

RESPONDING TO THE NOW EMPLOYEE

*the role of training and
development in assimilating
today's youth into
the work force*

A large and significant group of young people has begun to leave the campus and enter the world of work. This group may have a greater impact than any other similar group which has already entered the work force. These are the young people who have been to college and are now going to work. They currently range in age from 18 to 24 and by 1975 approximately seven to ten million of them will have entered the work force.¹ They bring with them attitudes, experiences, and a general outlook much different than that of preceding generations. Because of the distinctness of this group and difference in their attitudes, we will refer to them as NOW Employees. (NOW stands for **New Orientation to Work.**)

As many managers and trainers have already discovered, the NOW Employee presents a challenge. The young people entering the work organization are a large and vital human resource. They bring with them great sophistication, new skills, an awareness of the potential of technology and a desire for innovation. They also bring with them attitudes which may come into conflict with the pressures and demands of the work organization.

NOW FACTORS

Why is their impact so significant? There are three major factors which together underscore the importance of the NOW Employee. The first factor is size. The NOW Employee is the product of the post-war baby boom. His group is the largest to ever hit the work force during such a short span of years. While the NOW Employee constitutes only part of this post-war generation, his impact is still quite significant. The bulk of the college educated young employees will enter the work force as: professional and technical workers; managers, officials, and proprietors; or as sales workers. These occupations, comprising what can be called the professional work force, numbered between 21 and 27 million in 1970.² Thus the impact of seven to ten million new young professional workers in the next five years will

be great. This numerical impact is even more important when one realizes that a large percentage of the current professional work force is nearing the retirement age and that there is a statistical dip in the work force in the 30 to 45 age range, reflecting war deaths and the lower depression era birth rates.³

Numbers alone, however, is not the only factor. In addition to size, the NOW Generation is characterized by a high educational level. Not only have they graduated college, but many have gone on for advanced degree work. Their formal knowledge has been supplemented by their experiences. Growing up in the television age has made them greatly aware of happenings in their environment.

NOW ATTITUDES

The third factor is that of attitudes. This is the generation which brought unrest to the universities of America; it is the group which has shaken the foundations of many of the strongest institutions of the country; it has protested the Vietnam war; it has fought against racial injustice; and it has sounded the alarm over the destruction of the environment. This is a group of socially committed activists with a values system much different than that of their parents or older colleagues. These attitudes, therefore, combined with the educational level and the size of the NOW Employee group, suggest that their impact upon the work force and the work organization will be extremely significant.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of the NOW Employee is his attitudinal outlook. The values systems, attitudes, and patterns of behavior of the young employee will be the factors which will present the greatest problems and the greatest challenges to the work organization. These attitudes are, to a large extent, a product of the experiences of the NOW Generation. This group grew up in the environment of assured affluence and permissiveness that characterized the 1950's. As the NOW Employee reached the age of

DAVID NADLER
First Year Student
M.B.A. Program
Graduate School of Business
Harvard University

awareness, the great social movements of the 1960's began to enter the national scene. As he entered college the country entered a period of involvement in a frustrating war and disillusionment about resolving its racial problems. The college student of the late sixties flocked to follow the activist groups that had emerged in the first half of the decade. Students of both radical and moderate inclination found that through student power and the use of protest they could influence the university and other large systems. This, of course, constitutes just a brief reference to the history of this generation, and other more detailed accounts are available.⁴ Even so, an examination of the history of the NOW Generation reveals the sources of the attitudes of the NOW Employee. From a psychological standpoint, there were numerous factors in these experiences which lead to further patterns of behavior on the part of the student of the sixties and the employee of the seventies. These psychological factors have also been considered in greater detail.⁵

ATTITUDES TOWARD WORK

Regardless of the causes or sources of the NOW Employee's attitudes, they are a factor to be reckoned with. If supervisors, managers and trainers are to respond intelligently to the NOW Employee, it is vital that they understand what his attitudes and values systems are. The older worker need not like or accept these attitudes, he must, however, understand them if he is to deal successfully with the young.

