

## **XII. Behind the Scenes: Current Research on Unions as Organizations**

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# **Adapting Internal Administrative Practices of American Unions to External Challenges: A Longitudinal Study**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports selected preliminary results from the third wave of a longitudinal study of the administrative practices of U.S.-based national and international unions. Surveys conducted in 1990, 2000, and 2010 gathered information on the financial, strategic planning, and organizational practices of American unions. The results of the 2010 survey regarding hiring and human resource practices are reported here. These results are also compared with the findings of the two earlier studies. The findings reaffirm the emergence of union staff work as a “profession,” something first identified in our 2000 study. The 2010 survey also found a clear continuation of the trend toward greater formalization and standardization of human resource policies found in previous surveys.

Since their inception, American unions have fought for the standardization and formalization of workplace personnel practices and policies. During the past century, union-negotiated contracts established the benchmarks for formal human resource policies that eventually became commonplace throughout American businesses, government, and nonprofit organizations (Freeman and Medoff 1984).

Labor organizations are also employers. Like all organizations, they depend on employees to help them pursue their mission and achieve their goals. The issue of how unions create, organize, and administer their workforce is just as important in evaluating their effectiveness as it is in evaluating businesses, governments, and nonprofits (Weil 1994). How do American unions recruit and hire a workforce that will help them pursue their organizational objectives? Do they engage in the standardization and formalization of workplace personnel practices and policies they advocate for other employers? Have they practiced what they have preached in their role as employers?

These questions have received relatively little attention from scholars, falling within the “black box” of union internal administrative practices that tends to elude outside observers (Jarley, Fiorito, and Delaney

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1998). Commentators on this subject have characterized union personnel decisions as politically driven, as contrasted with the standard for business and government (Belfer 1952). Harvard Professors Derek Bok and John Dunlop described the staff selection process in unions as limited to internal candidates and deplored this constraint on the search for the best-qualified personnel (Bok and Dunlop 1970:186). They found the union tradition of protecting workers against discharge to be a barrier to disciplinary action of its own employees, with union staff members fired only in the most serious cases of incompetence or abuse (179–80). A national union survey reported that relatively few unions had written job descriptions or provided training programs and orientation for staff (Delaney, Fiorito, and Jarley 1991).

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s, significant changes began to appear in both the hiring and human resource practices of unions. As unions faced more and more complex challenges in all of the arenas in which they operated—economic, financial, political, legal, and organizational—the types of skills, knowledge, and experience union staff required in order to address these challenges also was changing. The traditional “up from the ranks” approach to developing staff appeared less and less able to, by itself, meet the needs of labor organizations. Unions were gradually forced to look outside their own membership to find professionals to assist with the work of the union.

At the same time, there appeared to be an emerging “profession” made up of people who spent their careers in professional capacities with unions. These union professionals often were hired from outside the labor movement and in many cases moved across unions in the course of their careers.

In addition, unions themselves began to take what might be characterized as a more professional approach to managing their workforce. The greater investment unions were making in recruiting and hiring union staff, the growth in the number of full-time employees working for American unions (Clark 1992), and the emergence of staff unions negotiating contracts specifying rates of pay and conditions of employment (Clark 1989) all highlighted the need for systematic human resource policies in labor organizations. John Dunlop, comparing labor unions with other major institutions in American society, stressed the central importance of human resource management, pointing out that all organizations “depend crucially on the performance of their people” (Dunlop 1990:11).

In response to gaps in the literature, two of the authors of this paper surveyed national unions in 1990 and again in 2000 with respect to their administrative practices, including staff selection criteria and other human resource policies (Clark and Gray 1993, 2008). The results of these surveys demonstrated a shift from the informal practices reported by early observers toward formal and standardized human resources policies that are in widespread use by other organizations. The authors viewed this change as a response to environmental pressures (i.e., shrinking resources, growing employer opposition to unions, and government regulation). Further pressure to update human resource policies came from the unionization of staff.

In an effort to ascertain the current state of human resource practices and policies, the authors conducted a third iteration of the union administrative practices survey in 2010. This paper reports selected preliminary results from this third wave of a longitudinal study of the administrative practices of U.S.-based national and international unions. Surveys conducted in 1990, 2000, and 2010 gathered information on the financial, strategic planning, and organizational policies and practices of American unions. The results of the 2010 survey regarding hiring and human resource policies and practices are reported here. These results are also compared with the findings of the two earlier studies conducted in 1990 and 2000 to provide insight into how these practices have changed in recent years.

