

Make-A-Wish Foundation Case Report

Brendan Gebler, Malcolm Guya, Adam Zaffuto

Duquesne University

Author's Note

This case report is a summary of the work done for Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

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### **Introduction**

The Make-A-Wish Foundation Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia is a non-profit organization that grants the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions to enrich the human experience with hope, strength and joy in 57 Pennsylvania counties and West Virginia (Make-A-Wish, 2016). Our point of contact for this case report is the current Chief Operating Officer, Ms. Ann Hohn. Ms. Hohn has been an employee of the organization for nearly 25 years. In an email explaining our purpose, we reached out to Ms. Hohn to discuss Make-A-Wish's interest in being involved with our consultation project. During our meeting we discussed the culture of Make-A-Wish and the changes she would like to see in the near future. Ms. Hohn indicated she would like to improve hiring practices of the organization along with increasing retention of current and future employees. Ms. Hohn also showed concern regarding Make-A-Wish's lack of diversity. Aside from our primary goal of assisting Make-A-Wish via our research, we believe that almost all employers could benefit from this research, especially nonprofit organizations that may lack financial resources to aid in retention and candidate selection.

### **The Problem**

Improving and streamlining hiring practices was one of the major concerns that Ms. Hohn expressed during our meeting. Currently Make-A-Wish utilizes newspapers to advertise job postings. This results in far too many applications, many of which are from under-qualified individuals. Too large a percentage of responses to job postings are from individuals who do not seem to understand that, despite the fact that Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit foundation, it is a professional organization run by highly educated, professional individuals. Make-A-Wish would

like to explore a means by which they could post job openings in a way that would discourage applications from so many under-qualified individuals.

The nature of the work that is done at Make-A-Wish has bred a very specific culture in which employees are obviously required to be very compassionate with regards to their clientele. What is somewhat less obvious is that these employees must also possess a strong resolve and a tough interior in order to rebound from the difficult or disappointing aspects of work that involves children fighting life threatening illnesses. Simply put, Make-A-Wish is seeking job candidates who are both compassionate and resilient. Workplace diversity is also a concern with regards to the recruitment process. Currently the workforce consists of primarily Caucasian women of childbearing age. Make-A-Wish would like to find a way to attract more men and minorities via their job postings. Ms. Hohn also indicated that she believes that Make-A-Wish could make better use of social media with regards to recruitment.

In addition to improving selection procedures, Ms. Hohn also expressed an interest in improving the rate at which Make-A-Wish retains its personnel. Given the difficult nature of finding employees who work well within this unique and rewarding workplace culture, it is imperative that Make-A-Wish retain as much of their workforce as possible. Three main reasons that Ms. Hohn provided for loss of personnel are burnout, pay scale, and limited room for advancement. Many individuals become emotionally fatigued as a result of the sensitive and sometimes distressing nature of the work done at Make-A-Wish. As a result of being a non-profit organization, Make-A-Wish often has limited means by which to increase salaries. Often employees leave in search of jobs with higher wage scales or expedited salary schedules. Inherent with organizations of small to medium size are the limited opportunities for advancement. Make-A-Wish is no exception, as a medium sized workforce requires few

managerial positions. Also, due to the fulfilling nature of the work done at Make-A-Wish, once employees advance to upper management, they are not inclined to vacate those positions, which can lead towards advancement gridlock.

In summation Make-A-Wish is faced with three main issues. First, Make-A-Wish is not making the best use of information technology or social media during its candidate selection process. Secondly, Make-A-Wish is having a difficult time finding the best job candidates. Finally, Make-A-Wish employees are leaving at a quicker rate than management would prefer. Our goal was to find useful information, as well as inexpensive, easily accessible solutions regarding these issues.

### **Literature Review**

Extensive research has been conducted within various domains with the goal of shedding light onto some of the issues which have been encountered at Make-A-Wish. We found that transparent human resource management (HRM) practices have been shown to provide the foundation for reshaping work processes, including the implementation of work teams, job rotation, and quality circles (Mastracci & Herring, 2010). Mastracci and Herring describe how work teams, job rotation, and quality circles will not develop without ongoing training and formal personnel processes for hiring, evaluations, and promotions (2010). This explains some of the issues that Make-A-Wish has encountered with unqualified individuals applying for positions within the company and also a lack of room to grow for the employees that do get hired.

