

## **"NOT JUST AN OPERATOR"**

### **How The Manitoba Telephone System (MTS) & Communication, Energy & Paperworkers Union (CEP) Jointly Implemented Work Redesign**

**Presentation By:  
Jo-Anne Swayze  
President, Local 55, CEP  
&  
Alma Bromilow  
M-Power Project Coordinator, MTS**

**November 1993**

**On behalf of the Manitoba Telephone System and the Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada Local 55, I wish to thank you for this invitation to review with you our experience with the Operator Services Re-design Project. We will be presenting the highlights of the past five years and the experience of designing, implementing and participating jointly in this project.**

**This project has been named M-POWER; that stands for and summarizes the goal of the project. There is no meaning attached to the M. The rest stands for Professional Operators With Enhanced Responsibilities. Since it's inception this Operator Service Project has been a joint undertaking of MTS and CWC. MTS is a Crown Corporation and a member of Stentor. It's mission is "To meet the telecommunications needs of all Manitobans with the right solutions, outstanding service and superior products."**

**MTS employs over 4500 people throughout the Province with major administration centers in Winnipeg, Brandon, Selkirk and Thompson. There are approximately 650 Operators. Operator Services Offices are located in these cities and in several smaller communities. MTS is 98% Unionized. Employees are represented by three Unions: The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers representing Craft, The Telecommunications Employees Association of Manitoba representing Management, and the Communication Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, representing Clerical and Operators.**

**In November of 1992, the name of the union changed with a merger between the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada (CWC), the Energy and Chemical Workers Union and the Canadian Paperworkers Union. The new union is called the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, (CEP) representing 140,000 members from coast to coast to coast. The CEP is affiliated to the Canadian Labour Congress and all subordinate bodies. The Local changed from number 5 to 55. At MTS, the CEP has two Locals, Local 7 representing clerical staff and Local 55 which represents the Operators. We will use the names CEP Local 55 and CWC Local 5 in the presentation to maintain the historical perspective.**

Over the next 45 minutes we will:

- \* Provide a Historical Perspective
- \* Review the Project structure and Process
- \* Discuss the Decision Making Process used on the Project.
- \* Give you an update on the current status.
- \* Review the work of several Joint Task Forces, how MTS/CWC have worked together to solve problems and bring about change.
- \* Review the benefits to MTS/CWC

In 1986 there was a power surge at our Winnipeg Office. The power outage caused the screens on our Operator Positions to shut off and come back on in a surge. Soon after, Operators in our Long Distance Office experienced what we called sensations or shock like incidents. These varied from tingling in the finger tips, numbness in their face to an operator being taken to the hospital by ambulance.

There was a STOP WORK Order issued for our Directory Assistance office in January of 1986. In the beginning; the incidents were only being reported in our Directory Assistance office; by the summer of 86 they were being reported in our Long Distance office. The number of incidents that were reported throughout the whole history were 300, effecting about 75 to 100 operators. We have Operator Services throughout the province yet all the shocks were reported in one building in Winnipeg.

Technical investigations occurred throughout this period of time. There were internal and external people conducting investigations, trying to understand what was happening and trying to determine whether there was a problem with the equipment.

In September of 1986 the Operators exercised their right to refuse unsafe work. In October of 86 the Winnipeg Toll office was closed and a Stop Work Order was issued. Remedial measures continued to be tried. Operators were moved from this building to other buildings and locations. This involved travel and organizational difficulties for both MTS and the Operators.

The direct cost to MTS over this time was over one million dollars. The emotional trauma was great. This situation was difficult for MTS managers and the CWC Executive. No one knew whether this was a technical problem or whether someone was playing a cruel joke. There were rumors that a technician some place was zapping operators. It was a real dilemma with a lot of fear and concern.

The technical investigations said the equipment was safe. It stated that although there was electrostatic discharge there was nothing that would create the kind of response we were seeing.

In 1987 an external biomedical engineer by the name of Monty Raber delivered a joint report which pulled together all the investigations that had been done. The report indicated that all the equipment was safe. The recommendation was to continue the efforts

to minimize the electrostatic discharge. The Raber Report recommended that MTS improve the work area and that there be JOINT LABOUR MANAGEMENT effort to achieve better communication, resolve grievances and improve working conditions.

While the technical investigation were going on Human Resources had become involved. The research they did suggested that this would occur in an environment where there was a breakdown in the ability to cope with the stress inherent in highly automated, repetitive, routine closely measured, high productivity tasks. Occupational Health and Safety in the U.S. was looking at it, and Australian Telecom was reporting a similar situation.

