there.
5. I would rather work for a company which did not require me to sign the above statement.
6. A long-term employment relationship would be unlikely with company requiring me to sign the above statement.
7. The above statement could influence me to have pro-union sentiments.
8. I feel that I would be signing away my rights if I had to sign above statement.
9. When applying for a job, I would like to know about a company's policies regarding termination and expectations of long term employment.

REFERENCES

Bockanic, W. and Forbes, J. (1986). The erosion of employment-at-will: Managerial implications, *SAM Advanced Management Journal*, Summer, 16-21.
Buckley, M., & Weitzel, W. (1988). Employing at will. *Personnel Administrator*. August, 78-82.
Caudron, S. (1996). Low unemployment is causing a staffing drought. *Personnel Journal*, 58-67.
Eilon, S. (1968). Taxonomy of Communications. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 13, 266-288.
Flynn, G. (1996). Why at-will employment is dying. *Personnel Journal*, May, 123-128.

Fulmer, W. & Casey, A. (1990). Employment at will: Options for managers, *Academy of Management Executive*, 4(2), 102-106.

Jennings, M. (1988). The abolition of the right to fire--no-fault is in divorce only, *Business and Society*. Spring, 23-28.

Keppler, M. (1990). Halting traffic on the road to wrongful discharge. *Personnel*, March, 48-54.

Lehman, C.M., Himstreet, W.C., & Baty, W.M. (1996). *Business Communications* (11th ed.). Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western College Publishing, 285.

Manley, M. (1988). Charges and discharges, *INC*., March, 124-128.

Nye, D. (1988). Trust is a well-drawn employment contract, *Across the Board*, October, 33-41.

Parks, J. & Schmedemann, D. (1994). When promises become contracts: implied contracts and handbook provisions and job security. *Human Resource Management*. 3(3), 403-423.

Panaro, G. (1988). Don't let your personnel manual become a contract, *Association Management*, August, 81-82, 217, 218, 247.

Paul, R.J. & Townsend, J.B. (1993). Wrongful termination: Balancing employer and employee rights-A summary with recommendations. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 6(1), 69-82.

Saltzman, A. (1997). Making it in a sizzling economy. *U.S. News and World Report*. June 23, 50-58.

Salwen, R. (1989). Crafting employment contracts and other executive agreements. *Directors & Boards*. Winter, 34-38.

Saul. S. (1984). Unjustified firings being challenged in courts. *The Detroit News*. Oct. 14, 11-E.

Schesinger, J.M. (1997). Jobless rate fell to nearly 24-year low in May as wages continue to advance. *The Wall Street Journal*, June 9, A2, A6.

Schwoerer, C. & Rosen, B. (1989). Effects of employment-at-will policies and compensation policies on corporate image and job pursuit intentions. *Journal of Applied Psychology*74(4), 653-656.

Smither, J.W., Millslap, R.E., Stoffey, R.W., Reilly, R.R. & Pearlman, K. (1996). An experimental test of the influence of selection procedures on fairness perceptions, attitudes about the organization and job pursuit intentions. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 10(3), 297-318.

Summers, C. (1006). Protecting all employees against unjust dismissal. *Harvard Law Review*. Jan-Feb, 132-139.

Vedder, R. & Gallaway, L. (1995). Laws, litigation and labor markets: Some new evidence. *Report for the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy*, San Francisco, September, 1995.

Wayland, R.F., Clay, J.M., & Payne, S.L. (1993). Employment At will statements: Perceptions of Job applicants. *International Journal of Manpower*, 14(1), 22-33.

Witt, M. & Goldman, S. (1988). Avoiding liability in employee handbooks. *Employee Relations*, 14, 5-18.

