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**Teaching strategy and reducing stress at
Time.com and Brightnet:
An organisational intervention**

**Personal development and training assignment: Time.com take
over Brightnet**

24th March 2003

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Introduction

Background

Brightnet, a Leeds-based specialist software development firm has called in a group of Occupational Psychologists in an attempt to reduce employee unease. This has been at a high level since the take-over of the company by Time.com, a York-based competitor. The take-over has included significant changes to the day-to-day running of Brightnet, and to the jobs of Brightnet employees.

Particular issues surround the increased workload of the newly created job role 'Developer Consultant'. This delivers the responsibility for technical consultancy to the already existing role of Developer, meaning, in effect that the Developer Consultants receive double the workload.

The remit of this paper is to outline some training and well-being enhancing interventions to help the stressed employees of Brightnet at this time. Some pragmatic recommendations for Brightnet will be presented alongside a description of the literature informing these recommendations, and a description of the problems that need investigation.

Needs analysis

Change in an organisation cannot be achieved without identifying the gap between its current and desired states (Goldstein and Ford, 2002). This process, called needs analysis, is generally used to identify issues for training. However, the same process of clarification of the current situation and identification of areas for improvement can generally be used for any type of intervention.

Ideally, a comprehensive needs analysis should have been performed early in the take-over of Brightnet by Time.com. Interventions should be put into place to facilitate change, and not as an afterthought, fixing the difficulties that change has already caused (Mack et al, 1998). By this stage in the take-over, though, new roles have already been created, and the issues must be dealt with post-hoc.

An inability to influence this change plan should not discourage the Occupational Psychologists from attempting to influence future change plans. By introducing interventions that improve the difficulties created, Time.com might be encouraged to deal with all changes after the event. It is therefore vital that Brightnet and Time.com are equipped with the tools to create long-term strategy for any future changes.

Future changes should certainly involve employees during implementation (Nytrø et al, 2000). The currently proposed stress interventions are an ideal place to start this involvement. After all, the employees' working lives are to be disrupted once more (Goldstein and Ford, 2002), and the new changes will be ultimately be as prone to creating fear of the unknown and stress as the take-over (Buchanan et al, 1999; Pollard, 2001).

A brief needs analysis has therefore been conducted with the employees of Brightnet, or, more specifically, the newly titled Developer Consultants. While the issues raised are beyond those of knowledge, skills, abilities and sometimes affect, traditionally raised in needs analysis, all seem to be influencing well-being, and therefore need attention:

1. The Developer Consultant job role is ill defined and highly demanding.
2. Developer Consultants are experiencing a skills deficiency, including a lack of sales, communication and consultancy skills.

3. There is little communication between staff and management, with staff unable to influence decisions, and management unsupportive of their staff.

It might be argued that Time.com's poor planning for change is symptomatic of its more general problems. For example, the failure to communicate with staff during change implementation is echoed by the Developer Consultants complaints about Time.com's general communication failures.

Further than needs analysis, then, Brightnet and Time.com really require an 'organisational analysis' (Goldstein and Ford, 2002). This looks at the needs of a company from the point of view of the entire organisation and prepares for training and other interventions to take place organisation-wide. While there is a certain legitimacy in more individual-level interventions for stress (Schaubroek, 1999), it is hoped that by intervening at the organisational level here, a solution can be reached at the problem's base (Ganster et al, 1982). Furthermore, by training the entire organisation, and allowing participation of both managers and employees, hopefully all can be persuaded that stress and illness are a priority (Nytrø et al, 2000).

Underlying issues

The three issues identified by Developer Consultants in needs analysis have different sources, although many of the implementations to dealing with them will overlap. For simplicity's sake then, these three issues will be considered separately.

Developer Consultant job role

Uncertainty about the job role, or role ambiguity, is clearly evident, with a less than clear picture of the tasks that the Developer Consultants' jobs should involve. The adverse effects of such role ambiguity, and the importance of creating a meaningful job for employees have been frequently emphasised (O'Driscoll and Beehr, 1994; Warr, 1998).

Fortunately, role clarity can be established by obtaining agreement between all stakeholders in the job about its aims and goals, and the consequences of behaviour within that job (O'Driscoll and Beehr, 1994). From this agreement strategies for goal attainment can be developed (Noe, 1996), preferably in partnership with the management of Time.com and Brightnet (Ross and Altmaier, 1994). The ways in which management can help with this process will be discussed later.

