Professional Employees

Tina Covensky 2001   ©2000 www.arttoday.com   ©2000 www.arttoday.com   Tina Covensky 2001

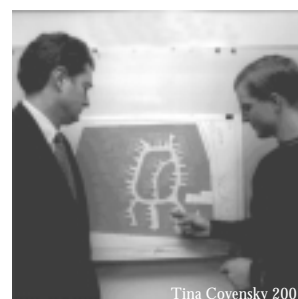## *The next frontier for organized labor*

By Guy Molyneux

The labor union, we often hear, is a quintessentially "old economy" institution. Conduct a word association exercise with the phrase "union member," and you are likely to conjure up images of people who work in manufacturing—autoworkers or steelworkers—or perhaps in the construction trades. Commonly, unions are assumed to be most needed by, and most appealing to, manual trade workers.

Signs have begun to emerge, however, of unions' continued relevance in an economy increasingly organized around the delivery of services and information. Of particular note is the recent upsurge in interest from highly-skilled professional employees.

Consider these developments:

• In February and March of 2000, engineers at Boeing in Seattle staged the largest private-sector strike of professionals in history—and won major contract improvements. Four months later, 6,500 more Boeing engineers in Kansas voted to unionize.

Guy Molyneux is a partner at Peter D. Hart Research Associates, where he directs the firm's trade union research.

• The American Nurses Association (ANA) and the American Medical Association (AMA) have both made unionization efforts a top priority.

• In Washington state, employees from Microsoft and other information technology firms have formed an advocacy organization called WashTech—the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers—which is affiliated with the Communication Workers of America.

Last spring, Hart Research conducted a survey for the Albert Shanker Institute to help gain a better understanding of professionals' view of unions and workplace representation. We interviewed samples of four types of professionals: nurses, teachers, information technology (IT) professionals, and engineers. Although the aggregated results do not constitute a true representation of all US professionals, they provide many useful and meaningful insights into the perspective of professionals more generally.

The commonly accepted view of professionals is of committed individualists who oppose collective representation and perceive unions as relevant only for lower-status occupations. The findings of this study call into question this stereotypical view. Throughout the data we find signs of support among professionals for a stronger collective voice at work.

Fully 55% of the professionals surveyed say they would approve of the establishment of an employee organization in their workplace to represent their interests. That figure stands in striking contrast to the 23% of professionals nationally who today enjoy the benefits of representation at work.

The demand for representation is impressive even when we consider professionals outside the heavily-unionized teaching field. Nurses wish to be represented by a two-to-one margin (60% to 31%), while IT professionals are divided fairly evenly, with a 48% plurality approving and 45% disapproving. Support among engineers is considerably weaker, with just one-third saying they approve (34%). Overall, 44% of the non-represented professionals surveyed approve of representation in their workplace.

Professionals have a more mixed reaction to the notion of establishing *union* representation in their workplace. Sentiment is

divided evenly, with 45% approving and 46% disapproving of the idea. Again, we find significant occupational variations, with positive sentiment outpacing negative among both teachers (74% approve, 20% disapprove) and nurses (50% approve, 39% disapprove). The reverse is true for engineers (21% approve, 69% disapprove) and IT professionals (36% approve, 56% disapprove).

This "union gap"—lower support for a union than for a generic employee organization—vanishes among professionals who are already in unions. Unionized professionals actually support a union (81%) even more strongly than they do an organization (76%); for them, having a union and having an organization mean the same thing. So, this gap actually exists only among non-represented professionals, who have less experience on which to base their impressions of unions; 44% of them favor an organization, while only 33% favor a union.

The data in this study suggest that demand for representation by today's professionals is driven largely by what we might call *deprofessionalization*—workplace conditions that subvert professionalism. Professionals take great pride in their work, both in the skill, training, and dedication it requires and in the quality of service or product that results. But many factors beyond their control—established by their employers or by larger economic forces—determine whether their professionalism is enhanced or diminished. Professionals desire representation when they feel that employment conditions are undermining their professionalism by denying them a meaningful voice on the job, or the respect and appreciation they believe they deserve.

One of the most powerful predictors of professionals' support for representation is their assessment of overall conditions facing their profession. Those

who perceive worsening conditions are far more likely to favor representation than those who see improving professional conditions. The degree to which the four professions are satisfied with professional conditions varies consid-

> "Professional organizations must address professionals' strong sense of individualism if they are to be successful."

erably and parallels their support for representation. Nurses see their profession as clearly in decline (55% getting worse, 15% better), and teachers also register concern (48% worse, 19% better). However, IT professionals are very upbeat (61% better, 12% worse), and engineers also offer a positive assessment (46% better, 20% worse).

