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Dow Scott, Loyola University Chicago
D Deadrick
G S Taylor

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The Evolution of Personnel Research

Dow Scott,
Assistant Professor of Management,
Department of Management,
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University,
Blacksburg, Virginia

Diana Deadrick,
Instructor of Finance and Accounting,
West Virginia Institute of Technology,
Montgomery, West Virginia

Stephen Taylor,
Doctoral Student,
Department of Management,
Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University,
Blacksburg, Virginia

The personnel function began to evolve more than a 100 years ago when the industrial revolution transformed our agrarian economy into a society in which a majority of the labor force became employees of large organizations. What began as simply a clerical function concerned with keeping employee records and insuring that employees were paid on time has evolved into a more diverse function concerned with the best utilization of the organization’s human resources.

It is important to examine the history of the personnel profession for two reasons. First, we must examine the past in order to understand and evaluate the development of those issues that have become benchmarks of what is now a major and sophisticated function in most organizations. Second, such an examination can help us address the following questions, which have not been adequately addressed elsewhere:

1) Have some personnel issues dominated the field, and if so, have those issues ever been resolved?

2) Have personnel issues of current concern been of interest in the past? Have these issues periodically surfaced, and if so, why?

3) Is personnel a more diverse function now or is it focusing on a more limited number of concerns than in the past?

Research Materials

In order to fulfill these dual objectives, we analyzed more than 6,000 articles published in Personnel Journal and Personnel during the last 54 years— from 1927-1980. These journals were selected for this study because of their relatively long history and practitioner-orientation. All analyzed articles were placed in 10 family groupings, which, in turn, were subdivided into smaller topic areas. (See sidebar, “Survey Methodology,” for more detailed information.)
TOTALS INDICATE NUMBER OF TIMES EACH CATEGORY APPEARED DURING THE LAST 54 YEARS

315
Equal Employment

1545

Career Planning and Development

583
Union Relations

Occupational Safety and Health

Compensation

Outplacement

Manpower Planning

170
169
Personnel Journal was started in 1922 and is published by A.C. Croft, Inc. This journal is published 12 times a year and has more than 20,000 subscribers. Personnel is published by the American Management Association. Although first published in 1919 as more of a newsletter, this early venture lasted only until 1921. Publication resumed in 1927 and continues today with six issues per year and a readership of more than 10,000.

Dominant Issues

Our findings indicate that certain issues have indeed dominated the field. As an example, the most pervasive issue in Personnel and Personnel Journal during this 54-year period has been employee training. More than 10% (625 articles) of the articles published between 1927 and 1980 pertained to this issue. However, job satisfaction (9.7%) and union relations (9.4%) have also been dominant issues.

This trinity is a good reflection of three major aspects of traditional human resource management: namely, scientific management, the human relations movement, and the adversarial nature of union-management relations.

Scientific management attempts to apply rules of mechanical efficiency to human employees. That is, this school of thought stresses the importance of designing jobs in such a restricted manner that the employee completes only a few tasks, all of which are repetitive and easily learned. The practitioners' stress on training is a reflection of this school, as many of these articles pertain to the most efficient manner in which an employee can be trained. Moreover, the employee is trained for a job, not jobs, and is to learn the "how to" of that job, not necessarily the "why." This, too, is a legacy of Taylor and his distinction between the "doers": the workers, and the "thinkers": management.

Employee Satisfaction

Once employees are trained, and assuming their job performance is satisfactory, it is to management's benefit to keep that employee on the job and productive. The Hawthorne studies, which were the impetus of the human relations movement of the 1930-40s, emphasized the influence that employee attitudes have on employee behavior. Because personnel acts as the interface between the organization and the employee, positive attitudes — often termed "job satisfaction" — became a major concern.

Over the years job satisfaction has been the central topic of 605 articles, or almost 10% of the articles published in Personnel and Personnel Journal. Although this interest has varied over the years, it has always represented a major component of the articles published in these two journals.

Finally, emphasis in the area of union-management traditionally has been on ways to resist unionization, to combat the union at the negotiating table, and how to at least live with the union. Indeed, the published literature is almost unanimously embued with the belief that the goals of unions and management are basically incompatible. The adversarial attitude is shared by parties in the collective bargaining relationship and has been consistently reflected in the literature.

Career Planning and Development

When the individual topics are combined into family groupings, career planning and development represents 25.0% (1,545 articles) of all articles found in these two journals. (It should be noted, how-
ever, that 40.5% of these 1,545 articles deal with training, as was previously discussed.) It is surprising that one such area could constitute such a large segment of these journals, especially when there are a number of other journals devoted specifically to these concerns, for instance, Training and The Training and Development Journal.

Staffing (13.8%) and compensation (12.6%) are two other family groupings that represent major areas of interest as reflected by the number of published articles. Because training, compensation, and staffing represent major responsibilities of most personnel departments, the emphasis of these publications accurately reflect the reality of the personnel manager's job.

What is more difficult to determine is how or if the treatment of these topics has changed. Although the massive literature that has been created since 1927 makes it impossible to systematically examine the changes in each topic or issue area, a qualitative change in these topics seems to have occurred. First, the treatment of each issue indicates more appreciation of the complexity of the factors that influence these issues. This seems especially true in terms of how these personnel issues interrelate and affect the organization.