The ability to advertise publicly posted vacancy notices, written job descriptions, and formal job evaluations within the company makes the employment relationship explicit and transparent for the employees, which in turn empowers the workers (Mastracci & Herring, 2010). This would be a great benefit for Make-A-Wish as it would provide their employees with

complete information about their potential for growth within the company and would empower them to be more motivated to work to achieve those goals. Informal hiring practices “create a culture of favoritism and entrenched biases that preserve the status quo” (Mastracci & Herring, p. 160) and can cause a divide amongst employees. This “precarious employment breaches the ‘psychological contract’ between workers and workplaces, resulting in diminished productivity” (Mastracci & Herring, 2010, p. 160). In addition to human resource practices, the other concern listed by Make-A-Wish was that the majority of employees in the company are young females who tend to leave their positions in their late twenties and early thirties. Some are leaving for more money while others are simply leaving the workforce in order to stay home with their children.

Research shows that the one of the reasons that many female professionals depart from their career paths is due to family responsibilities (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). Stone and Lovejoy (2004) provide some insight as to why this may be:

Married professional women, by virtue of the privileges their jobs confer as well as the demands they entail, are subject to numerous, competing pressures on their decision to quit jobs and exit the labor force. These pressures emanate from both the workplace and from the home, where expectations about parenting are shaped by an ideology of intensive mothering. (p. 64)

Many women do not have a choice regarding leaving their jobs as the demands of motherhood begin to surface within their lives. During a series of interviews that Stone and Lovejoy (2004) conducted they concluded that there were three major themes that were consistent amongst women when leaving the workforce: (1) work, (2) children, and (3) husbands.

In their survey Stone and Lovejoy (2004) found that a significant concern among working professional women is a lack of workplace inflexibility. Stone and Lovejoy (2004) established that “upon becoming mothers, about half of the women in our sample expressed a desire to cut back on their work hours and/or to increase the flexibility of their schedules” (p. 68). In addition, Barney and Elias (2010) “found that flex-time work environment provides employees with a high degree of autonomy, which leads to high determination, positive personal development, higher quality work, and lower absenteeism” (p. 488). Berry (1981) also asserts that:

“Flexitime benefits both employees and employers. Benefits frequently reported for employers include increased job satisfaction, increased productivity, the elimination of punctuality as an issue, less personal business conducted on company time, less absenteeism, reduced personnel turnover, additional recruiting leverage, and lower unit labor costs.” (p. 36)

Congruent with Make-A-Wish’s concerns regarding women vacating their positions were the findings of Stone and Lovejoy (2004), who found that 72 percent of female respondents mentioned the pull of children as a significant factor in their decision to leave the workforce. Mothers are more inclined than fathers to feel compelled to be with their children before they leave for school or daycare in the mornings and again upon returning from school at the end of the day. Husbands also often encourage their wives to give up their careers in order to stay at home with their children. Several women mentioned that their husband’s hopes for the wives to stay at home also led to their decision. Most women in the study viewed their careers as secondary to their husbands. Women often “indicated that their husbands communicated to them, either explicitly or implicitly, that they expected their wife to be the one to sacrifice or modify

her career to accommodate family responsibilities” (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, p. 78). Stone and Lovejoy (2004) also argued:

“Our analysis makes clear that to retain these women, employers must move beyond existing programmatic, human-resources-based approaches to reduce the hours of work and enhance its flexibility through work redesign.” (p. 82)

The retention issue that Make-A-Wish is facing appears to be a result of a population which is asymmetric in terms of gender and ethnicity. This skewed demographic has resulted in too many employees vacating their positions after a 5 to 10 year period. One solution regarding Make-A-Wish’s dilemma which has been proposed by various researchers is to hire a more diverse workforce. Research in diversity has demonstrated that organizations acquire intrinsic benefits from having a diverse population. In addition to resolving the retention issues that Make-A-Wish has been confronted with, workplace diversity has been shown to increase group learning and employee effectiveness (Foldy, 2004; Herman & Renz, 1998). Mastracci & Herring (2010) demonstrated that “organizations with greater gender and racial diversity are financially better off. Diversity literally pays” (p. 156). Given the lack of gender and ethnic diversity found at Make-A-Wish these findings are a critical tool in the effort to resolve the issues Make-A-Wish has been facing.

### **Proposed Solutions**

When consulting for an organization as successful as the Make-A-Wish Foundation it is paramount that the positive aspects of the work environment and culture are not altered in order to exact change. Sweeping changes in this instance are far from necessary. In light of the issues described during our visit to Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia we

proposed a number of amendments which will improve both selection and retention of Make-A-Wish's employees.

In an effort to improve retention we have researched various means of increasing employee satisfaction. We approached this issue by examining Make-A-Wish's work-life benefits, while remaining sensitive to their limited financial resources. We also approached the challenge of increased employee satisfaction in terms of finding alternative approaches to work, which we believe will improve satisfaction. These approaches vary in terms of how and where work is conducted as well as how work is supervised or supported.

