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AN INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEWS
WITH MANUFACTURING DEPARTMENT
EMPLOYEES LAID OFF EARLY IN 1930

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AN INTERPRETATION OF THE REACTION OF THE MANUFACTURING DEPARTMENT

EMPLOYEES LAID OFF EARLY IN 1930.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain how a major lay-off due to lack of work affects an employee's attitude toward the Company. Expressing it more broadly, the endeavor was to find out if the employee looks at the lay-off as a matter of necessity governed by general conditions beyond the control of the Company or merely a whim of its officials, also whether the individual employees feel they are being treated justly in the lay-off. Obviously the best manner to obtain this information was to interview laid off employees themselves. As a result 162 of these employees from the Manufacturing Department were interviewed between the period of April 8 and May 28, which covered the peak of our recent lay-off. Ninety-seven of these interviewed were men and sixty-five women. Approximately one half of the interviews were taken in the department a few days prior to leaving and the other half after final payment had been made.

We realize that we did not interview any of those who were laid off first and most likely were the least desirable employees. This and the fact that we interviewed only 162 out of 10,000 will possibly weaken to some extent the conclusions drawn from this study. Nevertheless we consider our results as generally true as those who were interviewed were taken at random and as such their opinions may be considered as the expression of the laid off employees in general.

Before approaching these employees we expected to find antagonism or resentment due to the usual interpretation of injustice which is felt at such a time no matter how fair the employer may be.

We are all creatures of self-defense. It is only natural to find such a feeling as everybody endeavors to pass on the blame for serious reverses or misfortunes on somebody or something, usually that which is most convenient. In the case of laid off employees, the Company or something closely connected with it is the most convenient and consequently usually the first place where blame is fastened. Discussing previous lay-offs with interviewers in the employment confirmed this opinion. One employment interviewer expressed himself in this regard as follows:

"In the last general lay-off, we had to be very careful with the people being laid off. With the most of them, we discussed the matter of lay-off as little as possible for fear we would stir them up and have them vent their feelings toward the Company and even possibly result in a scene. As an example of how they felt, one man told me that the Company was unfair and that he was going out and tell everybody he met just how he felt about it. He was all worked up and I had an awful time with him. There were many more who took the same attitude, and, no doubt, much undesirable publicity was given the Company in this manner."

We therefore approached the first group of these employees with little hope of obtaining a satisfactory interview which would give us a picture of their attitude. We were greatly surprised, however in that every one approached was willing to be interviewed and gladly gave us his time, in many cases for which they were not being paid and when friends or relatives were waiting to accompany them

have. The employment interviewers agree with us in that they also noticed this change in attitude.

A casual observer may possibly consider this attitude as an effort on the part of the employee to create a friendly feeling toward himself in order to retain his job. On considering previous lay-offs, however, when working conditions outside the Company were the same as at present, and how employees expressed themselves, it is evident that this is not the case. In addition, more than two-thirds of those interviewed for this study had been interviewed before and, accordingly, know that these interviews are confidential and consequently realize that anything said cannot be used either against them or in their favor and, accordingly, no assistance can be expected in this manner. The other one-third, no doubt, realize this also due to their everyday contact with others who have been interviewed. A careful scrutiny and comparison with other interviews was made to determine if a special effort was being made to create a friendly feeling at the time of lay-off, but none was detectable. The only conclusion we could draw was that they were sincere. The possible answer is that this favorable attitude is due to the fact that only employees with short service (two years and less) were laid off. These employees still retain a vivid picture of outside experiences and, accordingly, are the more able to judge conditions here than those with longer service.

On reading over these interviews, we can readily discern a decided change in the opinion of our leaving employees. They show by their willingness to discuss the lay-off that it is fair and that the

Company is compelled to curtail production due to conditions beyond its control. Seventy of the one hundred and sixty-two expressed themselves very clearly in this manner. Typical comments in this vein illustrate this point:

"The Company can't keep us here for nothing, if they haven't any work."

"Things have got pretty slack and I realize us new fellows have to be laid off. Everyone here sure gets a square deal."

"Did you know this is not the only place that has slowed down; it seems to be all over the country from what I hear and I am glad I have held on this long as I know of men who have been without a job for quite some time now."

"The Western Electric has always had the reputation of being pretty stable. It's bad all over. Other concerns have more of this the year round than the Western does so we are not so bad off."

It is interesting to note that the above comments were obtained from men; the women for some unknown reason do not express themselves on the fairness of the lay-off or its causes. The general feeling on their part seems to be that the layoff just happens to follow in the course of events and it is unfortunate that they are laid-off. Their only suggestion in this regard is that single girls should be given preference over married women because many of the single girls must support themselves and dependents while most of the married women only use their salaries to purchase fine clothing, automobiles or other non-essentials.