Specifically, what are the attitudes which the NOW Employee has towards work? Whenever anyone talks about the attitudes of a group of seven to ten million people, he runs a great risk of generalization. This is even more of a problem with the NOW Employee. If there is one safe generalization, it is that the NOW Employee has a great need and a great desire to be considered as an individual, not as a type, or in a certain category, or as part of a group. Beyond this, all that can be done is to paint a

general attitudinal picture of the NOW Employee. This picture will not constitute a description of a "typical" NOW Employee, rather it will provide a framework, within which the individual young employee can be considered.

MEANINGFUL WORK

Briefly, when we ask the question, "What is the NOW Employee looking for in a job?" we find that first of all he is looking for meaningful work. To him work is more than eight hours of the day spent in earning a living — it is an integral part of his life. Therefore, his work must be of some significance. The NOW Employee is looking for a work environment which will put a minimum amount of pressure on him to change his life style and conform with the customs and traditions of the work organization. On the most obvious levels, this includes the question of appearance, length of hair, and style of dress. On a more subtle level, this brings up questions of social conscience, conformity of behavior, and acceptance of authority. The young employee is also looking for a challenge, a chance to prove himself and show he is capable of performing well. He is also looking for a job which involves contact with people, rather than one which produces paper as its end product. He is a socially committed employee, one who wants his job to be an expression of social commitment, and who may put pressure on his employer to realize an organizational social commitment. Being a human being with physical needs, he also is looking for a job which will provide enough money to live comfortably. This, however, is probably of a lower priority than some of the above factors.

What then are his needs as an employee? He has a desire to be put into a position of responsibility. He may have had considerable experience while in college dealing with large numbers of people and managing large amounts of money, and he resents being considered as though he has had no experience at all. He also tends to be more mobile and less conscious of job security. He is

more likely to become frustrated by stagnation or an atmosphere of rigidity. Also, as a result of his experiences he is more likely to desire immediate gratification — more demanding of immediate results and immediate action. The admonition to "Wait till you get older" or "Wait until you get some experience" seems like an excuse rather than an explanation.

AREAS OF CONFLICT

More specifically, what are some areas where his attitudes are likely to come into conflict with the expectations and pressures of the work organization? Most conflicts will revolve around the question of the NOW Employee's self concept, as related to his perception of the organization. A key element here is his attitude towards authority. He is not only less respectful of it, but may be openly hostile. Be it the actions of his supervisor or company rules and regulations, they are not right just because they are impositions of authority. The NOW Employee sees himself in more of a mutual relationship with the company - his supervisor must prove himself before he is worthy of respect. Rules and regulations must have a rational basis to be obeyed — and frequently the NOW Employee may demand a role in making those rules.

The NOW Employee also sees himself in the role of change agent. He has performed in this role in relation to the university and even in regards to society as a whole. He feels change is good and stagnation is evil. He is liable to rush headlong into attempting change with little understanding of how change is effected in large organizations. He has, however, a wealth of experience in using pressure to bring about change. He is an activist and will push for change in an activist manner.

INFLUENCE, NOT CONTROL

He also sees himself as having a right to a say over the conditions of his existence. This idealistic vision of participatory democracy extends to the work environment, and as an employee, he de-

sires to be able to influence the decision-makers. (Influence, not control — the two are often confused.)

One of the greatest fears of the NOW Employee is that he will be co-opted. To his parents he says, "I don't want to become like you." He holds on to his identity strongly as it is an important factor which keeps him from being "sucked up" by the organization. He may also seek out other young employees in the organization and form groups of a formal or informal nature to serve as outlets for venting frustrations, reinforcements of his identity, and a base for applying pressure to the organization.

This then, is a picture of the NOW Employee in the most general of terms. Again, it is important to remember that each person is an individual and needs to be considered in that light. This picture, however, can help the older person begin to understand the NOW Employee.