We first recommend that Make-A-Wish consider performing an in-house survey to better understand the wants and needs of its workforce. Surveys can be a double edged sword, serving as a useful source of information and at the same time strengthening the bond between employer and employee. With regards to Make-Wish, a survey could help them better understand what would make an employee likely to leave or stay while also engendering a sense that Make-A-Wish is concerned about the happiness and well-being of its employees. In his article, "The Employee as Customer," Berry (1981, p.34) wrote that "satisfying the needs and wants of employees requires that management first understand what these needs and wants entail." Simply put, if they have not already done so, Make-A-Wish should solidify their beliefs regarding the reasons that employees are leaving. Such a survey would also enable them to better understand which aspects of their workplace make Make-A-Wish a desirable career option for those seeking employment, enabling them to better advertise job-postings. As Berry (1981) notes, "marketing research can be used to identify employee needs, wants and attitudes just as it can be used to identify consumer needs, wants and attitudes" (Berry, 1981, p. 34).

All employers face retention and selection issues. On the surface these issues may appear to be unique to one another, however we believe that improving the work-life benefits associated with careers at Make-A-Wish could improve both retention and selection. These issues will need to be resolved via means which do not involve increasing salaries or incurring substantial costs to the employer due to the financial constraints associated with operating a nonprofit organization.

To tackle the issues of retention, Make-A-Wish could implement a system of flex-time as exemplified by the work done by Stone and Lovejoy (2004) which showed that female employees were leaving the workforce due to a lack of flex-time and flexibility in scheduling during their childbearing and child-rearing years. As stated in the literature review earlier in this work, flex-time has been shown to lead to a reduction in absenteeism, personnel turnover, and unit labor costs while improving recruiting leverage (Berry, 1981).

Casper and Buffardi (2004) detail how careers or jobs that offer more flexible schedules are more attractive to all people, not just mothers. Incorporating flex time would widen the net of prospective hires. Flex time could improve selection and improve retention at the same time. This study found that schedule flexibility contributed to predicting anticipated support and job pursuit intentions. Survey subjects indicated that they would be more likely to apply for a position with a company which offered schedule flexibility because that served as a sign that the organization valued and cared about the wellbeing of its employees. This led to increased job pursuit intentions; in essence, it made the job more desirable to a greater number of people. It should be noted that this increase was across the board, not just individuals with children (Casper & Buffardi, 2004). A recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll however showed that 74% of

homemakers who are able to work and have not looked for a job in the past 12 months would be more likely to return to a job which offered flexible hours (Brodie et al., 2014).

The current practice of posting job advertisements through outdated methods such as newspapers automatically limits the scope of potential employees that could be hired. A social media intern should be hired in order to advertise job postings on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as well as professional networking sites such as LinkedIn and Indeed. This would cast a wider net reaching all major demographics. Overall this intern's position would begin to tackle this issues stemming from Make-A-Wish's selection process, which would cause a domino effect leading to increased diversity. This increase in workforce diversity would then lead to increased retention rates.

We also assert that Make-A-Wish may benefit from reexamining its Paid Time Off (PTO) policy. According to the March 2015 National Compensation Survey conducted by the United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Make-A-Wish is below the national average in terms of PTO. New hires at Make-A-Wish currently accrue 15 days of vacation per year. Employees are not able to accrue more than 15 days of PTO until they have worked for Make-A-Wish for 10 years at which time they are able to accrue 20 days of PTO. Table 1 (see Appendix A) lists the average paid time off for full time workers and full time professionals, showing that Make-A-Wish is below the national average in these categories after 10 years. Furthermore, the rate at which the average employee accrues PTO increases after 5 years, while employees at Make-A-Wish do not. This leaves Make-A-Wish a number of days behind the national average after 5 and 10 years in terms of accrued PTO. Since Make-A-Wish reports losing individuals after 5 years of employment and before 10 years, we believe Make-A-Wish should increase the rate of accrued PTO for employees who have worked there between 5

and 10 years. This is a likely factor in the decision to leave after 5-10 years of service. An accelerated PTO schedule could compensate for Make-A-Wish's ability to match other employer's compensation scales. This increase in PTO is yet another means by which Make-A-Wish could increase perceived organizational support, which is defined as a global impression that employees hold that an organization values them and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 1990).

## **Deliverables**

### *Selection*

To improve the selection practices of Make-A-Wish Foundation, the development of a social media and staffing intern position is crucial. The duties of this intern would be to first create and update additional social media pages for the Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia division of Make-A-Wish. The intern would be required to be present for at least one weekly meeting with a member of the C-suite or marketing department to discuss organizational needs for that particular time period. LinkedIn and Indeed pages would also be monitored and updated by the intern in efforts to disseminate job postings for positions within the organization. The intern would also be tasked with sorting through unqualified candidates and passing on qualified individuals to members of the talent acquisition team. The ideal candidate for this position would be a college student with a focus in business, marketing, journalism, film and print media, or relevant majors. This intern would improve the selection practices of Make-A-Wish without any additional costs to the organization.

