Do Formal Union Administrative Practices Promote or Hinder Labor Revitalization?

Results of a Survey of American and British Unions

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Trade unions around the world face fundamental changes in their environments and aggressive attacks from their political and economic adversaries. This has sparked widespread discussion about new strategies for revitalizing and even transforming the labor movement. In a canvass of various initiatives being urged by academics and labor leaders, scholars have identified the following revitalization strategies: organizing the unorganized; grassroots political action; coalition building; labor-management partnerships; union mergers; internal restructuring; and international solidarity (Turner, Katz and Hurd, 2001). Most of these activities connect, directly or indirectly, “to a new emphasis on rank and file participation or mobilization”, the essence of social movement unionism, and a sharp contrast from traditional business unionism (id.). However, one issue very rarely addressed in these conversations is the role internal administrative practices play in union transformation and revitalization.

This paper reports the results of a longitudinal study of the administrative policies and practices of American and British unions. The authors conducted surveys of United States (U.S.) and United Kingdom (U.K.) unions that gathered information on individual union policies and practices involving human resources, hiring, budgeting, and strategic planning. The findings from the 2010/2011 surveys – supplemented by the results of surveys conducted in the early 1990’s – indicate that unions in both the U.S. and the U.K. have increasingly adopted modern, formal, and systematic management practices.

Clearly, a more rational and professional approach to administration has numerous benefits for labor organizations. When unions adopt more formal human resource, budgeting, and planning practices, they improve their overall organizational
capacity (Weil, 2005). And that—combined with better strategic choices by unions—can offset the effects of overall decline in their leverage (id.).

However, it is widely recognized that more formal approaches to administration can have costs as well as benefits for organizations of all types. This paper reports on recent trends toward the modernization of union administration practices. It then considers whether these trends undermine the voice of rank-and-file members or produce new rigidities that inhibit innovation or adaptation.

**Background**

In both the U.K. and U.S., academics and other observers have studied the structure, government and internal practices of unions dating back to their beginnings in each country (Webb and Webb, 1918 and 1919; Commons, 1918). In Britain, the literature has traditionally focused on how unions function (see, for example, Clegg et al., 1961; Roberts, 1956; Fisher and Holland, 1990; and IRRI, 1992). In the U.S., experts have emphasized union structure, governance, and leadership (Hoxie, 1926; Lester, 1958; Barbash, 1959).

In both countries, modern labor movements arose out of the tumultuous events of the 1930's and 40's, when the ranks of labor swelled dramatically. While many unions employed lawyers, researchers and accountants in this period (Wilensky, 1956), most of them operated in an ad hoc, informal manner. Yet, in retrospect, the post-World War II era in both the U.S. and the U.K. is seen as labor's “golden age,” a time of expanding power. Speaking of that era in the U.S., one leader of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee whose job it was to gather signed authorization cards recalled, "...it was a
poor week if he didn’t pick up at least 1,000” (Williams, 2011, p. 226). Clearly, in their period of greatest growth, unions functioned as lean and informal organizations capable of changing to meet the challenges they faced.

By the 1960's, major unions in the U.S. and U.K. had grown into organizations with large payrolls, diverse expenditures, and a greater need for specialists. In an article entitled “American Unions: From Mass Protest to Going Concern,” Jack Barbash noted how unions had begun to hire specialists in economics, research, accounting, law, and public relations (Barbash, 1968).

In the 1970's, U.S. and U.K. unions began to draw criticism from labor scholars as a result of their failure to adopt modern administrative processes and practices. These observers characterized labor leaders, in general, as being ineffective managers (Bok and Dunlop, 1970). They noted that unions hired almost exclusively from within, requiring that applicants for employment, even for demanding technical positions, be current union members. Formal human resource policies were rare, and political patronage was a common consideration in hiring. Over time, the overall employment practices of unions prompted their own employees to unionize (Clark 1989; Clark 1992).