Similarly, those who feel their employers do not treat professionals fairly are more likely to favor an employee organization. The four occupations have differing perspectives on the degree to which their employers care about professional employees. Engineers are the most content (71% rate their employers as excellent or good), followed by IT professionals (63%), teachers (59%), and nurses (55%).

An interesting contrast appears when we ask professionals about their own personal job satisfaction. Nearly three-fourths of all professionals say they are very satisfied (29%) or mainly satisfied (44%) with their current situation at work, "taking everything into account, including job content, salaries, benefits, professional respect, and working conditions." Unlike the large differences that occur among the four occupa-

tional groups regarding professional conditions and employer fairness, only small variations emerge in job satisfaction: 77% of engineers express satisfaction, 73% of nurses, 70% of IT professionals, and 70% of teachers.

Although a relationship exists between personal job satisfaction and support for representation, it is not as strong as we might expect. Clearly, satisfaction levels alone cannot explain the variations in support for representation among the four occupations. Statistical analysis reveals, moreover, that non-represented professionals' support for representation is much more strongly related to their sense of whether their employer cares about professional employees and treats them fairly, and to their perception of the overall situation for people in their profession, than it is to their personal job satisfaction.

In other words, support for representation is not primarily a function of personal disgruntlement. Many professionals are personally satisfied yet still seek collective representation. What drives support for representation is the belief that conditions facing the profession, and specifically treatment of professionals by management, are not what they should be.

When professionals report that conditions for their profession are worsening, or that they are not being treated fairly by management, what specific concerns are they referring to? Dissatisfaction in three areas is strongly associated with support for representation: feeling supported and respected by management, receiving a salary commensurate with one's position and training, and having a voice on the job. These all prove to be more powerful than such traditional trade union concerns as job security or health or retirement benefits.

A slight majority (51%) of professionals are less than satisfied with the support and respect they receive from

top management. Engineers are the most content, with 56% saying they are very or fairly satisfied, and IT professionals offer a mixed assessment (49%). Both teachers (46%) and nurses (40%) are more negative than positive. Once again, we see evidence that many professionals believe their status is being undermined, especially in nursing and teaching.

When it comes to receiving salaries and annual raises they consider fair for their position and training, once again, engineers express relatively high satisfaction (60%), while nurses (38%) and teachers (28%) are at the other end of the spectrum, and IT professionals occupy a middle position (52%). The precise language of this question is important, because it addresses professionals' belief that salaries represent more than just purchasing power. In our society, one's salary often is considered a measure of the value of one's work. Nurses' and teachers' low salaries suggest to them that their contributions are not appreciated or valued, and that their dedication and training are not respected.

A similar pattern emerges with respect to professionals' having a voice in decisions that affect them. All groups express considerable dissatisfaction, but it is strongest among teachers (62%) and nurses (63%). This idea of having a voice in decisions that affect you appears to be especially critical for professionals. Lacking a voice is not only personally disempowering; it also means that professionals are often denied the opportunity to do the best possible job or provide the best possible service—a core professional value.

The appeal of having a voice is also indicated by responses to questions about union representation. The most widely accepted positive statement about unions was that they give professionals a stronger voice in decisions on the job (56% agree, 35% disagree).

Among non-organized professionals, the correlation between believing unions provide a voice and approving union representation is quite high: 76% of union supporters, compared to 31% of opponents, say unions give professionals a voice.

Even as many professionals are drawn to the idea of collective representation at work, they have serious reservations and concerns. These are particularly powerful when contemplating union representation (as opposed to participation in a professional association or other employee organization). The survey results suggest that unions face three fundamental obstacles in gaining support from non-organized professional employees.

Obstacle #1: Potential conflict with management. Fully 72% of non-organized professionals agree with the proposition that "unions create a more negative relationship between professionals and management," the highest level of agreement with an anti-union statement in the survey. It is a nearly universal concern among professionals opposed to union representation (87%), but is also shared by many union supporters (57%).

Professionals value a strong relationship with management. The large majority of non-organized professionals have a positive feeling toward their firm's management: 65% say their employers do an excellent or good job of caring about professional employees and treating them fairly. Moreover, it is clear from other survey data that professionals generally have a very positive relationship with their immediate supervisors, even when they have a more critical view of top management. Reconciling the idea of collective representation with a positive labor-management relationship is one of the central challenges facing professional unions.

It is also important to recognize that employee organizations are not the sole or even the primary cause of labor-management conflict. Historically, management in most companies has resisted employees' efforts to achieve collective representation. Today's professionals recognize that they would likely face management opposition; two-thirds of all non-represented professionals predict their management would oppose employee efforts to establish an organization. For most professionals today, deciding to seek representation necessarily involves a decision to engage in conflict with management, not because *they* seek conflict, but because management will resist. Unfortunately, management of-

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Figure 1

Philosophical Differences on Achieving Goals

Question: I am going to read some pairs of phrases, and for each pair, please tell me which statement you agree with more.... People need to join together in groups to get what they want, or people need to rely on themselves to get what they want?