DILBERT AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE: WHAT BOTH CAN TEACH US ABOUT MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

Pamela R. Johnson, California State University, Chico

ABSTRACT

In decades past, a boss probably could ignore his employees' emotional lives: workers were, in effect, told to leave their emotions at home and most complied. No more. Without a doubt, people at every organizational level are hungry for direct, emotionally straight-forward interactions. A person with high Emotional Intelligence (EI) has the ability to understand and relate to people. In fact, this skill is now considered to have greater impact on individual and group performance than traditional measures of intelligence such as IQ. In the Dilbert comic strip, Scott Adams has made a career of lampooning what occurs in the workplace: vapid corporate-speak with no guts and no emotionally honest message. This paper will define Emotional Intelligence, describe how the comic strip, Dilbert, daily depicts situations where emotional intelligence is lacking, and discuss the organizational benefits of having emotionally intelligent managers and employees.

INTRODUCTION

Recent discussions of Emotional Intelligence (EI) proliferate across the American landscape from the cover of Time, to a best selling book by Daniel Goleman. But EI is not some easily dismissed "neopsycho-babble." EI has its roots in the concept of "social intelligence," first identified by E. L. Thorndike in 1920. Psychologists have been uncovering other intelligences for some time now, and grouping them mainly into three clusters:

Abstract Intelligence = the ability to understand and manipulate with verbal and mathematic symbols,

Concrete Intelligence = the ability to understand and manipulate with objects, and

Social Intelligence = the ability to understand and relate to people (Emotions and Emotional Intelligence, 1997).

The experts say individuals with the highest EI excel at four interrelated skills: (1) the ability to persist and stay motivated in the face of frustration; (2) the ability to control impulses; (3) the ability to control their emotions; and (4) the ability to empathize with others (McGarvey, 1997). These factors are now considered to have greater impact on individual and group performance than traditional measures of intelligence such as IQ.

In decades past, a boss probably could ignore his employees' emotional lives: workers were, in effect, told to leave their emotions at home and most complied. No more. In fact, from kindergartens to business schools to corporations across the country, people are taking seriously the idea that a little more time spent on the "touchy-feely" skills so often derided may in fact pay rich dividends (Gibbs, 1995).

Without a doubt, people at every organizational level are hungry for direct emotionally straight-forward interactions. In the Dilbert comic strip, Scott Adams has made a career of lampooning what nearly all of us experience in the workplace: vapid corporate-speak with not guts and no emotionally honest message. We may laugh at the cynicism in Dilbert but we might wonder whether we should be soul-searching instead. Emotional bankruptcy devalues all of us. It presumes that we are almost infinitely manipulable, if only those in power can put the right spin on things (Cooper, 1997). This paper will define Emotional Intelligence, describe how the comic strip, Dilbert, daily depicts situations where emotional intelligence is lacking, and discuss the organizational benefits of having emotionally intelligent managers and employees.

DEFINITION OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

If there is a cornerstone to emotional intelligence on which most other emotional skills depend, it is a sense of self-awareness, of being smart about what we feel. And self-awareness is perhaps the most crucial ability, because it allows us to exercise some self-control. The idea is not to repress feelings but rather to do what Aristotle considered the hard work of the will. “Anyone can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—this is not easy (Gibbs, 1995). Emotional intelligence is old wine in new bottles. It is about self-awareness and empathy, and those are skills any leader needs in building a successful organization (McGarvey, 1997).

In addition, EI is “good old street smarts” which includes knowing when to share sensitive information with colleagues, laugh at the boss’s jokes or speak up in a meeting. In more scientific terms, EI can be defined as an array of noncognitive skills, capabilities, and competencies that influence a person’s ability to cope with environmental demands and pressures (Martinez, 1997). Skill building in the area of emotional intelligence has lifelong impact. The urgency among parents and educators to provide these skills is a response to increased levels of interpersonal discord starting in the early grades, low self-esteem, early drug and alcohol use, and depression in young children. In corporations, its inclusion in training departments helps employees to cooperate better, increase motivation, increase productivity, and increase profits (Why We Need Emotional Intelligence, 1997).

The more emotions are integrated into your daily life, the higher your EI is likely to be. Some requirements to raising your emotional intelligence include:

1. A desire to change.

- Self-reflection (if you don’t know what is going on inside yourself emotionally, you cannot know what's going on inside others).
- Listen to what you are telling yourself. Notice that you can change and regulate your moods.
- Develop emotional control. when you can control which emotions you show, you are a much more polished leader.
- Practice empathy. Practice active listening skills. Explore the subtext of what a person is telling you because there likely is one.
- Validate the emotions of others, even if they are different than what you would feel in the same situations. Be sensitive to others, but don't let their emotions rule you (McGarvey, 1997).