In terms of their financial practices, unions engaged in little more than post-expenditure review, a practice later termed the “credit card syndrome” (Weil, 1994, p. 157). As late as the 1970's, union budgeting and strategic planning were the exception rather than the rule (Gray, 1982-1995 interviews with national union presidents; Dunlop 1990).
The 1980’s marked a turning point for modern American and British unions. In both countries, the decade brought privatization and deregulation of major industries, significant increases in import penetration, the offshoring of manufacturing operations, and more hostile governmental and employer policy toward unions. The Reagan and Thatcher years confronted unions with steep membership losses and related cuts in income, hardships that for many unions persisted throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s (Willman, Morris, and Aston, 1993) This dramatic worsening of the environment posed two significant challenges for the labor movement. First, unions recognized the need to revitalize their efforts to organize new members (AFL-CIO, 1985; Bronfenbrenner and Hickey, 2004; Mann, 2012; Turner, Katz, and Hurd, 2001; Netherlands TUC, 2007). Second, it became clear they had to take dramatic and urgent steps to cope with shocks to their membership rolls and dues ledgers. (Delaney, Fiorito, and Jarley, 1991; Clark, Gray, and Gilbert, 1993; Clark, Gray, Gilbert, and Solomon, 1998). The latter of these realities posed stark choices for unions and union leaders: either improve internal management or in some cases possibly face financial collapse.

Against this backdrop, academic researchers in both the U.S. and U.K. began to study trends in the internal administration and business practices of unions. In the U.K, Diane Watson (1988) compared the work and working conditions of union officers with industrial relations managers. Kelly and Heery in Working for the Union surveyed and analyzed the human resource practices of British unions, including staff recruitment, selection, training and performance appraisal (1994). In the U.S., scholars examined the HR practices of unions (Clark and Gray, 1993; Margolies, 2011). A recent study hypothesizes the kinds of correlations that should be expected between union
characteristics (size, degree of centralization, etc.) and their adoption of modern HR practices (Rau, 2012). Two of the three co-authors here have earlier compared trends in union administrative practices in Britain and the U.S. (Clark, Gray, Gilbert, and Solomon, 1998).

Some observers have pointed to a correlation between union innovation in their financial practices, especially budgeting, and the need for labor organizations to function with increasingly scarce resources. They have pointed to a similar connection between the challenge posed by scarce resources and the kind of environmental scanning that accompanies strategic planning (Delaney, Jarley, and Fiorito, 1996). Scholars have both urged unions to engage in strategic planning and evaluated their efforts when they have done so (Stratton & Brown, 1989; Stratton and Reshef, 1990; Dunlop, 1990; Weil, 1994).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

In 1990, Clark and Gray asked 110 U.S.-based national and international unions to complete a questionnaire about their internal administrative policies and practices. Forty-eight (48) unions returned completed questionnaires for a response rate of 44 percent. In 1993, with the help of Kay Gilbert at the University of Strathclyde, questionnaires adapted from this instrument were sent to the 86 national unions in the U.K. Sixty-one (61) of the 86 unions completed the questionnaire for a 71 percent response rate.

In 2010, Clark, Gray, and Whitehead asked 60 U.S.-based national and international unions to complete a questionnaire about their internal administrative
policies and practices. Thirty-five of the sixty national unions completed and returned surveys for a response rate of 58.3 percent. In 2011, the authors and Kay Gilbert also sent questionnaires to 56 Trade Union Congress (TUC)-affiliated and 40 non-TUC affiliated national unions in the U.K for the purpose of this study. Forty-six unions returned questionnaires for a 48 percent response rate.

Each version of the survey instrument included questions on human resource, hiring, budget, and strategic planning processes and practices, and this paper reports findings in those areas. In all of the surveys, the union respondents were asked to answer questions in reference to headquarters professional staff and field staff.\(^1\)

**Findings**

The findings from this study suggest that, over the last twenty years, most unions in the U.S. and the U.K. have, at least to some extent, adopted more modern administrative practices.

