

Unions dramatically shift their administrative practices, research says

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Administrative practices of U.S. unions have dramatically shifted during the past 20 years, according to research led by Lois S. Gray, the ILR School's Jean McKelvey-Alice Grant Professor Emeritus of Labor Management Relations.

According to research by Gray and Penn State professors Paul Clark '79 and Paul Whitehead, [unions](#) are progressively embracing conventional organizational habits.

Their findings suggest "unions have increasingly adopted more formal and systematic budgeting, [strategic planning](#), program evaluation and human resource habits, and have benefited substantially from the implementation of these practices."

The research is based on surveys in 1990, 2000 and 2010 of administrative practices of national unions.

According to the authors, union internal administrative policy and practice is a less frequently explored area of the labor movement, but is increasingly important as unions search for innovative approaches in the face declining membership and increasingly challenging external pressures.

The research found improved union handling of human resources, budgeting and planning – "the kinds of activities that make organizations everywhere more effective."

For example, findings showed annual budget development increased from 65 percent in 1990 to 80 percent in 2010.

Strategic planning showed an increase of 30 percent between 1990 and 2010; 70 percent of unions reported they now engage in the practice.

Program and initiative evaluation more than tripled over the survey timeframe, increasing from 22 percent to 50 percent to 71 percent in 1990, 2000 and 2010, respectively.

Similar increases were also found in hiring and human resource practices through data on HR policies, hiring trends and compliance.

The authors note such findings "illustrate the progress unions have made toward adopting a more systematic approach to organizational administration. The survey data suggest that unions are increasingly adopting more formal, systematic and professional administrative practices."

According to the paper, use of modern management techniques "can save unions money, help the individuals and departments conducting the programs of the union, reduce turnover and encourage greater professionalism in all aspects of the organization."

Whether this evolution in union administrative practices produces improved outcomes for unions and stakeholders could be examined through future research, the authors said, noting that trends indicate unions will continue to adopt such practices.

More information: Evolution of administrative practices in American unions: results from a 20-year study. www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2016/article-american-unions.pdf

Provided by Cornell University

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