Emotions impact everything we do. In an office setting, emotions can lead to team camaraderie and increased productivity. Likewise, emotions can also prove destructive. Emotions can "make or break" a family. Emotions can also enhance or end a loving relationship. It is the individual's emotional intelligence that dictate interpersonal relationships (Klausner, 1997).

One costly consequence of the relentless demands on leaders' time is their propensity to turn away from emotional issues and to stick as closely as possible to the realm of facts and intellect—to value only things that can be ordered, analyzed, defined, dealt with, controlled, and contained. Emotions seem "leaky." They can get people riled up, and then who knows where their time and energy might go. Many managers just want to keep emotions out of a situation and deal with things only rationally. Yet, research shows that emotions, properly managed, can drive trust, loyalty, and commitment—and drive many of the greatest productivity gains, innovations, and accomplishments of individuals, teams, and organizations (Cooper, 1997).

DILBERT AND THE ABSENCE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The Trojan War had Homer. The Spanish-American War had William Randolph Hearst. The twenty-first century worker has Scott Adams. Adams exposes many "cutting edge" workplace issues to the severe light of day, inviting us to laugh at re-engineering, cross-functional teams, business meetings, corporate buzzwords, management fads, and training. The gap between executive rhetoric and employee reality is a favorite target for Adams' biting humor. His comic strips are tacked to office walls throughout the country. He is quite possibly the nation's leading commentator on life in the modern workplace (Filipczak, 1994). Adams pokes fun at mean bosses, the lack of emotional intelligence, and inappropriate technological innovations.

The unhappy situations that Dilbert finds himself involved in are too often too real—so real that millions may be chortling at Dilbert's plight because it comes so close to their own. Perhaps it feels better to laugh when it is perceived that crying won't change an insane work world, one governed by what Adams terms 'idiotic management' (Brown, 1996). And, at the same time, Dilbert reflects the 'silent rage' of employees in the workplace. Dilbert, the corporate warrior/survivor, is the voice of the people. (Brown, 1996). In fact, Michael Hammer, engineering guru, has said that Adams' books 'offer more truth about the world of business than a shelf of case studies' (Greilsamer, 1995).

The real story of Dilbert is the basic disregard to his dignity as a human being, which is the biggest problem in workplaces generally. People, plagued by abusive bosses, pointless rules, and meaningless strategies, live for the weekend, doing as little as possible to get through the workweek. The result is a workplace that is very much like that of a Dilbert cartoon—but a heck of a lot less funny. And what is particularly sad is that most people do not expect anything better (Brown, 1997).

Dilbert taps into three powerful currents. One is the mounting obsession with work: the average American now works the equivalent of four more weeks a year than he or she did in the 1960s. A second current is the growing fear in the workplace. Scott Adams examines the many ways in which bosses lord it over their employees "desification" (packing more people into the available space by shrinking the size of their cubicles), "hot desking" (depriving people of permanent desks), and getting rid of health insurance. The third current is America's mounting irritation with the ever-increasing number of management fads. As the life-cycle of these techniques becomes ever shorter, the average worker's attitude is summed up in the acronym "BOHICA": bend over, here it comes again (The Anti-Management Guru, 1997).

Plagued by a heartless boss, confined to a featureless cubicle and forced to endure the Great Lies of Management ("Employees are our most valuable asset"), Dilbert is a bespectacled engineer who ventures through corporate Wonderland. The comic strip is also about human rights, human purpose, and human potential. Yet, the popularity of Dilbert reflects the fact that many people find their jobs futile, boring, and nonproductive.

