Managers at Wellington Associates think it is a great place to work, but the support staff doesn’t see it that way.

DOES THIS COMPANY NEED A UNION?

BY CONSTANTINE VON HOFFMAN

The weekly senior-management meeting had just begun. Jane Wellington, founder and CEO of Wellington Associates, a company devoted to analyzing the high-tech industry, had taken her seat. She was pulling out her copy of the agenda when Elvin Cusack, head of human resources, raised a finger in the air. "Not to get this meeting off track even before it starts, but we have a problem I think you should all hear about sooner rather than later," he said.

Cusack was as genial a person as Wellington had ever known, but the look on his face told her that this was serious. "What is it?" she asked.
"I was just informed—about two hours ago, in fact—that the United Office Workers Union has started a campaign to organize some of our staff."

"Oh, that's not a problem," said Neil Whetson, head of IS, from across the table. "Cusack, the look on your face had me worried there for a minute. Jane has made very sure that we've got some of the best pay and bennies in the industry."

Cusack shook his head. "It's not the analysts they're targeting. It's the support staff."

"What?" The question came from Elaine Bellows, who ran the New Media Research Group, but looking around the
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Table, Wellington could see it on everyone's face. She imagined that the same look was on her face as well. It had never occurred to her that such a thing might happen. She thought back to the day nearly 20 years ago when she had started the company. Back then—in fact, up to the point when the company had employed more than 30 people—she had done all her own recruiting. Now there was a full-fledged human resources department in place, and Wellington Associates employed more than 200 people to analyze and predict the course of technological change for more than 1,000 clients. Was she really so removed from those days, from her early management style, that she hadn't noticed the discontent growing throughout her support staff?

Wellington snapped out of her reverie. "They won't have a chance," Bellows was continuing. "We're a professional organization, not some steel mill." Bellows was the newest unit director and, at 27, one of the youngest ever in the company's history. She had a brash, impulsive management style that motivated many but rubbed some the wrong way. Right now, Wellington could identify

"Yes, let's stay away from that," Wellington spoke up. "Well, though, I have to say this has come as an unpleasant shock. What are our realistic options?" She looked around the conference table.

"Those people are just whiners," Whetson said, this time with a serious face. "We pay top dollar. We have flextime options. Our medical and dental plans are good, and we even have a day care center. We have a generous vacation package. And we're a good name, let's not forget that. When people leave here, they have the Wellington name on their résumés. That counts for a lot in this business."

Wellington frowned. "Neil is right," she said. "But I'm not sure all that is pertinent. Elvin, what's going on here? Who told you about this, anyway?"

Cusack thought for a moment before speaking. "First, I'd like to apologize. I've been here almost two years now, and I should have seen this coming. If anyone has dropped the ball on this, it's me."

Wellington waved her hand in a get-to-the-point kind of way. Cusack nodded and continued. "Second, let me talk for a moment about what I was told this morning. I basically sat and listened to one of my own staff members—on the condition that I wouldn't reveal that person's identity. Neil may have brought up some valid points, but judging from what I heard, the company looks very different from the support staff's point of view."

"First, this is a two-tier company. Wellington Associates is willing to go to just about any length to accommodate the professional staff, whom we see as our vital asset. They all earn it; we ask a lot of them. And as the company's performance shows, they deliver."

"But we don't do the same for our support staff. We pay well initially, but we have very strict policies about raises. Even our best clerical workers rarely get anything more than a 5% raise, and the norm here is 2% or 3%. When it comes to sched-

Wellington Associates will go to almost any length for the analysts. But it's another story for support staff.

with the people Bellows annoyed, but Cusack wasn't fazed.

"I'm not so sure about that," he said. "The union was invited in. Apparently, a number of the clerical people are very unhappy."

"Fire 'em," said Whetson, with a half smile.

"I doubt you mean that," replied Cusack, "but in any case, I'm pretty sure that a move like that would violate the law. Not to mention the PR problems it would create."

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particular benefit offerings quite deliberately, and we know that they are very competitive."

