Getting the message out - disseminating research findings to employees in large rural mining organisations

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ABSTRACT

Objective
To identify that effective dissemination of research results in large organisations is possible through novel approaches.

Setting
Two mine sites in Western Australia.

Subjects
All employees working in two large mining organisations in rural Australia.

Primary argument
To encourage employees to participate in research it is essential to disseminate findings. Currently utilised dissemination methods include conference presentations, journal articles and company reports. However these methods of dissemination do not reach all employees and often neglect to inform employees below middle management levels of the outcomes of projects. It is imperative that researchers develop strategies through a consultative process with industry to inform people of research findings. This paper argues that despite ongoing rhetoric concerning the need to disseminate research there is little evidence in the literature that describes effective methods of dissemination in large organisations.

Conclusion
Discussion during each focus group highlighted the dissatisfaction staff had regarding involvement in research projects as they rarely received any feedback or perceived any improvement. By organising a research steering group including membership by all key stakeholder groups from senior management to junior staff and identifying dissemination of results as a priority the research team developed a climate of trust. Dissemination of results through posters was a decision made by the team in response to staff dissatisfaction. This 'bottom up' approach created a climate of ownership catalysing behaviour change.

INTRODUCTION

Despite ongoing rhetoric concerning the need to disseminate research there is little evidence in the literature that describes effective methods of dissemination. Historically, research findings are disseminated through reports, journal publications and conference presentations. However these methods do not always deliver the findings to either the participants, individuals that may benefit from changing behaviours or entire workforces that might be affected by policy changes.

The majority of writing about dissemination of research is in the health literature, particularly focusing on health promotion and health prevention, demonstrating the significance of communication in effecting health behavioural change. Indeed, the literature acknowledges that research findings often lie idle, buried deep in reports, and thus not get put into practice (Waddel 2002). The issues associated with dissemination of findings are neither unique nor new with organisational barriers, issues related to secrecy of findings and lack of trust (Crosswaite and Curtice 1994).

The literature tends to describe dissemination of results in terms of translating research findings into policy or practice however, the larger issue of how to inform people within an organisation of research findings in projects they have participated in remains somewhat obscure. Indeed extant literature concerning dissemination to participants focuses on communication and theoretical frameworks rather than practical solutions. Crosswaite and Curtice (1994) assert that although communication is essential to dissemination it must meet the needs of a diverse group of people. They suggest that a research liaison officer position might bridge this gap as a dedicated person can focus on sharing knowledge with a wider audience. King et al (1998) on the other hand, found that for dissemination to be effective it must be a two way process of exchanging knowledge that occurs between the researcher and the people within an organisation. Such a two way process is particularly suited to participatory action research due to the collaboration of organisations and the research team. Abraham et al (2005) explored the issues surrounding project based dissemination and identified five strategies for effective dissemination: effective multi-level leadership and management, climate of readiness for change, availability of resources, comprehensive systems in institutions and funding bodies and funding designs that encourage and support change and dissemination. Although their project was to investigate Australian and international teaching and learning grant schemes and their outcomes, there are intrinsic messages in the report for all researchers. They describe dissemination as more than circulating information; rather it is a process of action whereby changes in behaviour and/or thinking empower individuals and organisations to integrate findings into the organisation resulting in changes in policies with outcomes demonstrating sustainable influences to practice over a period of time. This concept of dissemination builds on King et al's (1998) suggestion that dissemination is a two way process by arguing that dissemination also involves change within individuals or organisations.

DISCUSSION

The initial phase of this large Australian Research Council funded grant involved focus groups to examine the occupational health and safety dimensions of older workers. During the focus groups however it became evident that a large number of participants were reticent to be involved in the project as they were dissatisfied with the lack of dissemination of results from previous research studies which had left them wondering whether their contributions were valued and what the outcomes of the studies had been. The research team felt that these were valid comments that needed to be addressed in order to garner the ongoing participation and support of staff from both sites throughout the three phases of this four year project. A research steering group was formed and was comprised of a cross section of staff representatives from both organisations and the research team. The aim of this group was to provide guidance for the project.

The group debated the question: *How do researchers inform large groups of people in participating organisations located in rural Australia, all with different levels of literacy, interest and motivation, of the results of a research project while maintaining confidentiality and rigour?*

Input from the organisational members of this group was significant as they had an insider understanding of the respective organisational cultures and their involvement enhanced ownership and problem solving of the issue.

Due to the diversity of employees at both organisations it was acknowledged that a report would not be written and that a two pronged approach would reach most people at all levels within the organisations. It was decided that dissemination via posters and company newsletter would be trialled and if it proved successful this would be continued for the duration of the project.

Poster presentation was an innovative and novel approach to dissemination. A search of the literature revealed some discussion of the use of posters as a method of dissemination however these were mostly aimed at poster presentations at conferences within a collegial environment rather than to people or workplaces that have been involved in the research (Sherbinski and Stroup 1992). Thus it was found that although dissemination was viewed as being an important outcome for any project dissemination to people outside professional interest groups and peers has attracted little discussion in the literature.

Poster presentation differed significantly from that of a professional poster that would be presented in a collegial setting. The research steering committee discussed the results and poster presentation and included data guided by advice from this group. It was decided that as the organisations had predominantly male employees and the setting was mining, that graphs depicting results would be an acceptable visual representation of findings. After a lot of deliberation and practice the final poster consisted of three columns. The first column provided a brief overview of the project and a background to why it was important. This was written in lay terms using large font size. It was felt it was essential that employees were encouraged to stop and read the poster so large amounts of text were considered to be a deterrent. The second column contained the results which were depicted in graphs above which were written the questions employees had been asked. Below each graph was a single sentence explaining the result. The final column was simply titled 'where to next' and provided a brief description of the next phase of the project and contact details of the research team. The position of the posters within the organisations was inherent to success so it was decided to place a copy in the central meeting rooms and also in selected staff tea rooms.

A second strategy was reporting the results in the company newsletters. This was done in two ways – firstly a small narrative explaining what was happening and who the research teams were and secondly by placing a copy of the poster in the newsletter. Informal feedback suggested most of the male employees did not read the newsletter however the wives and partners did read it. This was evident in the final phase of the project which involved an intervention for both employee and partner as a number of partners told us they had read about it in the newsletter.

CONCLUSION

Presenting research findings in this manner is not without its problems. Prior to release all posters and newsletter articles needed to be approved by senior management. Senior management were initially reticent for findings to be presented to employees as they were concerned that this might create expectations by employees that any identified issues would be resolved.

Anecdotal feedback from employees was that the posters were a successful method of disseminating research

findings. Employees found them easy to read and felt that they were being kept informed about the project. Indeed this appeared to facilitate some employees taking ownership of the project as they spoke of 'our research project'. Furthermore the research team had anecdotal evidence that employees were discussing findings at work and in social settings.

The newsletter also proved a successful method of dissemination. In one organisation a hard copy of the newsletter was posted to the family address. It is important to include partners especially if the projects are health related and being carried out in male dominated industries.

The success of both strategies lay in framing the research results in an appropriate way for the targeted population and the support of the organisations in allowing posters to be placed in visible areas. The outcome from the posters was that most of the staff had an understanding of the research project and felt involved in the project. The research staff were not unknown to the staff as they had seen their names on the posters and in the newsletter. Additionally there was a sense that the research was 'real' and not just theoretical as the practical applications of results could be perceived through organisational changes that were made. Managing research projects in large organisations involves dissemination of results. This project has identified two relatively inexpensive methods of disseminating results to large populations in shift based environments over a four year period.

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