There are millions of people around the world who see themselves, their bosses, and their colleagues in the comic strip. "Dilbert" appears in 1,550 papers in 17 languages and 39 countries, with a daily readership of 150 million people. Dilbert, a naïve and socially inept engineer, and his bitterly cynical pet, Dogbert, a part-time management consultant, serve as windows into the mindset of the modern employee, awash in a sea of corporate buzzwords and fearing for his job. Chronicling the travails of Dilbert and Dogbert, Scott Adams provides a release for employee frustration while opening a unique line of communication between executives and their workers (Greilsamer, 1995).

What Adams has done is to take virtually every corporate issue of the past 20 years and catapult it to the top of many management agendas via trenchant cartoons and scathing essays in books. Adams' "Dilbert" comic strip regularly campaigns for the need to create work that is meaningful to employees, introduce work processes that can bolster employee productivity in an honest manner, eliminate corporate double-talk, and adopt forceful business practices instead of corporate folderol (Brown, 1997). The boss character has no name. Dogbert's species is unspecified. Dilbert's company has no name and it's intentionally unclear what they do for a living.

The gap between executive rhetoric and employee reality is widened by the presence of bosses who, for a variety of reasons, have no concept of what the employees do for a living. Out-of touch bosses are frequently cited by employees as a major source of confusion, if not hostility. The boss has no sense that the employees are finite buckets and he just keeps pouring work on. And because these are things the boss can describe in one sentence, s/he feels it should take an employee no more than five minutes to do (Greilsamer, 1995).

We all know the "boss zone." It's the place where the savvy manager concludes that if employees are unmotivated, it's "a sure sign that they don't have a newsletter." Where casual-day dress codes exclude jeans, sneakers, and shorts, "because they are comfortable and attractive and everybody owns them." Where your nonexistent salary increase goes into decorating the executive dining room. Where rumors are considered an excellent way to keep employees "edgy and working like bumblebees" (Kirchner, 1996).

Because Adams has such an intense respect for the people on the shop floor or in the cubicle, he finds it galling to have to heed the words of bosses who refer to human beings as "resources," who have to use software to do employee evaluations, and who say that the company is about to score a year of record profits, then tell employees "there will be no raises because it will be a difficult year" (Brown, 1997).

In one strip, Dilbert and his coworkers weather the indignities of such executive brainstorms as being sent into the wilderness for the "Rivers and Trees" management course. Dilbert assumes it's a team-building exercise; his boss replies, "I think of it more as a headcount reduction thing" (Arnott, 1994).

In another strip, Dilbert attends a sales training session that consists of the following speech: "As you know, our company makes overpriced, inferior products. We try to compensate by setting high sales quotas. We don't ask you to act illegally, but it's pretty much the only way to reach quota. Okay, that's it for the training. Any questions?"(Arnott, 1994). Dilbert's boss uses humor as a management tool, "Knock, knock," he says. "Who's there?" asks the worker. "Not you anymore" (Van Buenam 1996). And finally, there was the strip entitled "How Bad is Your Job?" There's a man hanging by a noose from the chandelier who says, "Yes, this is better than my job" (Pham, 1996). Adams says: "The most pernicious thing is to make employees work long hours without any return for that effort. Who's getting promotions these days? Raises are, by and large, puny. So people are giving their all these days, in lots of companies, for nothing in return, except the chance to keep their jobs (Brown, 1997).

ORGANIZATIONAL BENEFITS OF HAVING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENT MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES

As we have seen, Scott Adams, in his comic strip, Dilbert, presents many situations where Emotional Intelligence is lacking. Studies have shown that a significant part of an organization's profitability is linked to the quality of its worklife, which is based largely on trust and loyalty both within the organization and with outside people, such as customers and suppliers. Profitability is also linked to the way employees feel about their jobs, colleagues, and company (Cooper, 1997). Studies also suggest that it is emotional intelligence, not IQ or raw brain power alone, that underpins many of the best decisions, most dynamic organizations, and most satisfying and successful lives (Cooper, 1997).

