

Play-By-Play Nuclear Refueling Newsletter
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NEED/OPPORTUNITY

During refueling outages, nuclear power generating stations rely on help from hundreds of temporary supplemental employees to complete thousands of maintenance tasks. For its 30-day October/November 2006 outage, the Nebraska Public Power District's Cooper Nuclear Station (CNS) hired 822 temporary employees.

Because of a national shortage of skilled nuclear industry contract labor, contractors found themselves with 175 temporary employees with no nuclear industry experience and an additional 200 or so with minimal nuclear plant experience from across the nation. Hence, about 375 people—almost half of the temporary workers—had little or no nuclear industry experience.

Nuclear power plants are highly technical facilities, operating under a rigorous, nuclear safety-conscious work environment. During refueling outages, massive equipment is moving and being moved. More than 1,500 employees are working 12 hours a day, six days a week, sometimes in conditions of low light and high heat and humidity. And everything must be done precisely. Outages are intense and hectic. It takes years to become fully acclimated and acculturated to the way work must be done in a nuclear station.

Clearly, a nuclear plant is not a good place for a large number of beginners. Inexperienced employees are much more vulnerable to serious errors and to injuries from industrial accidents. The long hours are tiring, making inexperienced workers still more vulnerable. Consequently, turnover is high among neophyte outage workers—often 30 percent or more. But high turnover could extend the outage at a cost to the utility company of up to US\$1 million per day because replacement workers are simply not immediately available. For that reason, CNS could not have high turnover.

- CNS needed to coach, mentor and educate supplemental employees every day to reinforce crucial nuclear safety-conscious work environment behaviors, and to keep employees focused, alert and attentive.
- It needed to get temporary employees engaged and interested in the outage so they felt they had a stake in the outage, and would be less inclined to quit before the outage was over.
- The national labor shortage may continue for many years, so a large number of industry newcomers may be a fact of life for a long time. The 2006 outage was an opportunity to establish a measurable baseline for communicating effectively with inexperienced temporary employees in future outages.
- If the desired relationship could be established with the supplemental employees, it would give CNS the opportunity to convey positive nuclear energy messages to other people across the nation, which is a strategic goal for the entire industry.
- Temporary employees are notorious for being disinterested and disengaged, and for ignoring outage communications. To meet any of the company's needs, the

team, above all, needed to find a way to move temporary employees to read the messages.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW

For a number of reasons, a daily outage newsletter has proven to be the most efficient way to convey information to temporary employees during an outage. But with no stake in the business, they're not inclined to read the usual company literature. It is difficult to convey much of anything if people won't read the newsletter. So the strategy was to quickly develop a strong, loyal readership by producing a newsletter that employees loved and wanted to read.

To create a widely-read publication, CNS tapped into several characteristics:

- It's difficult to obtain a badge even to visit a nuclear station. Actually being able to work in a nuclear power plant is not just a job, but is a rare and somewhat exotic experience.
- Because it's an experience, employees are eager to tell family and friends about it when they return home.
- It's difficult to describe the experience in words, so employees need to be able to *show* what it was like.
- People like photos, especially of themselves and people they know. Even if they won't read anything else, they will read photo cutlines. If cutlines are written so they convey vital messages along with human interest information, you have a good chance of getting your message across.
- People like to feel useful and valuable, and they like to solve problems.

The newsletter, called *Play-by-Play*, was an upbeat "cheerletter" full of colorful, high quality photos of people. The content was specifically tailored to appeal to temporary workers, to make them feel good about themselves and their work, and to enable them to show others what it was like to work in a nuclear power plant. It was printed on a duplex color photocopier and distributed via take-one news stands in each of the 14 temporary employee break areas.

CNS published almost 400 high-quality "environmental portraits" of employees at work in a nuclear plant environment. Employees were identified by name, and the cutlines described what they were doing and why it was important. The faces were recognizable even in the smallest photos. At every opportunity, the cutlines also included nuclear safety conscious work environment information. CNS promoted teamwork by taking yearbook-style photos of work teams. The team photos also made the newsletter more popular. Information was friendly, readable and interesting, illustrated with photos to the maximum extent possible. The narrative information sought to show people how they could make a genuine contribution to safety.

To get temporary employees actively engaged, *Play-By-Play* invited guest workers to join the hunt for potential problems. When an employee uncovered a potential problem, he or she received a Good Catch award and a nice pat on the back in *Play-By-Play*. Good Catch helped temporary employees feel valued and appreciated, and spurred them to actively look for problems. The Good Catch accolades, in turn, made the newsletter even more popular.