## **Data Collection**

All three of the surveys (1990, 2000, and 2010) used a similar methodology. In 1990, questionnaires were mailed to 110 U.S.-based national and international unions. Forty-eight completed questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 44%. In 2000, similar questionnaires were sent to 88 of the unions surveyed in 1990; 46 unions completed and returned questionnaires for a response rate of 52%. In 2010, a questionnaire containing most of the items included in the 1990 and 2000 surveys, as well as several additional items, was sent to 62 national unions. Thirty-two unions completed the survey, for a response rate of 52%.

Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of the samples for each of the surveys in terms of sector and membership.

TABLE 1  
Union Respondents by Sector, 1990, 2000, 2010

	1990	2000	2010
Industrial/Manufacturing	12	7	6
Building Trades	4	9	5
Transportation	8	9	6
Office/Professional	7	2	0
Public Sector/Government	8	8	9
Service	7	3	0
Entertainment/Sports	2	8	5
Sector Not Reported	—	—	1
Total	48	46	32

TABLE 2  
Union Respondents by Membership Size, 1990, 2000, 2010

	1990	2000	2010
More than 750,000	4	6	4
750,000–500,000	4	5	3
499,999–250,000	4	3	3
249,999–100,000	9	9	8
99,999–50,000	6	4	5
Less than 50,000	21	19	9
Total	48	46	32

## Results

As Table 3 indicates, the results of our latest survey confirm that the majority of American unions have moved away from the traditional “hire from within the ranks” criterion most had used for decades. In 2010, only 22% of respondent unions indicated that prior membership in the hiring union was a requirement for appointment to the national staff. This is considerably less than the 38% that required membership for staff appointments in 1990. And only 13% of unions responding to the survey required candidates for national staff positions to have been previously elected or appointed to union office at some level. On the other hand, 88% of respondent unions said they had, on occasion, hired professional headquarters staff who had no previous union experience whatsoever, and 50% said they hired field staff without such experience.

In terms of hiring practices, the data suggest that 50% of unions responding to the survey hired national staff on the basis of “specific degrees or training.” In addition to specific position-related qualifications, 84% of respondents indicated that a college degree was either “very or somewhat important” in hiring decisions for headquarters staff (this fell to 47% for field staff positions) (Table 4).

And most unions saw experience working with unions as important. Eighty-four percent of respondents indicated that they hired headquarters staff who had previously worked for other unions, and 72% said they had hired field staff who had previous employment experience with other labor organizations (Table 3).

TABLE 3  
Union Hiring Practices, 1990, 2000, 2010

Percentage of respondents whose union has:	1990	2000	2010
Current membership as a qualification for appointment to the headquarters staff of your union	38%	16%	22%
Prior election or appointment to union office at some level as a qualification for appointment to national staff	2%	4%	13%
Hired HQ staff who have no previous experience working for a union	n.a.	80%	88%
Hired field staff who have no previous experience working for a union	n.a.	56%	50%
Specific degrees or training as a qualification for appointment to national staff	n.a.	40%	50%
Hired headquarters staff who have previously worked for other unions	83%	76%	84%
Hired field staff who have previously worked for other unions	55%	66%	72%
	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 32

TABLE 4  
Union Hiring Considerations, 2000 and 2010

In hiring decisions, how important are the following?	2000	2010
	Very or somewhat important	Very or somewhat important
College degree for headquarters staff	80%	84%
College degree for field staff	58%	47%
	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 32

In terms of the formalization of human resource policies, one trend seems apparent. As indicated in Table 5, the percentage of responding unions having formal, written personnel policies for headquarters or field staff increased significantly between 1990 and 2010. Generally, the increase in the percentage of unions having formal policies was greater between 1990 and 2000 than it was from 2000 to 2010, but overall, 10 of 14 categories for headquarters and field staff saw double-digit increases over the 20 years between the first and the most recent surveys.

An examination of the survey results concerning human resource policies (Table 5) indicates that unions were most likely to have written policies for headquarters and field staff in five areas: sexual harassment, discipline and discharge, ethics, equal opportunity/affirmative action, and hiring.