As organizations have shifted to a more team-based workplace, they are asking employees for commitment and passion—to bring both their brains and hearts to the job. Along with this, organizations have to expect people will bring their emotions to work too (McGarvey, 1997). Emotional intelligence is the hidden advantage. If you take care of the soft stuff, the hard stuff takes care of itself. As leaders worldwide are discovering, attention to emotions have been shown to save time, expand opportunities, and focus energy for better results (Cooper, 1997).

What characteristic most distinguishes star performers from average workers? If you said IQ, you answered incorrectly. Emotional Intelligence is a bigger predictor of workplace success. In fact, an individual's success at work is 80 percent dependent on EI, and only 20 percent dependent on IQ (Martinez, 1997). For example, derailed executives or those rising stars who have "flamed out" failed most often because of "an interpersonal flaw" rather than a technical inability. Some of the fatal flaws include classic emotional failings, such as "poor working relations" "being authoritarian" or "too ambitious" and having "conflict with upper management" (Gibbs, 1995). Not surprisingly, the higher up a manager goes in any organization, the more important emotional intelligence becomes because relationships become more important.

CONCLUSION

A manager should personally study the errors and foibles of the boss in "Dilbert" to see if his/her traits in any way mirror the reader's. Managers can have a strong impact on the people working around them. In fact, research has shown that managers with high Emotional Intelligence can get results from employees that are beyond expectations. The employees will work harder, especially in the kind of turbulent times that characterize today's business climate, when the manager demonstrates emotional intelligence.

Companies have built teams, reengineered processes, even downsized, for the sake of profitability. Now it is time to make sure organizations are getting the most efficient, high performing managers and employees possible; ones who won't check their brains and hearts at the door.

REFERENCES

Arnott, N. (1994, December). Comic Relief. *Sales & Marketing Management*, 146:15, 72-73.

Brown, T. (1997, February). What Does Dilbert Mean to HR? *HR Focus*, 74:2, 12-13.

Brown, T. (1996, February). The Deeper Side of Dilbert. *Management Review*, 85:2, 48-52.

Cooper, R. (1997, December). Applying Emoitonal Intelligence in the Workplace. *Training & Development*, 51:12, 31-35.

"Emotions and Emotional Intelligence." (1997). Http://www/emotionalintelligence.org.

Filipczak, R. (1994, July). An Interview with Scott Adams. *Training*, 31:7, 29-33.

Gibbs, N. (1995, October). The EQ Factor. *Time*, 146:14, 60-68.

Greilsamer, M. (1995, March). The Dilbert Barometer. *Across the Board*, 32:3, 39-41.

Kirchner, J. (1996, October 22). Identifying Suck-Ups, and Other Management Secrets. *PC Magazine*, 15:18, 37.

Klausner, H.(1997). Review of *Raising Your Emotional Intelligence* by Jeanne Segal. Http://www.emotionalintelligence.org.

Martinez, M.(1997, November). The Smarts That Count. *HRMagazine*, 42:11, 72-80.

McGarvey, R. (1997, July). Final Score: Get More From Employees By Upping Your EQ. *Entrepreneur*, 25:7, 78-81.

Pham, A. (1996, May 28). Dilbert Cartoon Strip's Office Drudge Amasses Workplace Following. *Knight-Ridder/Tribune Business News*, p. 52.

"The Anti-Management Guru: Scott Adams Has Made A Business of Bashing Business." (1997, April 5). *The Economist*, 342:8011, 64.

Van Buenam, D. (1996, March 18). Layoffs for Laughs: A Cartoon Called 'Dilbert' Uplifts the Downsized. *Time*, 147:12, 82.

"Why We Need Emotional Intelligence." (1997). Learning Theory Funhouse. Http://www.emotionalintelligence.org.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF A NATIONAL INSURANCE FIRM: RESTRUCTURING AFTERMATH

Mari Brandenburg, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Frank Slavinski, St. Francis College