**HR Policies and Practices**

*Written Human Resource Policies* -- Table 1 presents results from the 1990/1993 and 2010/2011 surveys regarding the percentage of respondent unions with more than 50,000 members that had formal, written human resources policies for headquarters professional staff in seven subject matter areas (equal opportunity, discharge and discipline, etc.). The findings show that as of 1990, a majority of U.S. unions had written

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\(^1\) Headquarters professional staff are usually specialists with advanced training and/or experience in such areas as law, politics and legislation, education, economics, communications, and advanced technology or generalists with significant experience in collective bargaining, contract administration, and organizing. Field professional staff are generally involved in direct representation capacities, including organizing, bargaining, or settling grievances and disputes with employers on behalf of the members the union represents.
policies on only one subject (discipline and discharge) out of seven human resource areas; by 2010 a majority of U.S. unions had written policies on four of ten employee relations topics. The findings also show that between 1990 and 2010 there was an increase in the percentage of unions with formal policies in six of seven areas of HR concern. The exception involved the 37 percent of unions with salary review policies in 1990 versus 36 percent in 2010.

For U.K. unions, Table 1 shows that between 1993 and 2011 the percentage of unions with formal written policies for headquarters professional staff increased in four of seven human resources areas. It also indicates that a majority of U.K. unions responding to the survey in 1993 had written policies in three of seven areas. By 2011, that number increased to seven of ten issues. As of 2010/2011, a greater percentage of British unions had formal HR policies than did U.S. unions in nine of 10 areas.

In sum, the data clearly indicate that unions in both countries have moved toward more formal, systematic human resources policies for headquarters professional employees. The reasons seem readily apparent. More formal, written human resource policies are likely to result in greater employee job satisfaction and lower turnover. They also commit the union to meeting standards that union bargainers themselves demand of their employer counterparts.
Table 1

Written Personnel Policies for Headquarters Staff,


(Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Headquarters Professional Staff</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Discharge</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Appraisal</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary Review</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Harassment</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Privacy</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=27</td>
<td>n=25</td>
<td>n=14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hiring Practices and Policies—The 2010 U.S. and 2011 U.K. surveys included questions about union staff hiring practices. As indicated in Table 2 below, the analysis found that only a small percentage of respondent unions in both the U.S. and the U.K. still
impose the once common requirement of unions that job applicants for the headquarters professional staff belong to, or hold office in, the union.

The survey results also indicated that – in contrast to their traditional “hire from within” emphasis -- a very high percentage of U.S. unions (88 percent) hire individuals for headquarters professional jobs who have no previous experience working for a union. Just under half of U.S. unions (48 percent) do this for their field/regional staff. U.K. unions, on the other hand, do not appear to make this distinction. Most U.K. unions hire people from outside the labor movement for headquarters professional staff just as readily as U.S. unions. However, they are much more likely than American unions to hire individuals without prior union experience for their field/regional staff (78 percent of U.K. unions; 48 percent of U.S. unions).

Table 2 illustrates that British and American unions to very similar extents hire staff who have previously worked for other unions. A high percentage of unions in both countries hire such people for their headquarters professional staff (92 percent for U.S. unions; 89 percent for unions in the U.K.). Most British unions (67 percent) hire field/regional staff who have worked at other unions, and a slightly higher majority of American unions (80 percent) engage in the same practice.

It makes sense that unions in the U.S. and the U.K. are open to hiring headquarters professional staff who have worked at other unions. Certainly, staff need to be knowledgeable about the issues specific to the sectors or occupations in which the members of a given union work. But that knowledge can be readily acquired if the staff person
Table 2

*Union Hiring Practices: Qualifications and Recruiting Sources*

**U.S. & U.K. Unions w/50,000+ Members, 2010/2011**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--require current membership as a qualification for appointment to the headquarters professional staff</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--require prior election or appointment to union office at some level as a qualification for appointment to the headquarters professional staff</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--have hired headquarters professional staff who have no previous experience working for a union</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--have hired field professional staff who have no previous experience working for a union</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--have hired headquarters professional staff who have previously worked for other unions</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--have hired field/regional professional staff who have previously worked for other unions</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=25  n=9

has the skills and background required of professionals. It is, therefore, not surprising that a national union might hire a legal, political, or communications professional who has worked at one or more other unions.

