

The following article is the first in a series of “management” articles for the *Wastewatcher*. The information is from the Supervisory Management in the Water/Wastewater Field correspondence course offered by Michigan State University. The website to preview the course and/or sign up is www.vu.msu.edu/preview/smwwf. The Program Coordinator is Virgil Langworthy.

Management’s Changing Role in the PC Age

Technology has invaded the workplace. That statement shouldn’t surprise anyone who had worked in a public utility environment in the last ten years. The advent of technology has altered even the simplest day-to-day operations and consequently, office dynamics are very different from what they were a few short years ago. Management attitudes must also evolve to reflect these changing needs.

The greatest challenge lies in learning to take full advantage of the benefits technology has to offer. Innovative concepts of organization and decision making can be invaluable in the development and implementation of policies and procedures.

One of the key characteristics of the new technology is that it is not static. Revolutionary advances occur quickly and often with little or no warning. As a result, product lives are being drastically shortened. It’s no longer feasible to spend years in development on goods that may be outdated before they reach the market. Similarly, unique purification and treatment processes may undergo revision, if not obsolescence, soon after they have been placed in operation.

To achieve the rapid turnaround required, it becomes necessary to rethink organizational structure. The hierarchical concept of organization is undergoing change because there isn’t time for each decision to make its way up and down the chain of command. It’s much more effective to consider the entire organization as a unified network with each element contributing to the whole.

Internal control over production matters should be given over to those directly involved in the activity. Information must be allowed to flow freely and quickly to those who need it the most and can respond the quickest. End-users are more capable of decision-making now than ever before. They are better informed, having access to information that would never have been available prior to the computer age, and are becoming less dependent on middle management for control.

Managers continue to be responsible for providing motivation. They must create an atmosphere that provides employees with a clear sense of the utility’s direction yet allows them to take initiative in their own positions. Properly trained and motivated employees can make many of the decisions needed to keep the work delegated to them flowing smoothly and efficiently, turning the smaller segments of the organization into valuable assets.

More importantly, technology allows people to redefine their place within the organization. Given a clear understanding of the company's goals and overall objectives, employees begin to assume a more active role within the system. They now feel a greater sense of belonging, of importance, and begin looking for a new ways to contribute as they learn more of how the system works as a whole.

Training is also an essential part of the new management philosophy. For all the advances made in hardware and software, computer literacy remains a problem. It is much more than a need to learn typing skills or acquire software knowledge. The ability to successfully interact with the computer is often a matter of a person's attitude.

The introduction of computer systems into the workplace frequently raises concerns of competency and job security among the workers. Being exposed to computers for the first time, many people fear that they may not be able to learn to use them quickly enough. Education programs geared toward raising computer literacy can help ease the adjustment.

Once employees have become acclimated to the new technology, it becomes an accepted part of the environment – as familiar as the coffee maker. The computer then becomes a valuable outlet for communication with management. Issues and concerns that would not be communicated more directly are easily expressed through the impersonal computer screen, and managers can respond quickly.

Implementation of a new system becomes another major issue. While no system is perfect, no one wants to go to the trouble and expense of designing only to find out later that it is not appropriate for use in their organization.

The participation of end-users, the employees, can be instrumental in creating an effective computer system design. The most effective system is one that is designed with a firm grasp of the user's needs. Frequently, employees being more familiar with day-to-day operations can not only offer input on the design but they may also suggest additional ways in which it may be used to improve productivity.

Technology has changed nearly every aspect of office operations yet to realize the full benefits it has to offer, managerial attitudes have to change as well. There must be recognition of the increased importance of the employees at the production end, and a realization that the "top down" approach to management is yielding to one which views the organization as a unified network.

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