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IWS briefing, Winter 2006 Volume 6 Issue 1

Abstract

[Excerpt] A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.

Keywords

ILR, Institute for Workplace Studies, IWS, labor, market, employee, human resources, Harry Katz, Martha Sherman, diversity, Christopher Metzler, Quinetta Roberson

Comments

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ILR Reorganizes Extension

As ILR begins its 60-year anniversary, the Extension division is pushing ahead with a new focus, a new purpose, and a new structure.

The traditional labor-management divide that long defined Extension's courses and services – tempered by a smattering of programs that fell somewhere in between – is fading away. In its place are work groups organized around themes that reflect 21st century realities, strengthen the research base of Extension's activities, and reinforce ILR's outreach agenda.

"We had to change in order to respond to the changing needs of the workplace," explains Dean Harry Katz. "Extension was founded shortly after World War II, when the parties lacked the experience and training to deal with the emerging industrial conflict. Today, the challenges are broader and deeper. We need to take the lead in the world of work as it is now and as it will become in the future."

The thematic structure goes a long way towards fulfilling Dean Katz's vision for the school. For one, it better describes the breadth of Extension's practice-oriented expertise. In addition to the traditional labor/unions and management development/human resources development themes, Extension is focusing on six other critical workplace topics: conflict resolution, alternative dispute resolution, and labor relations; diversity and inclusion; labor and employment law; organizational change; employment and disability; and workforce, industry, and economic development. The implications of globalization and public policy also figure in the work of each thematic group.

Another factor motivating the reorganization is the anticipated gain

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New Graduate Class Zeroes in on Human Resources as Strategic Asset

THE CHALLENGE, AS ANY INSTRUCTOR WHO DEVELOPS a new course will tell you, is pulling together lectures, readings, and assignments that are simultaneously rigorous, compelling, and manageable. When the course in question meets weekly and must address all the key components of a broadly-conceived discipline, the task is all the more daunting.

And so it is that the human resources (HR) management class, one of six modules that comprise ILR's part-time New York City-based master of professional studies (MPS) program, has undergone a transformation that aims to give students just the right mix of theory and practice while weaving the various facets of HR into a strategic whole. "The idea here is for master's students to understand the HR function as an integrated system with a set of complex and flexible tools that help businesses get what they need from their people," says Martha Sherman, vice president in human resources at JPMorgan Chase & Co., where she is a senior consultant in organization development for business groups across the company.

Instead of presenting students with stand-alone lectures on a variety of discrete HR topics, such as recruitment and staffing or compensation and benefits, the 12-week course designed by Dr. Sherman addresses the linkages among them. "The goal is to create a whole that's greater than the sum of the parts," she says.

Dr. Sherman knows whereof she speaks. A long-time practitioner who is also schooled in the field's academic traditions, Dr. Sherman is a proponent of making HR a full strategic partner within organizations. She says HR professionals should serve as internal consultants whose job entails solving problems and influencing clients. "Your goal is to figure out what the client needs, which may not be what the client asks for," she notes. "If you are a true partner, you're not just following orders from business managers."

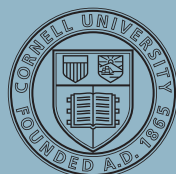
The restructured course was rolled out for the fall '05 semester. Its learning objectives revolved around the notion that human resources are as much a business asset as capital, brand reputation, and supplier relations. The practical import of this formulation, and the underlying theme of the course, was that the management of human resources affects, and is affected by, an organization's business strategies and operational policies and practices. MPS students had the opportunity to absorb this message through lectures and presentations

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A newsletter on workplace issues and research from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University



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Graduate Class

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delivered by veteran practitioners and Ithaca-based ILR faculty, through collaborative projects requiring real-world research, and through individual coaching sessions with Dr. Sherman.

Students spent the few first weeks getting grounded in the strategic fundamentals of HR management before moving on to the particulars. Different class meetings focused on strategic HR disciplines, such as work systems, diversity and inclusion, and strategic compensation design, and also on process skills, such as consulting, team dynamics, and communications. Classroom learning was reinforced and expanded by required readings from the academic and practitioner literature, a list of suggested readings, written assignments, and case discussions. A virtual Internet-based chat room was also available for the collaborative work.