**Specific Training and College Degrees in Union Hiring** -- Table 3 illustrates that slightly more than half of the respondent unions from both the U.S. (58 percent) and the U.K. (56 percent) require specific degrees or training as a qualification for appointment to the
headquarters professional staff. However, U.S. unions appear to place a significantly
greater value on college degrees when making staff hiring decisions. Eighty-four (84)
percent of U.S. respondents indicated that a college degree is a very important or
somewhat important consideration in hiring headquarters professional staff, and 54
percent reported that a degree was similarly important in hiring field/regional staff. A
slightly lower percentage of U.K. unions (75 percent) placed similar value on degrees in
the headquarters staff-hiring process, while only 38 percent indicated this was a very
important or somewhat important consideration in hiring field/regional professional
staff.

Table 3

Union Hiring Practices: Training Requirements and College Degree

U.S. & U.K. Unions w/50,000+ Members, 2010/2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of unions that:</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>require specific degrees or training as a qualification for appointment to the headquarters professional staff</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>say a college degree is a very important or somewhat important consideration in hiring:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*headquarters professional staff</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*field/regional professional staff</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=25</td>
<td>n=9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In recent years, as unions have faced more and more complex challenges in all of the arenas in which they operate—economic, financial, political, legal, and organizational—the types of skills, knowledge, and experience union staff needed to address these challenges also has changed. In recent years, the traditional “up from the ranks” approach to developing staff has proven less and less able, by itself, to meet the needs of labor organizations. Unions have been required to look outside their own membership to find professionals to assist with the work of the union. Over time, there has emerged a group of “union professionals” made up of people who spent their careers in professional capacities with unions. These individuals often were hired from outside the labor movement and in many cases moved across unions in the course of their careers.

Use of Consultants — For both countries, the union administrative practices surveys asked unions about their use of outside consultants to supplement the expertise of in-house staff. Table 4 indicates the percentage of unions with more than 50,000 members that indicated they employed consultants to provide various services in 2010/2011. The results suggest that while unions in both the U.S. and the U.K. used consultants in many areas, U.S. unions employed outside experts to a much greater degree than U.K. unions. In fact, a higher percentage of American unions used consultants in twelve of the sixteen areas included in the 2010/2011 survey. And in several areas—economic analysis, public relations/communications, lobbying, travel, and corporate campaigns—U.S. unions used consultants to a much greater degree than their U.K. counterparts. It is also worth noting that the two areas in which unions most often used consultants were
identical for both U.S. and U.K unions (legal work and computer services and technology).

Table 4

Use of Outside Consultants

in U.S. & U.K. Unions w/50,000+ Members, 2010/2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of unions that use outside consultants to assist with:</th>
<th>U.S. 2010</th>
<th>U.K. 2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--computer services &amp; technology</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--economic analysis</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--financial planning</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--containment of union’s benefit costs</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--organizational analysis</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--personnel recruitment</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--public relations/communications</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--training</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--political work</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--lobbying</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--travel</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--legal</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--corporate campaigns</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--organizing techniques &amp; strategies</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--leadership development</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--occupational safety and health</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=25 n=9
Budgeting and Strategic Planning

The 2010/2011 union administrative practices questionnaire also included items focusing on the budgeting and strategic planning activities of unions. Both surveys asked the responding unions if they developed an annual budget with planned expenditures by function or department. As Table 5 illustrates, in 2010, 72 percent of U.S. union respondents with more than 50,000 members indicated they engaged in this practice, while, surprisingly, an even larger percentage of unions with memberships of less than 50,000 (89 percent) said they did. Fully one hundred (100) percent of respondent British unions both large and small reported that they had a formal budget each year.

The survey results regarding the employment of a formal strategic planning process are also presented in Table 5. The results indicate that in 2011/2012 U.S. unions employed this process less often than British unions. They also indicate that smaller unions in both the U.S. and U.K. developed a strategic plan more often than larger unions. Sixty-four (64) percent of American unions with more than 50,000 reported using strategic planning, while 75 percent with less than 50,000 members engaged in this practice. The results in this area for U.K. unions were 94 and 89 percent respectively.

