

## *Make-A-Wish Consultation Reflective Analysis*

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As an undergraduate at Duquesne University, I was afforded the opportunity to act as a student Industrial Organizational (I/O) Psychology consultant. Participants in this project were asked to identify an organization in the Pittsburgh area that could benefit from an Industrial/Organizational consultation. Once a connection had been solidified, each group was tasked with assessing how the organization could benefit from additional information in any of the following categories: selection, retention, performance, performance appraisal, motivation, training, and/or compensation (Schippmann, Hawthorne, and Schmitt 1992).

Two fellow students and I opted to work with Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit organization which grants wishes to children battling life-threatening illnesses. Make-A-Wish Greater Pennsylvania and West Virginia is headquartered in the downtown area of Pittsburgh. Our point of contact at Make-A-Wish was Chief Operating Officer Ann Hohn. Ms. Hohn asserted that Make-A-Wish had been facing a trend of employees vacating their positions after roughly five to seven years with the intention of raising a family. We believed that this retention issue stemmed from a lack of workforce diversity given the fact that the workforce at Make-A-Wish was almost exclusively female and had been hired immediately upon completion of postsecondary education. Our group then conducted a literature review as a means of establishing what could have caused these selection and retention issues and how best to resolve them. Once we had established some precedence, we proposed a number of industry-established solutions. Using this literature review and several proposed solutions, we composed a case report, which was then submitted to Ms. Hohn.

Given that we were relatively inexperienced consultants, we relied on our professor for guidance in terms of finding research to support our ideas. Our professor also shed light on how and where to find answers to our more complicated questions. Through our hard work, research, and support from our professor, we were able to accurately identify the root of many of Make-A-Wish's challenges.

I believe that our case report supplied attainable solutions to many of the issues that Make-A-Wish was facing. While we are extremely grateful to Make-A-Wish for the opportunity to work with such a successful organization, we also believe that Make-A-Wish and its employees will benefit from our work.

As I approached the work necessary for this project, I felt fortunate to have been endowed with the opportunity to take part in this endeavor. Performing the functions of an actual I/O consultant is a truly unique opportunity, especially for an undergraduate student. Rarely will an individual who has not yet completed an undergraduate-level education be allowed the level of autonomy we required in order to make the assessments and recommendations of an actual I/O consultant. While our professor gave us general guidelines regarding what we could or should discuss with our point of contact at Make-A-Wish, both the nature of the discussion and the support that we offered were left to our discretion. Also at our discretion were the areas in which we could offer to assist Make-A-Wish. While we were operating from the perspective of I/O student consultants, we were allowed to decide for ourselves exactly what issues Make-A-Wish was facing and how best to tackle those issues. The autonomy to make these types of decisions would not have been granted to an intern or even an

entry-level employee for a consulting group. Knowing that we could rely on our professor to lend her expertise and direction allowed for a great deal of confidence, which enabled us to be successful.

By performing this consultation in a real-world scenario, I gained invaluable insight into the world of Industrial Organizational Psychology. This consultation project was conducted in addition to lectures, readings, and exams on the subject of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. This rare glimpse into the world of I/O consulting gave us insight into what it would be like to work as actual consultants. This experience led one of my teammates to decide that he would like to pursue a career in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. In light of my experience, I am interested in researching how trauma, experienced by emergency medical responders, law enforcement officials, and combat veterans is tied to burnout and retention.

In addition to reading about how to apply research that had been conducted by I/O Psychologists, my teammates and I were able to perform a real-world consultation for an organization with real-world issues. This type of educational experience, which functions outside of the conventional classroom setting and places students in responsible roles in order to engage them in “cooperative, goal-directed activities” is known as experiential learning (Hamilton 1980). We found that this hands-on, experiential learning, when conducted in concert with traditional classroom lectures and readings, provided for a superior educational experience compared with the conventional classroom lecture approach.