We also recommend adding a "Careers" or "Join Our Team" portal to the Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia web site. As it stands there is no information on the Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia web site regarding employment within

the organization. A job seeker is likely to turn toward the website of an organization that he or she finds interesting during a job search. A person who is interested in the work that Make-A-Wish does is also likely to find working for Make-A-Wish rewarding and exciting. A “Jobs” or “Careers” portal should be on the Make-A-Wish website to enable job seekers to learn about potential job opportunities. Finding qualified applicants among the individuals who reach out to Make-A-Wish via this online portal is another role that could be fulfilled by an unpaid social media and staffing intern.

### *Retention*

Maintaining a high level of job satisfaction is essential to long term employee retention. A majority of female employees within the organization elect to leave Make-A-Wish around childbearing age due to a lack of flexibility within their schedules. By conducting a survey of the employees with the goal of finding a portion of the workday which consistently conflicts with each employee’s family or personal life, Make-A-Wish could gain insight into how best to implement flex-time. Once this information is acquired, the next step would be to mandate that all employees be at work within a specified window each day. This would enable employees with children the ability to ensure their children arrive at school or daycare while also giving them the flexibility to pick up children at the conclusion of their school day or activities. This increase in flexibility and autonomy would enable employees to perform their job duties as required as well as to tend to their family needs, eliminating many employees from leaving the workforce. Barney and Elias (2010) reference Hackman and Oldham’s (1975) job characteristics model stating that “worker autonomy gives employees a sense of responsibility in their work, which in turn leads to high motivation, high performance, high satisfaction, and low turnover” (p. 488).

Another means by which Make-A-Wish could possibly increase perceived organizational support would be to implement a system of Cafeteria Benefits (Berry, 1981). Under such a program, Make-A-Wish would provide the minimum life and health insurance requirements mandated by government regulations. Employees would then select additional benefits that fit their individual and family needs based on each individual's needs and preferences. These employees would only be able to choose certain benefits based on salary, service, age, and tenure within the company. This added bonus would give employees from different age groups the ability to find the plans better suited for them as opposed to being forced into a cookie cutter mold. Financially, this program would reduce unnecessary costs that Make-A-Wish accrues by providing services that are not used by a majority of employees. To obtain information from the employees about which services they would be most interested in, these types of questions could be asked within an employee survey.

### **Conclusion**

Make-A-Wish is an extremely successful organization and a fantastic example of the great work that an extraordinary nonprofit organization can accomplish. Make-A-Wish expressed a few of their organizational concerns with us in our initial meeting which mostly centered on selection and retention issues. Through a comprehensive literature review, our proposed solutions include, administering employee surveys and hiring an unpaid intern who could help with the use of technology and lend a hand during the selection process. We are confident that these recommendations are sensible and could be implemented with minimal effort. In addition, these recommendations were generated while keeping in mind the financial constraints inherent in operating a nonprofit organization and should not lead to any additional financial burden. In order to avoid any potential future issues, Make-A-Wish could monitor

average PTO times for professionals, as well as trends involving telecommuting and flex-time. Make-A-Wish should also keep an eye on how to best use information technology for the purposes of recruitment and selection. Resistance to change is always a possible limitation, especially from long term employees who did not have the opportunity benefit from these recommended policies. We believe that a heightened sense of perceived organizational support as a result these policies will surface, enabling management to overcome any resistance. If implemented, these recommendations will lead to improved selection, retention, and employee satisfaction. We anticipate that these changes will result in an improved sense of perceived organizational support by the employees of Make-A-Wish and will result in a stronger workforce overall (Casper & Buffardi, 2004). We are extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with an organization that is world famous for improving the lives of children battling life threatening illnesses and we are hopeful that we have been able to contribute to that mission if only in some small way. We also believe that these issues are not unique to Make-A-Wish and that that this research could stand to benefit many organizations, especially nonprofits.

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## Appendix A

Table 1

*Average number of paid vacation days for all workers in the United States as of March 2015*

<u>Years of Service</u>	<u>Average Consolidated Paid Time Off After Specified Years of Service</u>	<u>Average Consolidated Paid Time Off After Specified Years of Service for Management, Professional, and Related Employees</u>	<u>Make-A-Wish</u>
1	15	17	15
5	19	21	15
10	22	24	20
20	24	27	25