Budgeting – Who Is Responsible?: For those respondent unions reporting that they develop a formal budget, Table 6 shows, by country, which union representatives have primary responsibility for the budget. Because respondents were free to check more than one official as primarily responsible, percentages in Table 6 exceed 100
Table 5
Financial and Strategic Planning Practices
in U.S. & U.K. Unions w/50,000+, 2010/2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S.</th>
<th>U.K.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;50,000</td>
<td>&gt;50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of unions that:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--develop an annual budget with planned expenditures by function or department</td>
<td>89 (n=9)</td>
<td>72 (n=24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--employ a formal strategic planning process</td>
<td>75 (n=8)</td>
<td>64 (n=24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

percent. Not surprisingly, half of responding unions in the U.S. placed budgeting responsibility in the office of the Secretary-Treasurer. But other unions assigned this task to the union president (17 percent), executive board (6 percent), and appointed financial specialists (9 percent).

In Britain, where 100 percent of responding unions develop budgets, 61 percent of them give chief responsibility for financial planning to the general secretary. An appointed finance officer takes the lead in 39 percent of U.K. unions. Other participants
Table 6

Union Official With Primary Responsibility for Developing Union Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United States</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--President</td>
<td>--President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Secretary-Treasurer</td>
<td>--Secretary-Treasurer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Executive Board</td>
<td>--Executive Board or Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Appointed Finance Specialists</td>
<td>--Appointed Finance Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Other</td>
<td>--Treasurer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Other</td>
<td>--Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=27  
n=46

Strategic Planning – Who Participates?

Table 7 provides information on which union leaders and staff participate in the strategic planning process. U.S. unions typically include the president, executive board members, and staff of the union (81 percent, 86 percent, and 86 percent, respectively). Other officers besides the president participate in strategic planning in well over half of U.S. respondent unions (68 percent). Notably, a third of respondent unions in the U.S. include local union representatives in strategic planning, while 41 percent involve convention delegates.

In the U.K., the most frequent participants in strategic planning included the general secretary (76 percent of responding unions), the executive body or its members (67 percent), and the union president (48 percent). Other participants included
Table 7

Participants in the Strategic Planning Process—U.S. and U.K.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>--President</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Other Union Officers</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Executive Board Members</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Staff</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Local Union Representatives</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Convention</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--Other</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=22  n=46

professional staff (33 percent), professional staff unions (20 percent), and the union’s congress or conference (22 percent).

To gain additional understanding of the strategic planning process, the 2010/2011 questionnaires asked respondents to briefly outline the process (i.e., what is the structure, who is involved, etc.). The responses indicate that somewhat smaller percentages of British unions bring their executive body or its members (67 percent) or congress or conference (22 percent) into their planning process than is the case with U.S. unions (86 percent of whom include executive board members and 41 percent their convention).

More generally, unions in both countries report planning processes that differ across various dimensions, including: the depth of internal study and environmental research that informs the process; the regularity of planning cycles (once per year
versus every third year versus occasional); and whether planning reaches beyond officers, executive board, and senior managers to include broader constituencies like in-house unions or local union representatives. The survey results suggest that U.K. unions more commonly base their planning on formal research efforts than do their U.S. counterparts. The findings also indicate that U.K. unions are more likely than their U.S. counterparts to conduct planning on as frequently as an annual basis.

The authors conducted interviews with administrators of U.S. unions (typically the chief administrative officer) about their planning processes, and their reports underlined the truth that “no two unions are alike.” In a smaller craft union, for example, the international president appoints a union vice-president to serve as director of strategic planning; together, the two leaders and a facilitator convene a group of local presidents to assist in formulating the union’s strategic plan. A medium-sized union of professionals conducts an annual process led by its “strategic cabinet” of leading staff, national officers, and the chairs of key internal committees; they work together in several retreats over the year.

A public employee union focuses its strategic planning activity on the development of an annual plan for organizing new members. A mixed craft/industrial union has traditionally engaged all of its leadership in the planning process, but it reports that, in recent years the process is evolving from a top-down process to “a more bottom-up approach.”
Discussion

The Implications of More Formal Human Resource Policies on Union Revitalization

The trend to formalize human resource policies reported by the respondents to our surveys in the U.S. and the UK. may be expected, according to extensive literature documenting the results of HR practices in other organizations, to enhance organizational efficiency and effectiveness. And thereby contribute to union revitalization. Also predicted by the literature is higher employee morale and commitment reflecting greater satisfaction with predictable compensation and benefits and greater equality of treatment in relation to job assignments and working conditions.