THE TRAINING RESPONSE

What, then, is going to be the impact of the NOW Employee as he begins to enter the work organization? Clearly he offers challenges to the supervisors and managers. They will have to learn about the NOW Employee; they must attempt to understand him; and they must determine what their response is going to be to him. Beyond that there are greater implications for the whole organization.

This is where the whole question of training and development comes into the picture. It is through the efforts of those in the training role that these potential areas of human conflict may be resolved. Through training and development, the NOW Employee can be utilized as a valuable human resource.

Accepting the premise that training can play a vital part in the organization's reaction to the NOW Employee phenomenon, what are the specific challenges to trainers? Observations in the work environment in addition to the responses of over a hundred trainers in a workshop on the NOW Employee⁶ seem to

indicate five major areas of possible training and development response:

1. *Supervisors of NOW Employees* — The most obvious need is to train the supervisors of NOW Employees. They need to understand something about the student movement and the values of young people. They need to be aware of the possible patterns of behavior that they will encounter. More importantly, the supervisor needs to examine his own supervisory practices and determine how he is going to motivate, work with and respond to the young subordinates. Perhaps the greatest problem is to get the supervisor to understand the NOW Employee from an objective viewpoint. Too often the supervisor tends to make value judgments and compare the NOW Employee's behavior against his own standards and values. The supervisor needs to learn that the NOW employee group will be coming on the scene, whether he likes it or not. He must become aware that his actions, to a large part, will determine whether the NOW Employee becomes a productive member of the organization, or a source of discontent.

2. *Management of Organizations* — Another, less obvious training and development need concerns the middle and upper management of organizations experiencing an influx of NOW Employees. These people also have to be made aware of the problems and challenges presented by the NOW Employee. They have to consider not only the problems of supervision, but the implications for management. How will management react when young employees come to them with a petition or stage a sit-in in the executive offices? How ready is management to consider the ideas and suggestions of the young employees and how will it make the NOW Employee aware of the fact that management is listening to him. Top managers also need a basic understanding of the nature of the youth phenomenon. It is just as important for them to develop an objective point of perspective as it is for the first-line supervisors.

3. *Co-Employees* — A group which has rarely been considered is that of the older co-workers of the NOW Employee. Other employees will not manage or supervise NOW Employees, but will still come into contact with them and may frequently work with them. How will these employees react to the "hairy beasts" among them? The trainer needs to look at this group and determine if they are in need of understanding and a response to the NOW Employee.

4. *The NOW Employee* — Strangely enough, one training need will be for the NOW Employee himself. It is a mistake to think of the response to the youth phenomenon as a one-sided question. Not only will the organization need to be trained to respond to the NOW Employee, but the NOW Employee will need to be trained to respond to the organization.

As the NOW Employee enters the organization, he is sophisticated, yet naive. While he has had experiences of all kinds, gained a great deal of knowledge, and is sophisticated in his awareness of his physical and social environment, he is often quite naive when it comes to understanding the processes of change within an organization. Our schools do not really teach young people how to work with a social organization. The subtleties of change as a process have never been explained to the NOW Employee and indeed, many older employees in positions of responsibility still do not understand it.

The need exists, therefore, for something beyond a simple orientation program for the new NOW Employee. Some managers have suggested it might be worthwhile to train NOW Employees as they enter the job — to make them aware of how an organization works and is worked with. Just as the other employees had to formulate a response, so does the NOW Employee. He needs to give some thought as to how he will respond to the pressures and demands of the work organization. He needs to develop his own philosophy of compro-

mise in order to guide his own pattern of behavior. This can be accomplished through training and development, and can head off more violent confrontations.

