

INFORMATION SYSTEMS

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Civil Grand Jury received two formal complaints concerning the management of the Information Systems Division of the General Services Department. Information Systems is the division of the county government that supplies computer hardware and software services to the various departments of the county. One issue raised in the complaints was an excessively high turnover rate for this particular division.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury interviewed seven staff members, chosen at random, who are currently employed in Information Systems (IS). In addition, the Grand Jury interviewed three former employees from the IS division, the Director of Personnel Lori Walsh, the manager of IS, the Director of General Services Dennis Cassella, who supervises the IS manager, and the county administrative officer (CAO) David Brennan. Three county department clients of the IS division also gave testimony. Further, the Grand Jury studied personnel records of past and present division employees and management personnel. Management correspondence and the county Personnel Code were also studied.

FINDINGS

1. Over the last two years, nine full-time and six temporary people were hired as replacements into a division with an authorization of 17 full-time employees. Of the 17, three are management or supervisory. Therefore, the turnover consisted of more than the total employee staff of the division over the two-year period. As of November 17, 1997, seven of the twelve current non-supervisory employees on board were hired after October 20, 1996.
2. According to personnel records, none of the people who left IS employment in the past two years ever filed a formal grievance.
3. Several of the female employees interviewed felt there was evidence of gender bias. A review of the past five-year history conducted by the Personnel Department showed no obvious preference of males over females with regard to promotion. In exit interviews conducted by personnel, female employees were in general agreement that subtle forms of discrimination were occurring. Of the nine full-time employees hired in the past two years, only one was female. Much of the anxiety described by female employees is covered in a memo from the director of personnel to the CAO, dated September 3, 1997, and titled "Staff Turnover." The Grand Jury found in interviews of employees that both male and female employees felt condescending and insulting remarks constituting verbal abuse were often directed at them by supervisors.
4. "Concerns With Management" meetings were initiated early in 1997 lasted through about 10 or 12 sessions and terminated. No representative of the Personnel Department was at any of the meetings

although the director of personnel was aware the meetings were being held. Personnel was not invited to the meetings because the director of general services considered the meetings an internal matter.

5. Most individuals who left IS did get jobs with higher pay. The three ex-employees interviewed were unanimous in agreement that the primary cause for leaving was not money but, rather, problems with management. They generally are working out of the county now and have long commutes. The Personnel Department memo of September 3, cited above, and management level interviews by the Grand Jury, support the finding that pay was not the primary cause of turnover in staff.

6. An analysis by the director of personnel of the turnover problem was summarized in another memo to the CAO dated August 21, 1997, titled "Staff Turnover in Information Systems." This memo addresses the issue as to whether the pay for computer service technicians offered by Nevada County is competitive. Quoting from that memo: "The Computer Service Techs seems (sic) to generate applicants from a variety of sources (private and public sector). Our salary seems competitive and we tend to attract qualified individuals. The funds to provide a targeted, expansive marketing strategy in our advertisements would help, of course. I would encourage (the division manager) in the next recruitment, to beef up the specs to identify the job skills he needs - but even then I don't think salary will be an issue." When the position of computer service technician 1 was advertised in August of 1996, 54 applications were received. Another announcement for CST III produced 11 applicants, and an announcement for programmer analyst III produced 14 applicants.

7. Three county department clients described their interaction with IS. Two of the three departments have hired their own programmers to supply most of their needs and as such are virtually independent of IS. The third department does utilize some services of IS, but finds the service to be inadequate. One client believes the cost of IS services to be high when compared to services available from the private sector and contracts out for some services.

8. The director of general services decided to send the manager of IS to two one-day management classes in September 1997. Personnel has no knowledge of whether or not this happened. The manager has attended one of the classes but no record of his attendance was found in the manager's personnel file.

9. Some of the current staff still find fault with the management of the division, while at the same time describing conditions as better because many of those employees who were dissatisfied have left, diminishing the amount of management-employee unrest. Most current employees have either less than one year of employment or more than ten years employment.

10. The Grand Jury could find no evidence in personnel files of any technical training program for the division staff.

11. All of the annual evaluations of current and ex-employees of the division studied by the Grand Jury rated them either "outstanding" or "very satisfactory."

12. The Personnel Department was critical that the minimum qualifications on job announcements were too low, but sent out the announcements anyway

13. The Personnel Code states in part "The Director shall direct the enforcement of personnel policies established by the Board..." (speaking of the director of personnel). The director of personnel acted in a support role in the IS problems. General services management restricted help from personnel, believing the issue to not be within personnel's purview. The director of general services believes that personnel should only be involved when requested by management, except for sexual harassment and formal grievances.