Organizations with modernized HR policies generally have lower turnover, as well as cost savings, in employee recruitment and training. Furthermore, systematic search procedures, including opening the applicant pool to candidates outside the organization (another trend in union practice reported by survey respondents), generally increases the likelihood of finding the most qualified individuals who match the skills and knowledge unions require to achieve desired outcomes.

Our survey results suggest that unions on both sides of the Atlantic now recruit job candidates from outside, as well as inside, the membership ranks, not only for headquarters specialist positions, but for service and organizing positions in field offices. To date there is no direct evidence of the relative effectiveness of insiders versus outsiders. However, two studies (Kelly and Heery, 1994, in the U.K., and Ganz, Voss, and Strauss, 2004, in the U.S.), suggest these types of candidates for union positions have different characteristics and motivation.
Outside recruitment results in a higher representation of women in staff position in British unions (Kelly and Heery, id., p. 57), a result the authors attributed to the shift from political considerations in hiring to a focus on finding the best qualified candidate. Studies in the U.S. also show that women find greater opportunities for staff appointments when they bring special talents from the outside, as compared with their chances of being selected from inside (Gray, 2000). In both countries, outsiders were reported to have higher levels of education than insiders (Kelly and Heery, id., and Ganz, et.al, p.11).

The motivation and social philosophy of union staff plays an important role in revitalization of union activities. In depth staff interviews in the U.K. and the U.S. report that union staff hired from outside the membership (usually with a background of social activism as students, or working in social movement organizations) were more likely than insiders to see the union as an instrument for attaining broad social goals. Outsiders also tend to identify with left of center political causes (Kelly and Heery, p. 58).

Experience in the U.S. suggests a similar outcome regarding open searches. Staff interviews revealed that outside recruits identified themselves as ‘social reformers’ drawn to union work as a means of attaining social justice, with a strong belief that “political work is the best way to make the world a better place.” By contrast, insiders were more likely to be motivated by a commitment to making life better for fellow workers and/or their own ethnic group or to achieve upward mobility for themselves (Ganz, et.al. p. 10). While fragmentary, these reports suggest that adding idealistic outsiders to staff makes a positive contribution to union revitalization by broadening union objectives and strengthening alliances with other social movements.
On the other hand, there may be a downside to open recruitment in those unions which have traditionally filled all or most staff positions from within. Unions in both the U.S. and U.K. depend heavily on volunteers, particularly at the local level where members serve as unpaid officers, stewards, negotiators, organizers, and political activists. Traditionally, this volunteer work offers the reward of consideration for selection as full-time staff and elected office. The narrowing of such opportunities through open staff recruitment may have a negative impact on membership willingness to actively participate and volunteer, which would run counter to revitalization. For example, at the United Steelworkers of America’s 1992 Convention, almost 50 resolutions were introduced urging an amendment of the union’s constitution that would require, for the first time, that all new hires for field staff and technical positions be hired from the ranks of the union’s membership (USWA, 1992). That initiative accounted for one-third of all proposals to amend the constitution at that convention (id., p. 197). While the proposal was defeated, supporters of the change argued that it was unfair for members who had served as active volunteers to be passed over for staff opportunities by newcomers to the union.

In addition, there are questions about the relative value of education and motivation versus experience with industry practices and worker needs as qualifications for union work. There is little direct evidence in the literature regarding differentials in performance between individuals hired from inside versus outside for traditional staff positions.

An alternate model of staff recruitment is offered by unions representing professional workers in entertainment, health care, education, and airlines. In those sectors, fulltime staff positions are mostly filled with outside “experts” because members prefer to pursue the careers for which they were trained. Further research is needed to compare the results of
alternative practices to determine which are most effective staffing practices for unions that continue to perform traditional roles in bargaining, but aim to broaden their mission to meet current challenges.