ABSTRACT

The paper represents a pilot study of cultural characteristics within a large, national insurance company in the aftermath of restructuring. The Organizational Cultural Survey (Glaser, Zamanou & Hacker, 1987) was distributed to a random sample of 100 insurance company employees as a means to investigate six characteristics of organizational culture: teamwork, morale, information flow, involvement, supervision, and meetings. An internal look at the organization's cultural dimensions was expected to reinforce management perspectives of a now more efficient and progressive company. results, however, revealed a need for immediate management action to "repair" internal inconsistences and negative effects of restructuring. Co-workers reported a relatively low concern for each other, did not feel motivated by the company to put forth their best efforts, felt the company does not provide employees with sufficient information to do their jobs, and did not fee their supervisors were approachable, give criticism in a positive manner, or are good listeners. Without the insight of this cultural study, the company may not have recognized the extent of its internal issues, nor would the company have had an opportunity to plan remedial strategies in a timely manner.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF SELF-MANAGED TEAMS

Deborah M. Barnes, Southeastern Oklahoma State University
Dale E. Yeatts, University of North Texas

ABSTRACT

This research investigated communication strategies of self-managed teams. Many organizations are restructuring into self-managed teams for improved responsiveness and flexibility. These self-managed teams have assumed additional responsibilities including decision making for their team. Successful teams have developed communication strategies to support decision making.

Four case studies were conducted in a manufacturing environment, with two teams having high team performance and two teams having low team performance. The results were compared to determine differences in communication strategies of high-and low-performing teams.

Data reveal teams that nurture relationships outside the team in efforts to gather external information perform at a higher level than those that do not. Low-performing teams are usually working in a crisis situation, therefore, must focus on current, immediate problems. This allows little time to expand team boundaries for gathering external information or for innovating to develop ideas and understand trends. When communication is impaired, teams develop special communication channels or networks to obtain information they need.

The findings of this study can be used by information system designers to develop group decision support systems to support team-based environments. The star point methodology, successfully used by a high-performing team, is explained and could be adapted in other team-based environments. In addition, decision makers may use these findings to incorporate communication skills training for self-managed teams.

THE "DRESSING DOWN" OF THE MARKETING EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Bill McPherson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

American businesses are changing the way they look. During the late 1980s, there was a hostile takeover trend that threatens to change the very nature of American business. Corporate America is changing the way it dresses. Students who are preparing for careers in business must be made aware of the change. Is the "Dress-down days" trend becoming a part of American corporate culture? Casual dressing is popular, and people-friendly companies are capitalizing on its popularity. This study sought to determine if "dressing down" is still taking place in the 1990s and will this trend be around for the 21st century? In addition, this article discusses this corporate trend and offers discussion on the need to include this concept in the marketing education curriculum.

STATUS OF INTERNET USAGE AMONG VARIOUS SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Bill McPherson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania
John Olivo, Bloomsburg University

ABSTRACT

"Internet brings high school home," "Screening the Net," "On-line use is pupils gain," "First Amendment adjusts to fit a new medium" these are a few of the varied headlines that have appeared in the media focusing on one of the most important technological revolutions influencing many sectors of our society--the Internet. Educators across the U.S. are beginning to realize the educational value of the Internet and are scurrying to give their students Internet access.

While technology and education have been in the national forum for most years, it was President Clinton, in his State of the Union Address, April 2, 1997, who asserted, "In our schools, every classroom in America must be connected to the information superhighway, with computers and good software and well-trained teachers.... We are working with the telecommunications industry...to connect...every classroom and every library in the entire United State by the year 2000."

If dollars spent are any indication, these initiatives are well on the way toward meeting the goal. An estimated $ 4 billion spent on instructional technology for elementary, middle and high schools was taken in by high-tech businesses in 1996, according to U.S. New and World Report (December 2, 1996). President Clinton proposed "...an additional $2 billion in federal money so that 'every 12 year old can log onto the Internet'." While the focus of the program is on the proactive involvement of state and local governments to increase the effect of technology through education, the business community and parents are viable and needed partners in this endeavor.

INDEX

Barnes, D 33
Borstorff, P 17
Brandenburg, M 7, 32
Hearn, W.M. 17
Johnson, P 26
Jones, B.H. 1
Jones, G.H. 1
Little, P 1
McPherson, B 34, 35
Olivo, J 35
Slavinski, F 32
Wasson, L 7
Yeatts, D 33