TABLE 5  
Respondent Unions with Written Personnel Policies, 1990, 2000, 2010

	<u>Headquarters Professional Staff</u>			<u>Field Professional Staff</u>		
	1990	2000	2010	1990	2000	2010
Equal Opportunity/ Affirmative Action	46%	59%	59%	42%	54%	56%
Discipline and Discharge	50%	65%	78%	42%	60%	75%
Hiring	42%	48%	63%	40%	41%	56%
Performance Appraisal	33%	50%	41%	25%	41%	34%
Promotion	31%	35%	44%	27%	33%	41%
Salary Review	35%	37%	38%	35%	37%	38%
Training	29%	46%	47%	29%	46%	47%
Ethics	n.a.	n.a.	72%	n.a.	n.a.	72%
Sexual Harassment	n.a.	n.a.	81%	n.a.	n.a.	78%
Workplace Privacy	n.a.	n.a.	50%	n.a.	n.a.	50%
	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 32	<i>n</i> = 48	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 32

## Discussion

Our 2000 study found that over the decade of the 1990s, unions increasingly hired headquarters staff from outside the ranks of their union (Clark and Gray 2008). Interviews with union leaders suggested that this departure from past practice was related to changing union priorities and the increasingly complex challenges unions faced. Both of these factors compelled a significant percentage of unions to look for people with different skills when hiring staff.

Despite a 6% increase between 2000 and 2010 in the percentage of respondent unions that required current membership as a qualification for appointment to the headquarters staff, the latest survey indicates that only slightly more than one in five unions had such a requirement. This is consistent with the fact that, since the mid-1990s, most unions in the American labor movement have increasingly placed a greater emphasis on organizing and political action and devoted fewer resources to servicing activities. This change in emphasis, combined with the increasing complexity of the challenges unions face, has led to a change in the skills, knowledge, and experience many unions require of union staff.

The changing priorities of unions also explain the relatively low percentage of labor organizations that require prior election or appointment to union office as a qualification for employment as a staff member (13%). When unions placed a higher priority on servicing their membership (assisting local unions with contract negotiations, resolving grievances, presenting arbitration cases, etc.), the institutional knowledge and nuts and bolts bargaining, political, and leadership skills gained as a local union officer or activist were necessary and valuable skills for anyone being considered for a staff position. While these qualities remain useful for certain staff roles, they may not be essential for conducting organizing drives or working in political campaigns. In fact, many staff positions today require significantly greater technical skills not acquired through experience as a local union officer (skills involving data assessment, communications, financial and economic analysis, etc.).

Also, in the past it was not unusual for internal political considerations to play a significant role in staff appointments. While this likely remains a factor in some hiring decisions, it does not appear to be as important a consideration in today's unions as it was in the past. The fact that our respondent unions reported that they occasionally hire headquarters staff (88%) and field staff (50%) with no previous union experience is further evidence that unions view skills acquired outside of the labor movement to be of value.

Our 2010 survey also generated insight into the criteria unions are now using to hire professional staff. As indicated earlier, 50% of unions reported that they take "specific degrees or training" into

consideration when hiring national staff. Eighty-four percent saw a college degree as a “very or somewhat important” factor in hiring headquarters staff. This, again, suggests that unions are making hiring decisions based on the type of work on which they are focusing and the challenges they face. It also suggests that they view position-specific attributes that come with higher education as important in doing this work and addressing these challenges.

Given the percentage of unions that indicated they hired headquarters and field staff who had previously worked for another union (84% and 72% respectively), it is apparent that, while most unions do not hire primarily from within their own membership, they do see union experience as an asset when hiring staff. These findings not only suggest that unions are consciously looking for individuals with relevant experience, they also support the idea of a union “profession” in which professionals develop skills, expertise, and knowledge coveted by numerous unions and move from one union to another during their career. And the fact that the percentage of unions making these kind of hires has gone up slightly (1%) for headquarters staff positions, and significantly (17%) for field staff openings, is further evidence that working on the staff of national unions is now a viable profession.

One of the clearest findings that emerge across the 20 years over which the three surveys were conducted is that there has been a largely steady and significant increase in the percentage of unions with written policies in a range of human resource areas. The trend toward greater formalization and standardization is consistent with other changes seen in the area of union human resources practices during this period.