In February of 1988, MTS and CWC agreed to work together on a joint project. Certainly the motivation for both organizations was the crisis, we had a disruption to customer service and incredibly negative media attention along with the high cost of the unsuccessful technical investigations.

I said a minute ago this was looked upon as a reaction to stress a highly repetitive work situation. Let me describe to you what Operator Service's was like. The operators are key to good customer service, they efficiently give information and provide service to a variety of customers. MTS operators handle over 200,000 customer contacts daily, each operator handles 700 - 1000 calls per day.

At this point they were being remotely monitored. When they wanted to go to the washroom they almost had to raise their hand and say "Please may I?". Coffee breaks were 15 minutes exactly, you unplugged and plugged back 15 minutes later, not earlier because then you'd have too many operators on the board and not later because then you would not have enough operators on the board. This is a very closely measured organization.

Modern operators felt like an extension of the machine rather than valued for their contribution. Operators were given technical training but were limited in the education that would broaden their knowledge of the Corporation, it's business, it's products and service.

Operator Services Managers were also under pressure. The way the organization defined the operator's job also defined the way the managers were to manage. The front line manager in Operator Services was a disciplinarian and an enforcer of rules. During this crisis the Managers went to Human Resources requesting help. They needed to be better informed, to learn to communicate, to have more autonomy and decision making authority. They needed more training and development to help them manage in the 80' and 90's. Neither the Operators nor the managers respected the other's situation. It was the external consultants that provided that link later on in the process.

There were many external forces influencing MTS at that time. Operator Services was subject to intense technological change, competition was looming on the horizon; all of these forces were coming to bear at the same time. Precipitated by the shock like incidents,

focused by the developmental needs of managers and the Raber report, there was a readiness to look at an innovative program.

How did we get this to be a Joint Project? Human Resources had researched an article by Gareth Morgan of York University and they arranged to talk to him. He was up front with us and advised us that it was so important to involve the Union that he wouldn't talk to us until we had their approval. With Gareth Morgan's help we identified all of the key stakeholders. They were numerous. We began by working with the front-line executive of both CWC and MTS.

With the reports supporting the investigations we explained our plan for an approach to this problem. We asked for agreement and our strategy was to request their support to sponsor us to the next level in their organization. We kept going upward until together; both MTS and CWC ended up at the Provincial Ministers office. It was important to get that kind of political support. Our Conga Line took us 6 months before we walked all the way through both of these organizations. This was the key to providing the right foundation for this project. The Pilot finally started in February of 1988.

I began working on this project in Feb. '88 when the CWC Vice President of the Western Region asked me to sit on the Start up Committee. The Start up Committee consisted of 3 union members and 3 managers. It was our responsibility to get budget approval for the project, to select the external consultant and to select the members of the Design Team.

We secured budget approval from the MTS Executive and selected Bert Painter, a Social Scientist with the B.C. Research Council and Helen Maupin of the Workplace Innovation Centre, MB as external consultants.

Five of us remained on to be members of the Design Team. The Design Team also consisted of 3 union and 3 management and like the Start Up Committee was jointly co-chaired and minutes were kept of our work.

In May '88, a Letter of Understanding was signed by MTS and CWC. This letter of understanding defined the project. In the Letter, MTS made

- \* the financial commitment
- \* Operators were exempted from the usual productivity measures
- \* Exemptions from some of the terms of the contract and MTS policies
- \* participation was voluntary
- \* The union agreed that no policy grievances would be filed against the project
- \* implementation by mutual agreement only

The Design Team developed an Action Statement that guided our work.

"To trial organizational and managerial systems and processes that will improve the working environment by reorganizing work, improving communication, empowering employees and managers to be more directly involved in decisions while maintaining and improving the level of customer service."

As Design Team members, we knew that we did not have all of the ideas for change. We also knew that it was important to involve as many people as possible in the project. We held Educational Sessions for 90 operators and managers. These sessions included mini lectures on Socio-technical principles, work redesign and we had guest speakers from Mountain Bell who had conducted an change project in Arizona in the early 80's. The educational session ended with these participants green lighting there ideas for change in Operator Services.

Forty-five of these participants attended sessions we called Design Panels. They started with the ideas generated at the end of the Educational sessions, added more and worked on concepts for change. It total, about 30 different concepts resulted and became the framework for the Design Team to use in setting up the Trial Office.

The Trial office opened in November '88 with 40 operators and one manager selected by lottery from a list of volunteers. The size and structure of the office was a trial in itself, the traditional offices were either very large, over 100 operators with 4 or 5 managers or small remote offices with a staff of 25 and 1 manager.

We redesigned the work by including both long distance and directory assistance equipment in the office and cross trained operators to work both services. The traditional offices contained one service and very few operators had the chance to learn both.