14. The division lost its technical services supervisor in February 1996, and supervising programmer analyst in October 1996. The supervising programmer analyst position has been deleted from staffing, and the manager of the division has been filling the position of technical services supervisor.

15. Exit interviews of ex-employees were uniformly critical of IS management.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The Grand Jury concludes that a division with the high turnover rate of IS has a problem with the management of that organization.

2. Employees interviewed were either unaware of, or had no confidence in, the formal grievance process.

3. The Grand Jury's conclusion on gender bias in IS is that men and women were both subjected to a similar level of non-physical abuse. The Grand Jury could not reach a conclusion on possible hiring discrimination.

4. The "Concerns With Management" meetings are a clear indication of general dissatisfaction of management by the division staff. Implicit in the Personnel Code is that it is the director of personnel's obligation to attend management meetings where obvious or perceived serious departmental personnel matters are at issue.

5. The Grand Jury analysis of its own interviews as well as the correspondence between the director of personnel and the CAO showed that the primary reason people left IS was not higher pay. They left because they believed the work environment to be poor. The fact that positions were available within a commuting distance from Nevada County made it easier to solve their problem by resigning rather than staying.

6. Good jobs in Nevada County are not easy to find, so when jobs are advertised it is not surprising to the Grand Jury that many applicants respond. The Grand Jury believes that these data, well known to Nevada County management, should have generated a stronger response to the exodus of staff. The argument that people were leaving Nevada County employment only because they were attracted to higher paying jobs elsewhere is not supported by any data obtained from personnel.

7. The Grand Jury agrees with the three county department clients that the service supplied by IS is not adequate to the clients' needs. IS lost much of its expertise with the turnover in personnel, causing

unnecessary problems for the county clients and negatively affecting the efficient operation of the county.

8. The Grand Jury regards sending the longtime IS manager to two one-day management classes to be an inadequate response to the serious problems that exist in the division.

9. The current employees who are close to retirement or were recently hired are not likely to complain about management-employee problems unless the problems are very serious. Since there are still complaints, the Grand Jury must conclude that the problems have not yet been resolved.

10. The Grand Jury concludes that the lack of an ongoing technical training program in a field as dynamic as data processing has to affect the productivity and morale of the employees.

11. The Grand Jury concludes that IS division cannot recruit the most qualified employees when the job descriptions do not require adequate standards. The director of personnel did not insist that the job descriptions be made satisfactory, and neither IS nor general services management improved the job descriptions.

12. The director of personnel did not or could not fully utilize the authority given her by the personnel code to direct a resolution to the problems in the division.

13. The division does not have adequate supervision to perform its mandated functions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. One on one interaction at the work site between the manager and each of his employees should be undertaken in order to form a bond of understanding between the members of staff and management. Regular scheduled meetings where management-employee problems are discussed should be held at least monthly between the department director and the division manager.

2. The director of personnel should undertake to communicate to each county employee the formal grievance process within 60 days.

3. While no gender bias was discovered by the Grand Jury, any inappropriate comments regarding an employee's work by management should never be condoned. If this should happen in the future, the matter should be quickly investigated and the appropriate discipline imposed.

4. Since the Grand Jury is in agreement with the director of personnel that employee pay is competitive, management must find more creative ways to reward their employees and keep them satisfied in their jobs. Improving the environment in which they work is a good starting place. The IS and general services management should request of the director of personnel methods to do so, and the director of personnel should monitor the effectiveness of the program established.

5. The Grand Jury recommends that IS and general services management develop means by which the division can supply service at an acceptable level to all county departments, or consideration should be given by the Board of Supervisors to disbanding the division and contracting out the function.
6. A more comprehensive program should be instituted at the initiative of the Board of Supervisors to instruct county managers on how to properly deal with employees. The director of personnel has the authority under the existing Personnel Code to develop and enforce such a program, and should be supported by the Board of Supervisors and the CAO in doing so.
7. The Grand Jury recommends that the director of personnel monitor the situation in IS for a period of time to ensure that the management-employee situation improves, and report progress formally to the CAO on a quarterly basis.
8. The Grand Jury recommends that proper training of staff and managers should be a part of the division's annual budget.
9. All job descriptions in the division should be checked by the Personnel Department to ensure they contain the necessary standards for each position. The standards listed on all job announcements should meet with the approval of the director of personnel prior to publication.
10. All supervisory positions in IS should be filled immediately.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Director of Personnel
Due August 30, 1998

County Administrative Officer
Due August 30, 1998

Director of General Services
Due August 30, 1998

Board of Supervisors
Due September 30, 1998