As indicated earlier, the 2010 survey found that unions were most likely to have a written policy for headquarters and field staff in five areas: sexual harassment, discipline and discharge, ethics, equal opportunity/affirmative action, and hiring. One explanation for the relatively high rate at which unions have adopted policies in these areas, as opposed to areas for which policies have not been as readily adopted, is that these areas are regulated, to one degree or another, by law. It is reasonable to assume that unions want to be in compliance with laws designed to protect employees in the workplace from discrimination and harassment.

In the case of ethics, the Labor–Management Reporting and Disclosure Act (LMRDA) sets high standards for union officials. As a result, unions are closely monitored by the Department of Labor. It is in the best interests of unions to avoid any appearance of unethical or illegal activity that might reflect negatively on the organization.

By contrast, in the 2010 iteration of the survey, union respondents were least likely to have written rules on promotion (44%), performance appraisal (41%), and salary review (38%). Of all the policies listed in Table 5, these have the greatest traditional “managerial content,” and unions might therefore have less experience, or be less comfortable, with these issues. In the case of promotion and salary review, we do see a steady increase over 20 years in the percentage of union respondents adopting these policies, although progress is slower than for most other issues. As indicated in Table 5, less progress has been made on the issue of performance appraisal. Of the ten topics listed, it is the only one not showing a clear increase in adoption between 1990 and 2010.

The establishment of more formalized and standardized human resource policies by unions makes sense for a number of reasons. As pointed out earlier in this paper, unions have long fought to protect their members from arbitrary and unfair practices by convincing employers to create clear, consistent, and fair policies that are applicable to all employees. Not having such policies and protections in place for their own employees would be inconsistent with these principles.

Another factor compelling unions to establish formal policies and practices is the fact that many of their employees have chosen to organize their own unions (i.e., unions of professional union employees) (Clark 1989). The process of negotiating labor agreements with the unions representing their employees inevitably leads to the greater formalization and standardization of human resource policies.

Lastly, as unions begin to increasingly hire more employees outside their own membership ranks, they must compete for those employees in the external labor market. This may require them to compete with non-profit organizations, government agencies, other unions, and, in some cases, private employers. Having formal, concrete human resource policies helps unions attract the staff they need.

## Conclusion

The ten-year period between our 1990 and 2000 surveys was period of change for union hiring and human resource policies and practices. In the area of hiring, unions appeared to move away from making current membership a qualification for appointment to their headquarters staff, suggesting that unions were increasingly recruiting staff from outside their membership ranks. Consistent with this finding, the data also indicated that the percentage of unions hiring field staff who previously worked for another union increased. And, while the number of unions hiring headquarters staff who worked for another union fell slightly, a strong majority of unions (76%) engaged in this practice.

The 2010 survey found that the changes made in the 1990s largely remained in place, and, in some cases accelerated. While the percentage of respondent unions who made current membership in the hiring union a qualification for appointment to the headquarters staff increased by a small amount, the vast majority of unions (78%) did not engage in this practice. In addition, the percentage of unions that hired staff who worked for other labor organizations increased during this ten-year period for both headquarters and field positions, and the number of unions that hired headquarters staff with no previous union experience increased to 88% (although the percentage who did so for field positions fell slightly, to 50%).

These later results support our 2000 finding that professional union work is increasingly done by college-educated people, some of whom have no prior union experience. It also confirms that a high percentage of unions hire staff who previously worked for another union. Both of these factors reaffirm the emergence of union staff work as a “profession,” something we first identified on the basis of our 2000 study.

The 2010 survey also found a clear continuation of a trend involving union human resource practices first found in the 2000 survey. In all but two areas, the percentage of unions employing written human resource policies increased for the second decade in a row for both headquarters and field staff. This movement toward greater formalization and standardization of human resource policies is consistent with the trend toward more-professional hiring practices noted earlier.

As a whole, our 20 year longitudinal study has identified a number of significant changes in union hiring and human resource policies and practices. These changes are examples of the manner in which unions are evolving to meet the challenges they face at the end of the 20th, and the beginning of the 21st, century. Undoubtedly, unions will need to continue to adapt in these areas if they are to successfully confront the ongoing challenges of the decades ahead.

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