We enriched the jobs by rotating the operators through other job functions in the office. The administrative and clerical support functions were traditionally done by one person, in the Trial Office the job was divided into 4 tasks and several operators rotated through the job. The In Charge responsibility was also given to the operators and any one of them could be in charge of the office when the manager was not present.

We believed the operators were empowered in the running of their office. There was an office committee that consisted of the manager, a steward and 3 operators. This committee established office policy and was involved in most managerial decisions. Discipline and individual job performance were still the manager's responsibility. All decisions were made by consensus, the committee had a chair and minutes were kept.

We asked the operators to take risks to provide better customer service. Over the years, guidelines about handling customers and different types of calls had become hard fast rules from which no one could deviate. We told the operators that they could take risks and deviate from the practices if they believed that it resulted in good customer service.

Communication was improved. Monthly meetings were conducted by the office committee with the staff in the Trial Office. The committee set the agenda. It included office policy issues as well as customer service issues.

Education was increased in the Trial Office. Many of the operators were eager to get involved but in many cases lacked the skills required. Not only did they lack some of the technical skills, they needed education on how to work in a committee environment so courses were conducted on problem solving, communication & feedback, consensus decision making, conflict resolution and leadership.

The Management role was changed. We asked the front line manager to become the unit manager, the team leader, a coach and a mentor instead of being the enforcer of the rules.

The trial duration was 8 months and the Trial office continued on until the reorganization recommendation was implemented.

After the Trial Office opened, the Design Team began to discuss potential recommendations that could arise from the Project. The question became, who will make the decision on our recommendations? Under the guidance of our Consultant, the Design Team invited key individuals in senior positions of the union and the company to form a Committee called the Trustees. The group consisted of 3 MTS Vice Presidents, initially, Customer Service, Human Resources and the Executive VP, and the CWC National Representative and the Presidents of the 2 Locals who were the interim bargaining committee.

The first meetings were of an educational nature and were filled with posturing. Both sides, especially the union, were suspicious of the process. This was a new way of making decisions for CWC and MTS. The consultant lead the group through the process of change and discussed the theory and philosophy. We also discussed the Trial Office and what was happening there in terms of change and potential recommendations to prepare them for the package.

In July '89, the Design Team presented the Trustees with the 22 recommendations. The Design Team disbanded and two members remained to validate the evaluation data and to play a resource role for an Interim group established by the Trustees. This interim group consisted of the CWC Trustees and 3 MTS managers who researched the recommendations and did an independent analysis to verify the accuracy of the costs and evaluation data. In most cases, they concurred with the recommendations and in some cases added new ideas and improved upon the justification that the Design Team had presented.

The Design Team conducted a detailed evaluation and collected hard and soft data. The hard data included grievances, customer complaints and commendations, productivity indicators, absenteeism and turnover.

The 2 areas I worked on were grievances and customer contacts received by public relations. One of the conclusions reached was that if a grievance was not settled at the verbal stage, it would progress to the 4th and final step. Very few were settled at Step 2 & 3. One unit accounted for the majority of the grievances, I remember saying it was because

of the managers who were in that unit and a senior manager rebutted that it was because of the number of union activists in that unit.

The customer complaints from Public Relations showed that 30% of the complaints pertained to rude and discourteous operators. 40% were directly related to the directory assistance data base, (the number wasn't listed or the operator couldn't find the listing). These statistics supported our recommendation on improving the data base.

The soft data collected included interviews with the operators in the experiment as well as interviews with the "resistors". Some of these individuals were offended that they were labeled this way while others appreciated the opportunity to express their opinions.

A Job Diagnostic survey was done before the Trial Office opened and again 8 months later. The results from the Trial Office staff were isolated and compared to the rest of operator services. We noted that the operators in the Trial office expressed a higher degree of satisfaction in the job and scored higher when asked about opportunities to learn new things and to voice their opinions on office policy.

By March of '90, the Trustees had reached agreement on 9 of the recommendations and put together a document called Fast Forward to the Future. It included a Letter of Understanding, and each recommendation was listed with supporting background material.

This document was given to every Operator Services employee and each one had the opportunity to attend a presentation to discuss the package on company paid time. A total of 43 two hour presentations were held throughout the province. Union members voted to ratify the package and the MTS Executive Committee approved it.

Two recommendations applied solely to management and 3 were referred to the negotiation process. 2 more have been dealt with through subsequent joint ventures. A tentative Agreement has been reached on 3 more and 3 are left. They deal with job reclassification and a new concept in the wage structure, obviously very sensitive issues for the CEP to deal with. The Trustee Committee continues to meet to discuss outstanding recommendations, new joint initiatives and problems that arise with the implementation.