Second, as employee protection legislation has increased, discussion of these issues has often widened to include the legal ramifications they entail. Third, more articles seem to focus on technical concerns (for example, developing a computerized database or the ramifications of the Privacy Act) as opposed to the more conceptual notions of the purpose of the personnel function or the importance of training. Finally, less emphasis has been placed on developing programs for hourly workers than has been placed on programs for managerial and professional employees.

The Relevance of Past Issues

It seems that interest in certain topics has changed over time. Indeed, the first ascertainable trend to be found within the topic areas is that of union relations. During a nine-year span (consisting of the two periods covering 1927 to 1935), there was a marked decrease in the number of articles published on this topic (13.3% in 1927-30 and 6.0% in 1931-35). However, there was a sharp increase in interest during the 1936-40 period, which coincides with the passage of the National Labor Relations (Wagner) Act of 1935. This act greatly contributed to the power of organized labor, which should partially explain the expanded coverage of union relations in these two journals.

Although interest in union relations lessened somewhat during World War II, the surge of articles in 1946-50 (14.7%) may be attributed in part to a second major piece of labor legislation, the Labor Management Relations (Taft-Hartley) Act. On the whole, however, since the late 1940s the percentage of such articles has slipped steadily to 6.0% in 1976-80. This decline parallels the decrease in union membership rolls over this same period.

The compensation grouping has tended to show a steady increase from 1927-30 (when 8.4% of all articles dealt with these issues) through 1951-55 (when a peak level of 14.5% was reached). Again, the sharp increase in the 1930s parallels passage of related legislation: the Davis-Bacon Act (1932), the Social Security Act (1935), the Public Contract Act (1936), and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938). However, since World War II, with the exception of 1966-70 (8.9%), the proportion of published articles dealing with this topic area has tended to be relatively stable.

Conversely, there has been a steady decline in the percentage of published articles pertaining to occupational safety and health. From a high of 8.2% in 1936-40, there was a steady decrease in interest in this area through 1971-75 (3.4%). There was apparently no increase in activity in this area during the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite the passage of the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1970 and the increased governmental involvement with workplace safety that resulted. However, a major increase in the number of such articles did occur during the 1976-80 time period (5.7%), a period during which serious questions surrounding this act were brought to the forefront.

Other Notable Trends

It also should be noted that career planning and development, the most popular family grouping, has tended to remain quite stable, in terms of percentage of total articles published, throughout this 54-year period. We would have predicted that career planning was an outcome of labor shortages and societal demands of the 1960s that organizations take more interest in the people they employ. Yet, career planning was a major interest to personnel managers during the early 1930s. Although interest in this area later subsided, it did reemerge during the 1960s. The authors of the 1960s treated career planning as if it were a relatively new discovery, almost as if the body of knowledge from the '30s had been lost.

The topic of equal employment also shows a distinct publication pattern. As indicated by the number of articles published, interest in equal employment opportunity was low from 1927 to 1940. During World War II, there was a marked increase of interest in the employment of women (8.7%) which was probably attributable to women entering the work force in large numbers. The war effort brought both women and minorities into the factories. However, following the war, the level of interest as reflected in related articles dropped back to approximately 2%. It was not until the early 1960s that interest in this area began to grow (3.7%), and it has increased dramatically to a total of 11.1% of all published articles in 1971-75.

Again, our findings were unexpected. The concern for equal employment opportunity was not a
new development of the 1960s. However, the interest in the 1960s probably received more attention because of the passage of significant fair employment legislation and executive orders that protect women, minorities, and other segments of the labor force: Equal Pay Act (1963), Title VII of the Civil Right Act (1964), Age in Discrimination Act (1967), and President Johnson's Executive Order 11246 (1965). Faced with such governmental and societal pressures, employers have been forced to focus their attention on equal employment opportunity for protected groups.

Other notable trends include: 1) a relatively new interest in alcoholism, with the first article appearing in the 1956-60 period; 2) concerns about absenteeism seem to be centered on those years in which labor shortages were occurring (1927-30; 1941-45; 1966-70; 1971-75); and 3) staffing articles, particularly recruitment, had a tremendous surge during the 1966-70 period (160 articles, or 22%2) when college graduates were in short supply.

The Focus of Attention

In terms of volume, the sheer numbers of articles have increased substantially over the 54-year period of our study. During the 1931-1935 period a total of 214 articles were printed in the two journals. By 1976-80, almost 800 articles had been published. This 400% increase is even more striking when it is noted that a virtual plethora of personnel-related journals are now published: Personnel Administrator, Public Personnel Management, Journal of Human Resources, Compensation Review, etc. With so many different outlets for articles, the increase of articles printed in Personnel and Personnel Journal indicates the tremendous growth of the personnel management discipline.

Yet even with development of a massive personnel literature, many aspects of the field have remained relatively the same. This becomes apparent when the time periods for our analysis are reduced to three basic eras:1927-1940, 1941-1960, and 1961-1980.