	Non-represented professionals	Unionized professionals
Self-reliance	48%	28%
Working in groups	39%	58%
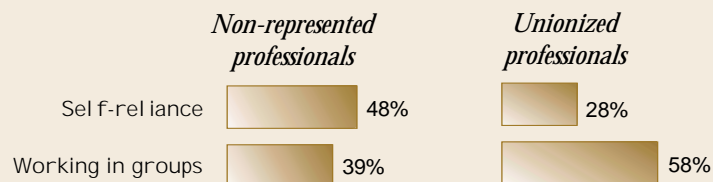
Source: Survey by Peter Hart Research Associates for the Albert Shanker Institute, April 24-May 9, 2000.

ten leaves professionals with a Hobbesian choice: either engage in unwanted conflict, or abandon the desire for professional representation.

Obstacle #2: Can unions deliver? Professionals' desire for a stronger voice at work certainly should not be construed as meaning they are indifferent to the prospects for more concrete gains. A majority of professionals says it is very important that an organization achieve such goals as improving health benefits (61%), salaries and annual pay increases (58%), and employees' retirement benefits (58%). The single most important improvement professionals want to see at work is in the area of salaries and raises.

However, when considering the question of union representation, professionals conduct a kind of cost-benefit analysis, balancing the costs against the anticipated gains. Many seem skeptical about the efficacy of union representation, doubting that a union could succeed in bringing about enough improvements, especially in wages and benefits, to justify the costs. Although 69% of organized professionals believe that unionized professionals receive better wages and benefits, just 39% of non-organized professionals concur. The latter's opinions on this issue are strongly associated with their support or opposition to unions; union supporters agree that unionized professionals are better compensated (65% to 16%), while union opponents disagree (53% to 28%).

The challenge to unions grows when the dues issue is added to the mix. By a substantial 58% to 23% margin, non-organized professionals agree that "generally, it is not worth paying union dues for what you get in return" (union members disagree by a margin of 68% to 27%). Agreement among those who oppose union representation rises to 73%, suggesting that this is indeed a serious barrier to union support. A

majority of engineers (65%) and IT workers (63%) accept this criticism of unions, compared with 47% of nurses.

Obstacle #3: An emphasis on individual achievement. Many professional employees strongly believe in rewarding people based on individual skill and effort. A philosophical debate over individualism versus collective action seems to be at work as professionals make their judgments about representation. Among non-represented professionals, there is a slight preference (48% to 39%) for self-reliance over working in groups to obtain what they want (unionized professionals prefer a group approach by two to one, see Figure 1). Among those who believe that people need to work together to achieve their goals, a 53% majority wants to establish an employee organization. Those who favor self-reliance oppose representation by 57% to 39%.

Three-fourths of all professionals (including a majority in each occupation) agree that "people should be paid according to their work performance, even if it means big differences in pay for people doing the same job." A majority of non-represented professionals also thinks unions make it "more difficult for people who work hard and do a good job to be rewarded." In both cases, engineers and IT professionals express a particularly strong preference for reward based on merit.

Obviously, any organization that seeks to provide representation for workers must engage in some form of group action. Professional organizations must find ways simultaneously to recognize and address professionals' strong sense of individualism if they are to be successful.

Clearly, a tension exists between professional values and union representation. Still, for most professionals, *this is a tension and not a*

contradiction; they do not reject the idea of union representation on principle. Majorities in all four professions—90% of teachers, 76% of nurses, 60% of IT professionals, and 55% of engineers—believe that it is a good idea, at least when management is unreasonable and unfair. The managed care revolution in the health care industry is producing stresses that make it a particularly likely arena for progress in professional representation.

Still, it is difficult to predict what the future will bring for professionals and unions. Tight labor markets and attendant increased job security are giving professionals a new level of confidence to challenge management, but are also pushing employers to make improvements that may make unionization seem unnecessary. The appetite for representation is clearly substantial, but employer opposition is strong and often effective.

What does appear certain is that successful professional unions will look somewhat different from traditional trade unions. Professionals want to belong to an organization with a demonstrated commitment to supporting the profession and its core values. Many also look to a new employee organization to play a role in their own professional advancement and development. Any organization that seeks to represent them must be seen as committed to strengthening the entire profession, not simply advancing the self-interest of members.

In a sense, professionals are looking for a kind of fusion between unions and professional associations. They want an organization that—like a union—will give them a strong voice and provide a higher standard of living for them and their families. In addition, they expect an organization representing them to share their commitment to professional values such as excellence, personal advancement, and public service. ◑