This rare educational opportunity not only shed invaluable light into the field of I/O Psychology, it also allowed us to feel assured that we were prepared to move forward in the professional world. As an adult student returning to school in order to obtain a bachelor’s degree, I am speaking from some experience, and I would like to encourage professors to offer their students similar hands-on, experiential learning opportunities. This project provided firsthand experience in the professional world and enabled us to prepare for what is expected of professionals by their employers. Experiences such as these allow students an insight beyond anything that can be observed in the classroom.

Keeping in mind that Make-A-Wish is a nonprofit organization which serves the community, we hope that by helping Make-A-Wish we are in turn helping the community. We believe that this case report will enable Make-A-Wish to be more efficient and more productive. Productivity at Make-A-Wish is measured by the number of “wishes” granted and through our research we were able to show that better, happier employees will become more valuable assets to Make-A-Wish. Our research and case report assert that by attracting better job applicants and retaining superior employees, Make-A-Wish will become an even more successful organization. As a nonprofit organization that strives to better the lives of children battling life-threatening illness, a more successful Make-A-Wish provides a foundation for a community with happier children and families.

My personal experience was a factor in deciding how best to approach Make-A-Wish’s retention issue within our case report. I have witnessed organizations that make an effort to express the value that they place on their employees. Within these organizations employees often feel a sense of purpose. This sense of purpose often has the ability to motivate employees to work diligently regardless of pay or status. I have found that when a business or organization shows its appreciation for hard work that the employees are more likely to stay and advance within the organization. We believe that by granting better work/life benefits, Make-A-Wish is conveying to its employees that they are valued.

As a military veteran, my approach to problem solving tends to be very structured. Specifically, I approached this particular project by identifying each issue or concern that Ms. Hohn described during our assessment of needs meeting and sought out individual solutions. This approach may seem obvious, but my teammates often pointed out issues that every organization faces in addition to the issues that had been described by Ms. Hohn. My teammates also were interested in researching extraneous issues. As we prepared a list of recommendations for Make-A-Wish, my team members expressed a desire to explore the implementation of a mentorship program and a training program geared towards making better use of social media and technology. While it should be noted that it is possible that Make-A-Wish may have benefited from these recommendations, we elected to forego the mentorship and training programs. This was due in large part to the fact that these recommendations did not address specific concerns described by Make-A-Wish. In addition, restrictions placed on our time and resources, as well as our minimal experience, forced us to acknowledge our limitations. In light of these limitations, we concluded that we could best serve Make-A-Wish by scaling back the overall number of recommendations in an effort to seek out and provide more encompassing solutions to the issues referenced by Make-A-Wish. I believe that my background and experience enabled us to compartmentalize the needs that Ms. Hohn addressed in our meeting and to focus in on those specific needs, so that those specific issues could best be resolved.

I believe that further work could be done to improve upon the recommendations outlined in our case report. Specifically, with regard to our recommendation to hire a student intern, additional research could be conducted in order to shed light on exactly how an intern could be utilized and how the internship experience could be integrated into a student intern's academic goals. In addition, I believe that with more time we could have supplied more information to Make-A-Wish regarding exactly how to interface with a university internship program. We also could have been more specific regarding the roles that we recommended for the intern.

As I reflect on this invaluable learning opportunity, my goal is that others may have similar learning experiences in other disciplines of psychology. This project, which provided an experiential learning environment, enabled students to become cognitively active, applying a purposeful, goal directed, and strategic approach to learning (Weinstein 1987). A cognitively active student is able to plan, execute, evaluate, and, if necessary, modify his or her course of action. These are all abilities which are highly valued in academia as well as the professional domain. Giving students opportunities to engage in hands-on, experiential learning should undoubtedly be utilized anywhere possible in the realm of higher education. As Armstrong and Mahmud (2008) wrote, "Experience needs to be acted upon to be learned." Students need opportunities to put their lessons into practice such that those lessons may be cemented in their minds, increasing the likelihood of both academic and professional excellence.

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