Personnel Research and General Electric

In the 1950s, General Electric developed a personnel research department. A number of talented psychologists worked here and generated influential theories and methods that helped spur the growth of I-O psychology. The personnel research group at GE was trained to be enterprising when generating ideas and empowered to put these ideas to action in many of the General Electric businesses.

The development of the personnel research function at GE can be directly attributed to the efforts of Herbert Meyer (1917–2006). Meyer was educated at the University of Michigan through the GI Bill, and came to work at General Electric by way of a contract with the Psychological Corporation. During his early years with GE, Meyer performed a needs analysis for Employee Relations, and also designed a well-received management development program for senior level managers. In so doing, Meyer quickly became well-respected at GE. Meyer’s bosses frequently tried to find him a permanent specialty in one area such as performance appraisal or training; Meyer declined, not wanting to be narrowed. Meyer thought GE should have a personnel research function, reasoning that many other organizations (IBM, GM, and DuPont) already had them. Impressed by this idea, Meyer’s superior (according to Meyer’s autobiographical sketch, n.d.) “asked me to prepare a job description to explicate what I had in mind. I, therefore, was fortunate to be able to describe what I thought was an ideal job for an industrial psychologist.” Meyer not only picked his own job, he developed a personnel research function at GE, known initially as the Behavioral Research Service, and soon hired several doctoral-level psychologists. Along with this, there was an advisory board for this group, in-
cluding eventual Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon and famed social psychologist Leon Festinger. Meyer sought to establish a tradition of freedom and autonomy throughout his staff. Notably, General Electric at this time had a large number of businesses (aircraft in Cincinnati, OH; televisions in Syracuse, NY; home appliances in Louisville, KY; elsewhere locomotives and light bulbs), which would present many opportunities for enterprising young social scientists to try things out.

Although many psychologists worked for GE over time, two examples of influential psychologists long associated with GE (in addition to Meyer) were J. Stacy Adams (1925–1984) and Melvin Sorcher. Adams, a social psychologist, was working at Stanford when a GE representative seduced him to come to New York, with the promise of a big payday (J. Wall, personal communication, February 6th, 2014). It was while Adams was working at GE that he began developing equity theory. Adams sent a letter to friend (and member of GE’s advisory board) Leon Festinger, where he explained, “I have developed some ideas and research plans over the past months that, to me at least, are quite exciting. I began with some notions variously referred to as ‘distributive justice,’ ‘status congruence,’ etc… I organized those in dissonance theory terms… Each member of the dyad… has certain inputs… and certain outcomes… These inputs and outcomes are evaluated by S[subject] in relation to the other S[s]’ inputs and outcomes.” Adams would later publish two definitive journal articles on equity theory while at General Electric (Adams, 1963, 1965), before leaving for an academic appointment at University of North Carolina.

Melvin Sorcher joined GE’s Behavioral Research Service in 1965. Sorcher eventually ascended to a leadership position within GE (Herbert Meyer left GE to start the I-O Psychology program at the University of South Florida in the Fall of 1973), and adopted the same principle of allowing psychologists in his group the freedom to develop and research their own ideas, as long as they had company-wide significance. Personally, Sorcher became interested in applying behavioral modeling practices. He approached Syracuse psychologist Arnold Goldstein, and together they created a methodology for applying behavioral role modeling to supervisor training (M. Sorcher, personal communication, December 11, 2013). This behavioral modeling technique was utilized to train GE’s supervisors; Sorcher and Goldstein worked to popularize their technique in a series of books and journal articles (Goldstein & Sorcher, 1973, 1974; Sorcher & Goldstein, 1972).

The GE group was an attractive place for new I-O psychology PhDs. Wayne State
PhD Robert Burnaska was recruited to join GE by Herbert Meyer himself (R. Burnaska, personal communication, November 8, 2013). Burnaska appreciated the climate of freedom and autonomy Meyer had established there. Burnaska found that there were many opportunities to pilot ideas in one or more of General Electric’s many businesses, and then “if it worked well, we would spread it.” Burnaska made a career out of General Electric, working on varied projects including assessment centers, self-managed teams, behavioral modeling, and surveys, and often published his work in prominent journals (Burnaska, 1976; Burnaska & Hollmann, 1974).

General Electric also fostered the research of other notable social scientists (some of whom weren’t GE employees). For example, Schachter, Willerman, Festinger, and Hyman conducted a fascinating series of studies at GE’s Home Laundry Department and the Owensboro Tube Plant, which were eventually published in *Journal of Applied Psychology*. The stated purpose of these studies was to determine how hostile and irritated states of mind would impact performance. Thus, the experimental group of GE employees in these studies were intentionally frustrated, for example by being insulted or asked to wear cumbersome clothing, all while they were attempting to do their job. The experimenters were committed to frustrating their employees, in fact, “at least one annoying incident occurred on 11 of the 15 working days” (Schachter, Festinger, Willerman, & Hyman, 1961; p. 203). Perhaps not surprisingly, the managers at GE soured on experimental studies after this one (P. Spector, personal communication. January 30, 2013). However, few other organizations would have allowed a disruptive (yet potentially illuminating) study such as this in the first place.

In the mid-1970s, a change in leadership as well as a recession prompted a change in the climate for the personnel research folks. This motivated many of the principle I-O people to leave. However, for the better part of a quarter-century, the personnel research function at GE had been a breeding ground for the development of innovative methods and theories in applied psychology.

References


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