In general, 1927-1940 were years of difficult economic conditions, rampant unemployment, and extreme human dislocation. In economic terms, 1941-1960 were relatively good years. The war-time economy of the 1940s was a booming one as American industry rushed to meet the demands of the war effort. The Korean War renewed this economic activity. The 1950s in general can be described as a prosperous period because of our commitment to a consumer society and to helping rebuild Europe stimulating markets for American goods.

The third and final era under consideration — 1961-1980 — was a period of American maturation. During this period, the issue of minority civil rights was a crucial concern. Economically, with the exception of the late 1960s, this was a somewhat sluggish period, marked by a series of wage and price controls, energy crises, and high inflation and interest rates.

Eternal Problems?

An examination of these three time periods indicate that the issues and topics of interest in prior years are very similar to the issues and topics that personnel managers are interested in today. While the percentage of coverage of certain issues and topics has changed, the overall rankings are quite similar.

Consider, for instance, career planning and development. This has been the dominant subject throughout the entire 54-year period studied. Also, staffing has consistently been a much written about topic, taking the second, fourth, and second positions, respectively, in this three-era hierarchy.

Indeed, these rankings have remained so stationary that only one topic — union relations — has moved more than one position during this period. That is, while articles dealing with labor relations were ranked third (12.2%) in 1927-40, by the succeeding era this topic had slipped to fifth (11.2%), a position it maintained during 1961-80 (although the percentage of these articles had fallen to 7.1%). This decline parallels shrinking union membership rolls.

When individual topics, instead of family groupings, are examined, this same stability is again found. Training has consistently been a much written about topic: first, second, and third, respectively, across the three eras. Similarly, employee satisfaction has shown consistent attention, ranging from first to third in the hierarchy. Other topics showing a surprising degree of consistent popularity have been performance appraisal, wage and salary concerns, benefits, and selection.

Some Significant Changes

While the coverage of most topics has been quite stable, a few have shown rather significant changes. The first such topic is that of absenteeism and turnover. While this was the twelfth and thirteenth most popular topic in 1927-40 and in 1961-80, respectively, it rose to the eighth position between 1941 and 1960. As stated above, these years on the whole were rather good economically, hence employers needed people to be at their jobs.

The percentage of articles written on safety has decreased substantially. In the era of 1927-40, this was the fourth most popular topic. Surprisingly, this area has received less and less interest, so much so that by 1961-1980 only 3.4% of all published works dealt with this topic, which was ranked tenth. Indeed, given the cacophonous reaction of the business community to the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, one would have expected the journals to have been inundated by a virtual tidal wave of such articles.

Of the 24 different topics examined in this study, perhaps the amount of attention paid to equal employment opportunity and affirmative action (EEO/AA) best parallels events in the social and
political realms. The first era — 1927-1940 — was basically a quiet one in terms of minority rights. Indeed, social and racial roles were well established and everyone "knew their place," both on and off the job. Consequently, few personnel practitioners were concerned with such topics as affirmative action.

World War II introduced a new era. First, women and other protected classes were needed to support the war effort. Women, blacks, and other minorities began to demand their rights, which were promised by constitution but never really given in the workplace. In 1941, President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802 stated the policy of nondiscrimination in the employment of defense workers. President Truman's 1948 Executive Orders 9980 and 9981 declared a policy of nondiscrimination in government employment and the military, respectively. The Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in Brown vs. the Board of Education was the beginning of increased concern for the rights of all Americans.

In response, those in the personnel field also turned their attention to the fair treatment of women and minorities. Between 1941 and 1960, articles pertaining to EEO/AA became the eleventh most popular topic and made up 1.3% of the articles published in Personnel and Personnel Journal.

This interest in EEO/AA continued into the 1961-80 era with 4.3% of all articles dealing with this topic. This expanded interest also has social/political parallels: the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the marches in Selma, Birmingham, Memphis, and elsewhere; and the integration of the University of Mississippi.

All these events focused the nation's attention on the issue of racial discrimination and demanded that this issue be addressed within the context of the workplace as well. This force is seen in the increase in the number of articles dealing with this and similar issues.

Learn From the Past
Our research seems to indicate that the important issues of the past are still important today. The personnel function is still struggling with the basic issues of attracting, retaining, and motivating employees. Although these basic issues have not changed, the world in which these programs must be implemented has.

Government regulation of employment has increased at a phenomenal rate and probably will continue to do so. Employees have become more diverse both in work values and cultural background, and personnel has been given the challenge of assimilating them into the workplace and attempting to meet their different needs. Finally, personnel must deal with organizations that are much larger and more diverse in terms of product, technology and geographical location.

Traditionally, the practitioner's approach to personnel management has been futuristic, and certainly the assessment of current needs and influences provides the basis for future actions. Yet, the proactive state of personnel management requires a working knowledge of the past. Without this knowledge, energy will be wasted trying to "reinvent the wheel."

Dow Scott holds a Ph.D. in management from Michigan State University. Prior to his academic career, he worked in personnel at the B.F. Goodrich Company.

Diana Durrick holds an M.B.A. from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Stephen Taylor is a doctoral student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, where he is specializing in statistical analyses of problems in personnel and industrial relations.

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