5. Organizational Development Implications — Beyond the training of groups of employees, there is the impact of the NOW Employee upon the organization itself. As an activist and in his self-conceived role as a change agent, the NOW Employee is likely to raise questions about how things are done, how problems are solved, how decisions are made and how policy is determined. These questions may also be a prelude to suggestions or innovations — new ways of solving problems and making decisions. The NOW Employee can inject new ideas into the organization. Whether the organization benefits from this or not depends upon its readiness to look at itself and realize that it can be improved. The trainer, in his role as internal consultant, developer of the organization, and change agent, can play an important role in facilitating the process by which the NOW Employee contributes to the development of the organization. How this is done is to a large extent determined by the conditions which exist within each individual organization.

These five areas therefore present the trainer with a great challenge and great possibilities. His action or inaction can be crucial to the outcome of the organization's confrontation of the youth phenomenon.

OTHER YOUNG EMPLOYEES

While the NOW Employee is an important factor in the work force, there is another huge group of young people which also is having a great numerical impact on the work force, though in other sectors. These are the non-college young people. They come from a somewhat different environment and enter the work organization with a very different perspective. Part of the problem is that there has been very little research regarding this group. There are a num-

ber of indications, however, that this group of young people (with the exception of those from lower-income backgrounds) share *some* of the same attitudes as the NOW Employee.⁷ This is a very qualified statement and only indicates the need for further inquiry and research. The implications for the employer and trainer are great indeed.

COURSES OF ACTION

Assuming that the work organization is beginning to experience the influx of NOW Employees and that the trainer recognizes that the above five areas are potential areas of training activity, what is a possible course of action for the trainer? One alternative is as follows:

1. *Identify the area of impact.* The first step is to identify the part of the organization where the NOW Employee is going to have the most immediate impact. This also implies an examination of at what level (vertically) the impact will be.

2. *Determine the priority for training.* After identifying the area of impact, it is important to determine what are the priorities in terms of the training effort. Basically, which one of the five areas listed above constitutes the most important and immediate need for the particular organization. This process of determining the priority of needs means that the trainer will have to get a good idea of the conditions within the organization and the relative receptiveness to change that exists in different areas and at different levels.

3. *Identify resources.* The next step is to identify resources which will aid in training. Are people available who have done research or worked with other organizations facing this same situation? Are training programs available that might respond to the need identified? What books, articles or audio-visual aids might be of value? Unfortunately, there is not a great abundance of such resources at the present time; however, more are being developed and will probably be available within the next year. Beyond these initial steps, the trainer

needs to design his training programs, much as he would design any training program.

SUMMARY

The influx of the NOW Employee into the world of work may turn out to be one of the most significant events of this decade. Whether this even is one worthy of rejoicing or lamenting depends upon the response which is made. We have taken a brief look at the origins, attitudes and behavior of the NOW Employee; we have also considered the implications and possible responses of training. This, however, should only be the beginning of the process — a process which hopefully will result in the development and utilization of one of the nation's most valuable human resources.

REFERENCES

1. U.S. Department of Labor, *Manpower Report of the President — March 1970*, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970, p. 249.
2. *Ibid.* p. 302.
3. *Ibid.* p. 217.
4. For a more detailed account of the history of the NOW Generation see David Nadler, *The NOW Employee*, Gulf Publishing, in press.
5. For an excellent examination of the psychological aspects of student activism, see, Charles M. Plummer, "The Time Barrier, Psychological Frontier of Student Activism," *Air University Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 2, Jan.-Feb. 1970, pp. 66-75.
6. "Responding to the Youth Phenomenon — a Workshop for Trainers," Session No. 44 and 44A, American Society For Training and Development, National Conference, Anaheim, Cal., May 1970. This workshop gave more than 150 trainers a confrontation with the NOW Employee and then gave them a chance to respond. The areas of training need are partially a result of this response.
7. These indications have been observed by the author in his work with the U.S. Post Office Department, in particular while working with the New Haven Post Office, as part of the staff of a Human Factors Workshop, sponsored by the Postal Service Management Institute, June, 1970.