The core lesson was experienced in real time. Students were divided into five teams that reflected the professional, gender, and ethnic diversity of the class and were advised to conceive of themselves as HR consultants to actual companies. Each group worked with a sponsor in the company to which it was attached and used the skills and concepts presented in class as a frame for investigating and analyzing the company's HR function. At the end of the project, students were required to assess their own professional capabilities and personal growth, a self-evaluation that was informed by

→ News Flash

THE 2006 *IWS* WORKPLACE COLLOQUIUM SERIES is in the planning stages. But mark your calendars now with these dates: February 23, March 23, April 27, and May 18. A brochure with all the details will be available shortly. Also check www.ilr.cornell.edu/iws or contact Katie Briggs at (212)340-7931 or kb41@cornell.edu.

feedback from teammates and company sponsors. "I expected everyone to get an A on that piece," Dr. Sherman says. "I told them if they didn't jump that hurdle on the first pass, I'd give it back to be redone. I really wanted the students to move themselves on their own learning curve."

Dr. Sherman was purposely vague about the template for the project. Not surprisingly, each group evolved its own dynamic and proceeded along its own vector. Where one team ran with the HR priorities suggested by the company sponsor and agreed to knit their individual findings into a common theme, another team initially struggled with members' conflicting perspectives and objectives. Ultimately, all the teams understood they would either tell a story about where and how HR fit into the company's operational strategy or offer recommendations that addressed an identified HR concern.

Students, for the most part, were excited about the course. Although some would have preferred a more hard-core academic approach, most appreciated the balance of theory and practice. "We were exposed to a broad spectrum of issues," says Mira Hole, whose day job focuses on driving performance improvement at a financial services company. "The topics were timely and we dealt with them strategically." Adds classmate Javeria Arif, a project manager for HR-related business technology initiatives: "I felt smarter each time I went to class and in meetings at work I was totally able to relate to the client."

That may be just the validation needed to continue offering this, or a similar course, next time the human resources management module rotates into the MPS curriculum. Meantime, the real benefits will be apparent as the students transfer their learning into their everyday professional lives.

Information about the MPS program is available at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/mpsny/>. ■

Extension Reorganizes

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from closer interaction between the Extension and resident faculties, the latter being professors who teach graduate and undergraduate students. Dean Katz and Associate Dean of Outreach Susanne Bruyère have asked professors to share their expertise with the thematic groups and to collaborate, when appropriate, on research and field-based projects. Dean Katz expects the exchange of ideas, information, and contacts will enhance ILR's teaching, research, and outreach missions.

Finally, the new configuration eliminates the geographic boundaries that once defined the formal structure of Extension. With faculty brought together through unifying concepts regardless where in New York State they are physically located, they can better coordinate efforts, leverage resources, and share knowledge. This team approach should enable Extension to provide clients a wider array of consulting, technical assistance, and training services; quickly develop services that target emerging workplace issues; and more easily disseminate research findings.

"The changes in Extension are part of ILR's resurgent focus on outreach," says Associate Dean Bruyère, "and are consistent with the original purpose of the Morrill Act of 1862, which established the land grant college system in the U.S. and made the dissemination of information and knowledge a high priority for land grant schools like ILR."

The reorganization of Extension – one of Dean Katz's first initiatives after assuming his post in July – was preceded by the appointment of Susanne Bruyère as associate dean of outreach. This new title and function underscores Dean Katz's commitment to enriching ILR's interactions with labor, management, policy, academic, and alumni constituencies.

Associate Dean Bruyère oversees Extension and works with Dean Katz on outreach strategy and programming. She founded and remains director of ILR's Employment and Disability Institute, which advances knowledge, policies, and practices that enhance opportunities for people with disabilities in all aspects of life by providing technical assistance to employers and schools and by conducting research. Associate Dean Bruyère joined ILR in 1986.

Does Diversity Affect the Bottom Line? ILR Faculty Search for Answers

THE CONCEPT OF WORKFORCE DIVERSITY SEEMS SIMPLE ENOUGH: Toss in a few women, some blacks, a smattering of religious and ethnic minorities, a couple of men older than 50, and someone with a physical disability and management assumes its legal and ethical obligations have been met. But from the perspective of ILR faculty who study, teach about, and advise on the matter, the meaning and value of diversity is significantly more complex.

“Diversity is not just about visible differences,” says Christopher Metzler, a senior Extension associate and group leader for **ILR** Extension’s new diversity and inclusion theme. “It’s about harnessing the skills, talents, and abilities of everyone in the workplace.” That means people with different thinking styles and learning styles, morning people and afternoon people, shy people and outgoing people, team players and team leaders, and so on.