The new explicit role should be partly defined by the employees, allowing reduction of the impact of the high work demands on their well-being. Karasek (1979)'s model of strain holds that if job demands are high, then allowing the worker more control in performing tasks can improve well-being, as discussed by Sargent and Terry (1998).

So for the Developer Consultants, flexibility and autonomy in their role, supported by management, could reduce strain, improve satisfaction (Warr, 1998), and thus even reduce absenteeism (Johns, 1997). In fact, experiencing challenging situations within the everyday work setting might also create positive mood throughout Brightnet (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989; Haworth and Evans, 1995) and further control their absenteeism problems (George, 1989).

Skills for Developer Consultants

Providing the skills training for the Developer Consultants should undoubtedly improve their performance in customer service areas, and well as increase their self-efficacy (Ford et al, 1998), allowing confidence and better performance. Designing training to meet employees' expectations and desires can not only increase self-efficacy, but also commitment and motivation (Tannerbaum et al, 1991), all of which have benefits to the organisation.

Communication Issues

As previously mentioned, the communication between levels of management and employees at Time.com needs a vast deal of improvement, which could have large benefits. For example, in involving employees in decision-making, well-being is frequently improved (O'Driscoll and Evans, 1988; Heaney et al, 1993).

This indicates that strategic change management, and providing the management at Time.com with the skills and impetus to create this, involving and communicating with employees within this process, would be extremely beneficial for employee relations, and the management of stress within the organisation (Buchanan et al, 1989; Nytrø et al, 2000).

Choice of programmes

It should be acknowledged that the course of action is not dictated by these problems in a one-to-one way. There are many and varied interventions available to the Occupational Psychologist, and choice, while dictated by theory, is also constrained by costs, time, and needs structure. Priority in this instance must be a speedy delivery of new skills and attitudes. With this in mind, the following intervention is suggested. Note that the overall timetable of events given in full at the end of this section.

Time.com and Brightnet management

As argued throughout this paper, the strategic management and support required to alleviate many of the problems at Brightnet is simply unavailable. For this reason, the first priority of the intervention must be in adjusting the attitudes of Time.com towards their newly acquired company, and in giving Time.com management the tools to create a strategy for a better environment and purpose for their employees.

While Time.com are expected to be the main creators of strategy, Brightnet managers will need to understand the process in order to implement strategy at the everyday level (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2003). The session will consist of a presentation of strategic ideas and their benefits, allowing development of a declarative knowledge of strategy (Anderson, 1982, 1987; cited by Weiss, 1990). The workshop should also include practical tips, eg. stressing the importance of including employees within strategy discussions (Nytrø et al, 2000) and describing focus groups and communication as a means of creating involvement.

To reduce impact created by removing the managers from their jobs they will be split into a morning 'group 1' and afternoon 'group 2', scheduled to take place on the Monday of the intervention week.

The second workshop will consist of the same groups, morning and afternoon, held on Wednesday, and involve a review of the ideas presented in the initial workshop, including a reiteration of its principles. Discussion of the topic will allow ideas about strategy to be compiled into more structured knowledge (Anderson, 1982, 1987; cited by Weiss, 1990), and has previously been used successfully (Burke and Day, 1986).

Managers at Time.com will have been asked before the workshop to consider and attempt to operationalise Time.com's overall strategy. A discussion, among the managers, of how the strategy of Time.com affects Brightnet will be facilitated by an Occupational Psychologist. This, and further spaced practice of strategy theory within new contexts will allow better memory and transfer of learning (Hesketh, 1997), and will begin the translation of the managers' declarative knowledge of strategy into procedural rules (Anderson, 1982, 1987; cited by Weiss, 1990).

Lastly, the managers at Time.com and Brightnet will be asked to prepare for a facilitated discussion, on Friday morning. This will involve the managers and representatives of the Brightnet employees. The purpose of this discussion is two-fold. Firstly, it will allow further procedural knowledge of practical strategy implementation by allowing the managers to apply Time.com strategy specifically to the clarification of job roles within Brightnet, using employee involvement and encourage further transfer of their new strategy skills (Sonntag, 1997).

The second benefit of this discussion is related to elements of the employees' jobs, and will therefore be detailed at the conclusion of the employee training programme, detailed below.

The Employees

The first proposed training for employees involves the newly created Developer Consultants. One of the main causes of concern identified by this group is their lack of skills in sales, communication and consultancy. Therefore, on Tuesday all Developer Consultants will be removed from work to participate in a day-long skills workshop.