For the final piece of the strategy, CNS distributed a large number of mailing labels in all the temporary employee break areas, inviting them to fill one out to receive *Play-By-Play: Relive The Experience*, a free, bound volume of all the issues of *Play-By-Play*, plus a CD of all the issues in PDF format and all the photos in JPEG format. The hope was that *Play-By-Play* would be so popular that people would want to keep the newsletter as a souvenir to show family and friends. *Relive the Experience* was a way to once again measure the level of readership and also convey the nuclear safety-conscious work environment message to Americans who might otherwise be unreachable. To the company's knowledge, if successful, it would be the first time an outage publication intended for employees would grow "legs" to become a useful public information piece for the nuclear industry.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The audience was everybody working at CNS during the refueling outage, especially inexperienced, supplemental employees who were at greatest risk for errors, injuries and high turnover. CNS also hoped to communicate with family and friends of temporary employees to promote nuclear energy. Temporary employees do not have computer access, so they receive printed copies of the newsletter. Permanent employees receive it via intranet posting.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. Generate a documented, daily, take-one, "paid" outage newsletter with a circulation of at least 100 copies. Paid circulation is the gold standard in publishing. If a temporary employee takes the time and effort to go get a publication from the news stand, the person is very likely to read it. That's probably as close to paid circulation as one will get with an employee publication. Because employees leave back issues on break room tables for a week or longer, each copy is eventually read by at least four people. Since CNS wanted to reach the 375 inexperienced temporary workers, they were reasonably certain that 100 copies would eventually pass along to reach all the target readers. Besides, there is no way CNS could print a copy for every employee, and if they did, the break area tables would be awash with copies.
2. Recruit supplemental employees to identify and correct at least 10 potential safety and quality deficiencies through a Good Catch campaign. That would represent 10 potential errors or injuries avoided. Good Catch was promoted in *Play-By-Play*, and for this first-time effort CNS would have been pleased to have 10 Good Catches, so that was the goal.
3. At least 50 supplemental employees request *Relive the Experience*. The 50-copy goal would satisfy the company if they achieved it, and it would give CNS a solid baseline for future outages.
4. Limit temporary worker turnover to not more than 19 people—about 5 percent of the inexperienced workforce; have zero lost time accidents and have no hot work-related fires inside the power block (temporary employees are responsible for virtually all hot work fires caused by welding and grinding). Many factors play a role in whether sitewide goals like this are met. But the entire purpose of *Play-By-Play* was to reinforce the nuclear safety-conscious work environment, and get temporary employees interested and engaged. If the station did not meet the broad outage goals, the publication certainly had to share accountability.

IMPLEMENTATION and CHALLENGES

Budget/costs: The station communicator was the editor and did all the work on the publication, using existing resources. There was no specific budget for the outage newsletter. Out-of-pocket costs included:

- US\$200 for blank CDs and CD envelopes.
- US\$1,600 for toner for the color copier.
- US\$175 for take-one cardboard newsstands.

Because of time constraints, the maximum publication size was four pages, and the maximum number of copies that could be printed every day was 240. The photos were small so more of them could be published. Readers want to be able to recognize faces in photos, so the pictures had to be the highest quality possible. The photos were taken under difficult conditions of low light, in large spaces and often at a distance. Consequently, images needed extensive, time-consuming work in Photoshop.

The photocopier produced good quality output but was quite slow. Keeping circulation records and writing down outline information for every person photographed was also time-consuming. As a result, the editor's work days were much longer than 12 hours.

A high quality, four-color daily publication takes a lot of time and energy. But it paid off because the editor and his camera were so visible in the workplace for so many hours every day that the editor established a friendly relationship with the temporary workforce. This also served to boost readership and loyalty to the publication and employee engagement. Therefore, the challenges were worthwhile.

MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION

Objective 1: CNS tracked circulation using the simple "drop sheet" system news vendors have used for decades. The company exceeded its 100-copy paid circulation goal every day, except for the first four days of the outage. The daily average paid circulation was 174 copies.

Day	Press run	Left over	Paid circ.	Day	Press run	Left over	Paid circ.	Day	Press run	Left over	Paid circ.
0	100	30	70	12	220	0	220	24	220	3	217
1	100	28	72	13	220	3	217	25	220	0	220
2	100	12	88	14	240	2	238	26	220	18	202
3	100	7	93	15	240	23	217	27	210	22	188
4	140	0	140	16	220	12	208	28	210	31	179
5	140	12	128	17	240	19	221	29	combined with day 30		
6	140	18	122	18	220	24	196	30	160	9	151
7	160	22	138	19	220	0	220	31	160	21	139
8	180	33	147	20	240	17	223	32	160	0	160
9	160	12	148	21	240	14	226				
10	180	5	175	22	240	34	206				
11	220	0	220	23	220	28	192	Total	6040	459	5581

Temporary employee disinterest in outage communications is legendary across the industry. In the past, just placing one copy on each table and hoping people would read it was the norm. Getting temporary employees to be interested enough to go out of their way to fetch a copy from a newsstand is a real achievement. And getting them to collect them and take them home is a major feat. CNS firmly believes that all members of its target audience eventually read most issues. Even permanent employees were enthusiastic.

Objective 2: Good Catch was very successful. The goal was 10 good catches during the entire outage. By the end of the outage, there were more than 60 Good Catch awards, most of them by temporary employees. Some Good Catches were so significant they would have caused major problems if they had not been caught. In future outages, 60 Good Catches will be the baseline goal.

Objective 3: CNS would have been pleased if 50 people liked *Play-By-Play* so much that they wanted to take it home to show it off. The company ended up with 187 requests for *Relive the Experience*. Furthermore, a number of employees collected issues every day to take home. That means more than 187 people are out there spreading the good word about Cooper and the nuclear industry.

Objective 4: Contractors report that only about nine temporary workers quit before they completed their assignment, far below the expected—and feared—turnover. And although there were two OSHA recordable injuries, there were no lost time accidents. Despite large amounts of welding and grinding, there were no hot work fires whatsoever.

Evaluation

They liked it. They really liked it. When the editor entered the break areas with that day's issue, workers rushed up and grabbed copies before he could put them into the news stand. Many said the daily outage publication was a high point of the day for them. CNS demonstrated that an outage publication really can be popular with readers and be an effective communication tool. The company hit upon a communication formula that could become an industry benchmark for connecting with otherwise disengaged and disinterested temporary employees. CNS established a solid baseline on which future outage communication efforts will be built. And they have found a way to make an internal outage newsletter for employees become a public image booster for the industry. It doesn't get much better than that.