Increasingly, academics and practitioners are coming to understand diversity’s beneficial impact on an organization. When diversity is viewed as an opportunity to be grasped rather than a problem to be solved, the culture of an organization undergoes a transformation that conceivably affects the bottom line. Indeed, researchers are beginning to discover links between policies and practices that promote diversity and also correlate with observable gains in organizational performance. These findings are particularly noteworthy because few companies are willing or able to support initiatives that don’t produce results.

“Companies managed diversity during the 1990s because it was the right thing to do,” explains Quinetta Roberson, associate professor of human resources studies at **ILR**. “After 2000 the economy changed and senior management didn’t want to hear warm and fuzzy. They wanted to see metrics; they wanted to know how they could justify what they were doing around diversity.”

Prof. Roberson’s own research may yield some of the answers managers are seeking. She recently completed a study of major U.S. companies that looked at

the relationship between sales and diversity within top management. What she found comes straight out of the diversity theory playbook: a moderate amount of diversity is the target to aim for. With too little diversity, Prof. Roberson notes, minority employees are treated as tokens and there is no impact on outcomes. Too much diversity, on the other hand, leads to polarization and power struggles among groups along with diminishing positive effects on performance. A reasonably diverse management team, however, has enough of a critical mass of “differences” for companies to successfully leverage distinct contributions.

Although researchers continue to find connections between diversity and organizational outcomes, they have yet to prove a direct causal relationship. Their efforts have been complicated by an inability to obtain the company-specific data that could produce a breakthrough. Researchers say managers are reluctant to share proprietary information that could make them vulnerable to criticism and to lawsuits charging discrimination. So academics like Prof. Roberson and her colleagues in **ILR**’s Human Resources Studies (HRS) department are forced to get at the question indirectly and by using comparative data that is readily available.

In one project, Prof. Roberson is working with assistant professor Christopher Collins on a survey of approximately 150 *Fortune 500* companies to learn whether, and which, diversity-related human resource practices correlate with firm performance. They are looking at numbers-oriented practices, such as affirmative action plans; inclusion-

oriented practices, such as coaching/mentoring arrangements; and “signaling” factors, including broadly-defined measures of a company’s reputation for diversity and the actual amount of diversity within top management and the board of directors. A related study by assistant professor Lisa Nishii, involving data from 250 organizations, looks at the industry characteristics of companies that adopt diversity-related human resource practices and assesses whether companies that do so also adopt other “best practices” in human resources. Additionally, Prof. Nishii is using data from this study to examine the relationship between these exemplary practices and organizational performance.

Another ongoing project in HRS focuses on diversity training, a popular corporate initiative whose effectiveness remains unclear. Companies typically evaluate training sessions through follow-up surveys that focus on employee reactions rather than on the benefits to the organization. That approach left a research hole that Prof. Roberson and assistant professor Bradford Bell are trying to fill. They are currently surveying employees and supervisors of a work group at Cornell that went through diversity training during the past year. The project involves a before-and-after evaluation that seeks to determine whether the training does, in fact, alter employees’ attitudes, behaviors, and/or competencies.

Regardless what professors Roberson and Bell conclude, Mr. Metzler cautions against over reliance on this particular type of intervention. While recognizing the usefulness of training and education programs – indeed, **ILR** Extension offers an array of diversity workshops and certificates – Mr. Metzler says organizations must do more. In his roles as consultant and coach, Mr. Metzler stresses the values, culture, policies, and skills that together sustain truly diverse and inclusive organizations and buoy the bottom line.

Mr. Metzler’s parting advice: “Diversity must be institutionalized.” ■

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ILR Librarian Awarded Top Honor

A passion for knowledge, commitment to service, and dedication to the field have earned Stuart Basefsky, senior reference librarian at **ILR**'s Catherwood Library, the State University of New York (SUNY) Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Librarianship. This award is one of four separate designations making up the rank of "distinguished faculty" in the SUNY system. Recipients of the award are considered to hold SUNY's highest academic rank.

Mr. Basefsky, who conceived, produces, and distributes (via email) the *IWS Documented News Service*, has been serving the greater **ILR** community since 1993. His varied duties range from teaching students how to assess the accuracy of information found on the Internet to helping faculty members locate rare source material to fielding research queries from employers, unions, alumni, and the general public. Mr. Basefsky is a

willing and eager guide to all things related to the workplace.

The *IWS Documented News Service* is a direct outgrowth of Mr. Basefsky's abiding interest in public policy. Through this news service format, Mr. Basefsky provides researchers, employers, workers, and government analysts with links to original source documentation containing critical news and information on topics related to **ILR** disciplines. The service is available free of charge and is published daily and weekly. For more information, or to subscribe, please go to <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/library/research/iws/iws.html>. ■

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