The morning of Tuesday will be taken up by a lecture presenting the ideas behind such skills. This will follow the same method of learning as the managerial workshop (Anderson, 1982, 1987; cited by Weiss, 1990), only here with the declarative knowledge stage entirely covered by the morning section. Practice of the newly learnt skills, in order to compile knowledge and pave the path for proceduralisation, will take place in the afternoon, with employees pairing up for role plays to practice their new skills. Employees will be encouraged to bring scenarios for these role plays based on problematic situations they have recently faced, in order to increase the job-relevance of the training scheme and improve transfer (Hesketh, 1997; Sonntag, 1997).

The second phase of employee training will be involve job shadowing by the employees voted to represent each department in their discussion with management on the Friday of the training week. In order to give these representatives a realistic idea of where their department stands within Brightnet as a whole, each Developer Consultant representative (of which there will be double numbers), will be paired with a representative from a different department. On Wednesday, one of the pair will job shadow the other, on Thursday these roles will be reversed.

The job shadowing performs a dual function for Developer Consultants, allowing them to view, in action, the consultancy, communication and sales skills learnt during their Tuesday training programme. This modeling of the behaviours they

have been trained in will further allow them understand their new abilities through social learning (Bandura, 1986, cited by Weiss, 1990). For this reason, it is recommended that the job shadowing project continues with other employees after the intervention week.

The new knowledge available to all those employees who have taken part in the job shadowing will allow them to take a great knowledge of the Brightnet, and particularly of the Developer Consultant’s potential role within the company. From this they will be better equipped for Friday’s facilitated discussion, to negotiate a more autonomous role for the Developer Consultant; and possibly to advise how some tasks currently assigned to that role might be shared among other departments. In this way, the second purpose of the facilitated discussion, ie. definition and negotiation about the role of Developer Consultant, will be realised.

Table 1: Schedule for intervention

	Time.com managers	Brightnet managers	Brightnet specialist workers
Monday am	Working with strategy (group 1)		
pm	Working with strategy (group 2)		
Tuesday am			Skills workshop (all day)
pm			
Wednesday am	Brightnet and Time.com (group 1)		Work shadowing (A on B all day)
pm	Brightnet and Time.com (group 2)		
Thursday am			Work shadowing (B on A all day)
pm			
Friday am	Discussion of Time.com and Brightnet strategies followed by feedback to non-attending employees		
pm			

It should be noted that at no time is training or facilitation of group discussion taking place with two groups of employees simultaneously, allowing a single Occupational Psychologist to conduct all training and discussion sessions and gain the contact and knowledge necessary to facilitate Friday's discussion.

Conclusions

Evaluation and follow-up interventions

Evaluation of the training and intervention schemes is important for two reasons: firstly, in knowing how successful the scheme has been (Kraiger et al, 1993); and secondly in resolving any further problems. Here only summative evaluation is possible, as the intervention has been designed to be administered quickly and as a unit.

The primary aim of this intervention was to reduce stress within the organisation – the main issue for which the Occupational Psychologists were called. However, there are many smaller issues to consider - the business outcomes of customer service reactions (Brown and Gerhardt, 2002), the attitudes of Time.com management (Birdi, 2000), and the knowledge, skills and abilities gained during training (Goldstein and Ford, 2002).

The wide number of criteria by which this intervention can be judged means that a wide range of both qualitative and quantitative investigations are needed – with views elicited from customers, Developer Consultants, Technical Support, Front Line Sales and Marketing and the management. The first set of evaluations is proposed to take place three months after the intervention is carried out.

At this point, further interventions may be deemed necessary. If employees are still frequently absent and stressed, it may be helpful to provide career counselling for potential leavers. Training might be given to the Brightnet managers to further improve role clarity by giving support and feedback (Hesketh, 1997). After any further interventions the scheme should be evaluated again at six and nine months.

Final remarks

This report outlines a best-practice strategy for much needed training and stress-reducing interventions, tailored to Time.com and Brightnet's needs. It is hoped that the suggestions for these interventions will be taken aboard by the organisation, and implemented with alacrity.

In requesting this report, the organisation has taken the first step on the road to improvement, and the first step towards implementing an organisational strategy that involves its employees and uses its resources to their most. If such principles of improvement continue to inform Time.com's ideas, there is a positive outlook for the company's future at all levels.

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