"Agreed," Cusack said. "And I've never had a problem with our package. But it wasn't until this morning that I really began to be aware of how much resentment our policies have fostered. I have to say, though, that I don't think it was our pay and benefit packages—even our rather ad-hoc flextime policy—that landed us in this situation. The crux of the matter, as it was presented to me, has to do with respect."

At that, several people around the table rolled their eyes and groaned. "Precisely my point," Cusack said. "You and I don't see the problem. But apparently, the impression we give is that we believe when a support person leaves he or she can be readily replaced. And to an extent, I do believe that—especially since the company is doing so well right now. But the way the support staff sees it, the people who've worked with us for years don't seem to matter.

"One issue that was waved in my face this morning was the fact that we rarely, if ever, promote from within. There are support people here who've been working in the field for a decade. We all know Ed Mixner in Interactive Tech is the person to talk to if you want a thumbnail sketch of what's going on over there. Anyone ever think of making him an analyst?"

"I'd suggest that we not start pointing fingers right now, Elvin," Bellows broke in. Interactive Tech came under her purview. "Mixner is not qualified to become an analyst."

"Sorry," Cusack said quickly, holding up a hand. "I didn't mean to single anyone out. I'm just trying to make a larger point. We provide only limited opportunities for our support people to further their education. Professionals get reimbursed for pretty much any workshop they choose to attend. We're constantly sending them to conferences, symposiums, seminars, you name it. Clerical workers get reimbursed only if they get a B or better in a course, and there's no arrangement for them to have time off to go to classes in the daytime.

"Now, again, I realize that even though I didn't set up these policies, I have run them without question since I got here. And I guess that from my point of view they were—and are—fair, I still think we give support people a good deal. It's only when you stack it up against what we give our professionals—as someone did for me quite bluntly this morning—that it starts looking shabby."

"For God's sake, we're only talking about secretaries here," said Bellows in exasperation.

"I started out as a secretary," Wellington said quietly. "The only reason I got further was that my boss could see that I was interested in his business. He started giving me the trade magazines and introducing me around to his clients and contacts. Finally, he encouraged me to go back to school."

"Which you did on your own time, as I recall," said Whetson, one of the few people in the room who was there when Wellington founded the company.

"Yes. Well. All right." Wellington said, frowning. "There are a lot of things for us to think about here and to discuss—when we've all had a little time to absorb the situation. Elvin, has a vote been scheduled? And if so, could the union win?"

Cusack shuffled the papers in front of him, then looked up. "No, I don't think a vote's been scheduled, and yes, I think the union could win. As I understand it, the regional union leaders are going to try to make this a showcase campaign. They think their future lies in organizing white-collar workers, and they want to make us an example. The truth about a '90s company,' was how I heard it. My sense is that the national union is willing to put a good deal of money into this."

"And we'll be putting a good deal of money into it if we find ourselves forced into extensive negotiations," Whetson added.

"My first thought is that we should meet with a group of our support people and find out what they think—" Wellington began.

"Jane, no," Bellows interjected. "We need legal counsel before we even whisper to any of our support people that we know anything about the situation."

Wellington started again. "I'm sure that we could gently probe our closest assistants to get a sense of whether the threat is as real as it seems here—"

This time it was Cusack who cut her off. "Elaine is right, I'm afraid. Our first step has to be getting an attorney involved. I was leery of even saying anything more than 'Oh,' and 'Go on,' this morning."

"But getting counsel involved will create even more friction than there apparently already is," Wellington said, frustrated. "I'm at a loss. And I'm more than a little angry as well. Why didn't the support people approach us first if they felt they were being treated unfairly? My own assistants could have talked to me—why didn't they? Do they even know about any of this?"

Wellington could hear her voice starting to rise, then she cleared her throat and continued. "I feel as though I've been given a problem but not the opportunity to solve it. I have to say I don't think our policies are unfair. I am willing to listen, and I am willing to compromise to a certain extent. We're just not the kind of company that has a union. Are we that out of touch with the people we work with?" She looked around the room. "What is our next step?"

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