The practice of recruiting college graduates (for example, the AFL-CIO’s Organizing Institute and Union Summer) has resulted in some tensions within unions (see, Rook, 2004). In one study, a scholar examining the management practices of a large service union reported that the hiring of outside lawyers to negotiate contracts resulted in a legalistic approach not appropriate to the culture of some bargaining units (Piore, 1989, p. 9). The author also criticized the use of consultants for organizing in corporate campaigns and in political action when activist members could be trained for these positions (id., p 10). Further research is needed to assess the organizational impact of open hiring and the advantages and disadvantages of recruiting non-members to achieve the dual goal of organizational effectiveness and membership commitment.

_The Implications of More Formal Budgeting and Strategic Planning on Union Revitalization_

For any modern organization, it is necessary both to budget resources in relation to targeted goals and to engage in strategic planning to assess planned activity in light of environmental opportunities and restraints. Therefore, the increased adoption of these practices by unions in the U.S. and the U.K., as reported in our surveys, is a major step forward in revitalizing the labor movement. More efficient financial management, budgeting, and targeting of goals free resources that can be used for new union initiatives and other pressing priorities. These “freed resources” can also be used to support new organizations (in the U.S., for example, student organizations, worker centers, ethnic coalitions, cross-border initiatives, etc.) that promote innovation and revitalization of unions.
Whether these practices contribute to greater membership involvement and commitment is probably linked to the methods employed in their adoption. To the extent that members are consulted, or at least informed, about plans for the expenditure of their dues money (the budget) and the rationale for the union’s planned activities (strategic planning), membership commitment should be enhanced. Our survey did not focus on the process of adoption and implementation, but survey respondents (as noted above) suggest that many unions, both in the U.S. and the U.K., are reaching out to a broad spectrum of membership in developing their strategic plan. The extent of involvement and its impact is a subject for further research. Case studies of the administrative and financial practices of major unions would be particularly helpful.

Conclusions

Longitudinal studies over a twenty year period provide convincing evidence that national unions in the U.S. and the U.K have modernized their administrative practices with respect to personnel and financial management. Long recommended by scholars on the basis of both successful applications in other types of organizations (business, government, and non-profit) and observed deficiencies in the management of unions, modernization should strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of unions in a time of declining membership and power. Reported changes in union practice include: (1) a shift from largely or exclusively hiring full-time staff from within the membership, to open searches for the most qualified candidates, notably from other unions, social justice organizations, and recent college graduates; (2) upgrades in financial practices that move unions from accounting for expenditures after the fact to modern budgeting by function; (3) strategic planning that
involves assessing the environment and substituting a systematic and deliberate targeting of goals for ad hoc responses to events and opportunities; and (4) the recruitment of expert consultants, not only for functions traditionally outsourced (legal and IT), but for a wider range of functions which overlay the work performed by full time staff (organizational analysis, public relations, communications, corporate campaigns, organizing, and leadership training).

The implications of these administrative changes on important components of revitalization like staff and membership morale are potentially significant. For example, the widening of searches for staff vacancies gives greater weight to knowledge and skills and less to political and personal connections. In practice, the open search attracts staff with higher levels of education, as well as idealistic, younger candidates, and offers more opportunities for women in traditionally male-dominated unions. On the other hand, survey data (and other recent studies of unions) do not deal with the potential negative impact of hiring outsiders for jobs which have traditionally been filled from inside. Does this narrowing of opportunities for recognition and upward mobility through appointment to a full-time staff position undermine the incentive for members to volunteer for union activities? And what is the impact of using consultants for functions performed by staff (for which they might be trained) on staff morale? These are questions for further research.

Adoption of budgeting and strategic planning is clearly essential to union revitalization, freeing resources for alternative and progressive programs. But what is missing from research to date is insight regarding how these practices are introduced and administered. Further work in this area should also assess leadership styles--top down versus consultative management—and leaders’ openness to new policies and practices.
Modern administrative practices are tools essential to the effective functioning of modern organizations. For unions intent on revitalization, these tools are vitally important. However, because unions are membership organizations, leaders need to think carefully about how to involve staff and membership in the adaption and implementation of these tools. Further research, including in-depth case studies, will advance our understanding of the phenomenon of union modernization and its implications for revitalization.
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