In addition to this feeling of fairness, the majority tell us

that they are extremely desirous of remaining with the Company and will return here any time that they are called back no matter whether they have a job elsewhere or not. They continue and explain why they hold such a high regard for their employment here. Their reasons are that they like:

1. The Company's policies.
2. Its supervision.
3. The sociability of fellow employees.

Out of 162 interviews, 155 find the Company's policies conducive to pleasant employment. Some typical ways of expressing their opinions are illustrated in the following excerpts:

"The entertainment that the Company furnishes is very good. They certainly make a fellow feel like working. One thing I like was the idea of the Company buying out the circus for two nights." (He continues and praises the rest periods, hospital and the restaurant.)

"I like the Western Electric Company policies. They have a lot of wonderful things here for the benefit of the employees. I don't think you can find such anywhere else."

"They sure have a lot of wonderful plans for entertainment for the employees and if a man takes advantage of them he will save money and make money and I also think he has a lot of more opportunities here than any other place."

Supervision is the next item of major interest in these interviews. The following are samples of the manner in which they express their high regard for their supervisors:

"I think in all the places I have been I like the Western Electric the best. The treatment I got here from the boss that I had was certainly wonderful. I got to hand it to the Western for the good bosses they have. I am so sorry that I am being laid off here, but as soon as it is busy again, regardless of where I am working, I will be back here."

"The bosses that I had were very good to me. I never knew that they had such good bosses as they've got right there. I did not think a foreigner like myself would get such good treatment from the bosses as I did."

"All the supervisors were nice to me. Now, before I left, they gave me a chance to learn on a Fan-fold that is a little bit different than the regular type machine. If I go down to the Underwood Typewriter Office, I might find a job."

As a result of these feelings toward the Company policies and the supervisors, it is only natural to expect that the employees will be happy and congenial which is a further reason for their desiring to remain with the Company. Their comments in this regard are interesting:

(During an interview, someone passed nearby whistling merrily.)

"Well, he seems happy, doesn't he? I wonder if there is anyone here at the Western who isn't happy. It seems such a happy family, I hate to leave."

"Well, they have done quite a bit of laying off in our department and as far as I was concerned they would have held me for quite a while, but there were a lot of other fellows there who needed the

job worse than I did. Some of the men were married men with families. I had an opportunity for another job and I would be helping some of the fellows in my department."

"You know what this package is? It's a pair of pajamas my girl friend in the department gave me for my birthday."

An illustration of this same feeling which may be added here is an incident narrated in one of the supervisory training meetings. A certain employee had had considerable family difficulties including the birth and death of a child. The mother was slow in recovering and was obliged to remain in the hospital for a number of weeks. The employee mentioned these circumstances and the resulting debts to employees working in his immediate vicinity, but failed to acquaint his supervisor. In the midst of all these troubles, his name was placed on the lay-off list. One of his fellow employees hearing of this, approached the supervisor and requested that his name be substituted on the list in place of the man who was experiencing the difficulties at home.

After reading all these favorable comments, we would naturally wonder if there are any which are not favorable. There are a few, but the ratio to the favorable ones is very low. Out of 132 interviews, only eight complained about supervision and nine about the method of lay-off. The eight who complained about supervision informed us in no uncertain language that it was a particular supervisor about whom they found fault and that the supervisory staff as a whole is satisfactory. There may be sufficient foundation to the complaints of two or three of the nine who feel their lay-off was unjust, but in the cases of the

others, it is felt that they may have been reasons for lay-off other than those mentioned or comprehended by the employee. As can be expected, numerous other complaints were received, but they were not serious in nature and apply to individual circumstances. Due to their diverse nature, it is impossible to classify them and, consequently, we may conclude that they cover no general condition.

We may add here that this lay-off as all others caused privation to many who were laid off as well as those dependent on them for support. One-half of the employees laid off had dependents and, although possibly many were able to obtain employment of some nature elsewhere, many of them and their dependents undoubtedly were obliged to curtail their expenditures to the extent where it hurt. Regardless of this, they have the same feeling of fairness. The following comments picked at random illustrate what prospects some had to face:

"I was crying all day yesterday. I don't know what I will do to support myself and my child."

"I am just a girl making a living for my mother all alone. I don't know where I'll get another job."

"I am worried. I have two children; one is four years old and the other is two years old. It makes it hard to get laid-off, especially for a married man but I know the Company can't help that. I know I was kept longer than the single fellows."

Summing up the results of this study, we may conclude that although the Company has been compelled to lay-off many valuable employees and cause much suffering to many of them and their dependents it has one redeeming factor in that it has shown us that a true loyalty has been deve-

loped in the majority of the employees of the Manufacturing Department. This loyalty is so sincere that it even stands the test of lay-off and extends beyond. They even promise that as soon as conditions improve and they can return to work here, they will leave whatever employment they may have at the time as they are convinced that no other Company has the working conditions, the supervision, or the type of employees we have here. In addition to possessing this intense feeling of loyalty toward the Company, they will in all probability, express themselves accordingly to others with the result that the Company will receive the best publicity obtainable, from those who have worked here and wish to return.

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