An evaluation is currently underway to assess the impact of the Project after the implementation of the 9 recommendations. That report supports the change to date, identifies that change has been slow and challenges the Trustees to look at structural change within Operator Services to encourage a higher degree of empowerment and participative management.

One of the weaknesses of the process was the lack of involvement of the Regions in the early stages. The shocks were viewed as a Winnipeg problem, therefore the Project and the recommendations were viewed as a Winnipeg solution. However, The Letter Of Understanding and 9 recommendations impacted Operator Services throughout the

province. In an attempt to overcome this resistance, a Regional Vice President was added to the Trustee Group and union and management regional liaisons were selected to lead the implementation in the province. The Liaison Group meets quarterly to discuss problems, generate solutions and coordinate implementation ideas.

The two M-POWER Project Coordinators represented the company and the union. Jo-Anne was the Vice-President of the Local and I had been in the management ranks for 8 years. It was our responsibility to implement the 9 Recommendations reflecting both work redesign and change in the work process.

MEDIUM SMALL WORK GROUPS: required a physical move of equipment and relocation of staff from three large groups with specific services {numbering 300 operator with definite services} to six groups with both Services.

ELIMINATION OF REMOTE MONITORING: was immediate.

CROSS TRAINING: - Gives the Operators and Service Assistants training to be equally competent in Long Distance and Directory Assistance. It was felt that this would give some variety to the operators daily job. The plan leaned heavily on the individual responsibilities of the Operators to maintain their new skills. We empowered them. Managers were to encourage their work groups to maintain their skill by following the established program.

When push came to shove the Managers took the quick painless route to solve a surge in work by bringing Service Assistants back to their unit off and on through out their cross training, leaving some of them without sound skills.

We learned that when change becomes uncomfortable people will ignore what doesn't feel good. They had forgotten that this was an enhancement to their jobs, they viewed it as a royal pain and stopped maintaining their skills. The result was poor customer service and confusion in the offices. We have learned a valuable lesson.

Change is a slow process and learning something new is not everyone's challenge. In a structured environment such as Operator Services, to go from the situation where everyone knew exactly what they were doing and put them in an environment where they had to ask one another for answers left them feeling uncomfortable with their role in the changing work place. They had always taken pride in their job knowledge. Information was not freely shared, rules abounded and there was a definite protocol that was followed if one wanted information. The situation made them feel inadequate where once they were "the expert". We have learned to move slowly and to reinforce the process and monitor the learning constantly.

THE ANSWER PHRASE: is MTS ..... SPEAKING, MAY I HELP YOU? It was designed to BRAND the service, and PERSONALIZE it with a name.

What looked to be a simple implementation of this recommendation has proved to be a challenge. It has been a difficult adjustment for the "dyed in the wool" OPERATOR, to move from the reserved unknown voice, with no face; to that of a real person with a name. They site the abuse that some customers heap upon them as a major concern.

**UNLIMITED TRADES:** provides flexibility in Operator Shifts and removed the restrictions on operator's trades.

**CAG AGREEMENT:** Our internal (Central Administration Group) was asked to allow each individual unit to strike an agreement with them to have more flexibility and autonomy for scheduling within each work Unit.

**EDUCATION:** requires 5 days of training per Operator per Year. Portions of the Information Exchange if it contains a presentation from within MTS on products or services is considered educational.

**COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK:** - It was recognized that our operators are front line to the customer, as you heard earlier; one operator handles 700 to 1000 requests from customers per shift. They needed to have accurate information on products and services MTS provides, and to keep the communication channel open within each office to promote a healthy working relationship. This has been accomplished by holding Information Exchanges in every work unit once a month for a two hour period.

To help the operators and managers understand the process and provide some of them an opportunity to learn the skills required to plan and prepare, Information Exchange workshops were held.

**DEDICATED TRAINING:** - Provides a room designed for Long Distance and Directory Assistance training to take place away from the floor of the office and allows training to be uninterrupted.

All of these have led to the involvement of MTS Management and Local 55 in three joint ventures. I'll take a few minutes to tell you of these projects.

For those of you who have never worked as an operator, I would like to explain that their job is 24 hour coverage, 7 days a week, with split shifts, scheduled coffee breaks and scheduled lunch breaks.

Our traffic is measured every fifteen minutes by the volume of calls and the Operators are scheduled accordingly. An operator could work a different shift every day of the week. To an operator, their hours of work are the most important part of their job.

In 1986 when the walkout happened, MTS realized they needed to maintain survivability in case of a disaster. For the first time Operator Services maintained a satellite office.