



Center for Paper Business and Industry Studies

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CPBIS Research Highlights

Chuck Parsons, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the DuPree College of Management, and Steve Vallas, Associate Professor of Sociology in the School of History, Technology, and Society at Ivan Allen College, have contributed this article on their current research project, “Workplace Transformation and Human Resource Practices in the Pulp and Paper Industry.” The third key member of this research team is Nate Bennett, Professor of Management and Associate Dean at DuPree. Also centrally involved are Ph.D. students Raul Necochea and Brande Burgess. This is the fifth in a series of articles focusing on active CPBIS research projects.

We’ve all seen the glossy photos of the latest, state-of-the-art paper machine, with all its high-tech wizardry. But what does the work system look like that best accompanies such advanced technology? How can a paper mill most effectively organize its human resources—most notably, its operators—in ways that can lead the industry into the 21st century? The answer, most analysts would agree, is one or another variant of a High Performance Work System (HPWS)—a system that depends on the intense involvement and commitment of production workers, who are selected, trained, and motivated to take full responsibility for the running of their machine and its relationships with other departments in the mill, and possibly external customers as well.

Easier said than done.

In the paper industry, the best-known examples of such advanced work systems are usually greenfield plants. In the most successful cases, hourly workers take responsibility for mill operations, and the

distinction between hourly and salaried employees blurs. But the great majority of the industry’s operating facilities are older, brownfield sites—unionized plants whose workforces have a long and proud history of running their machines under traditional forms of work organization. How can such mills make the transition to HPWS? The answer commonly given is: “They can’t. HPWS can only work in greenfield sites, where companies enjoy a blank slate on which to write work rules and norms.”

The problem with this view is that it too quickly writes off one of the most important strengths that traditional paper mills can deploy: the high levels of commitment among hourly employees. Rethinking the conventional wisdom about work systems is especially timely in the current context of economic uncertainty and industry retrenchment—and at a time when union leaders are more supportive of labor-management cooperation than ever before. The time is right for a systematic analysis of the conditions that facilitate workplace change and the benefits it can provide to both mills and employees.

We are launching precisely such a study. Helped by industry insiders, we have begun an ambitious round of data collection, starting with preliminary fieldwork in both greenfield and brownfield sites. Informed by such site visits, we have begun to design a survey questionnaire that will be used (with support from PIMA) for an industry-wide survey of 200 mills in the USA. The initial goal of the study will be to explore the prevalence of non-traditional work systems in the industry, and to tease out the performance outcomes that HPWS seem to provide. A second stage will seek to draw

conclusions about how HPWS seem to affect not only performance but the quality of employment that workers experience as well.

Says Chuck Parsons: “The paper industry has developed an elaborate set of instruments for tracking the production process. The wet end of a paper machine is no longer a mystery to mill personnel. But we have little systematic data about the human side of the production process. We hope to change that.” The result, these CPBIS researchers hope, will be of material benefit to industry managers, union officials, rank and file employees and their surrounding communities.

Paper Summit 2002

PIMA, TAPPI, RISI, and AF&PA, aside from sharing the attribute of being acronyms incomprehensible to the uninitiated, have at least one other thing in common: they are all organizations that, together with quite a few others, will join forces to sponsor a very large gathering of paper people at Atlanta’s Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC), March 4-6. It will encompass several conferences, a trade show, and numerous presentations, including the forecast by RISI economists of the state of the industry over the next two years. This is an opportunity for CPBIS faculty and others to learn by participating and networking. CPBIS will also participate by hosting events in conjunction with the Summit: the PIMA Board of Trustees Meeting, the PIMA Conference Committee Reception, and the PIMA/TAPPI Student Summit Reception. (See below.) To learn more, visit

<http://www.papersummit.net/>

Rethinking the Paper Machine

Oh, oh, oh, one more thing about the Summit... CPBIS will co-sponsor a session at which a select group of industry experts will convene to lead a brainstorming session to identify needs related to a looming problem for the North American industry—the growing gap in paper machine economic returns relative to other major paper producing regions, notably Europe and Asia. Don’t miss it—Wednesday, March 6, 8-12, Room 167, GWCC. For details, contact Jim McNutt.

CPBIS to Host Student Delegates

Among the items slated for the program of the 2002 PIMA/TAPPI Student Summit (Atlanta, March 2-5) will be a not-to-be-missed event co-hosted by IPST and CPBIS. Student delegates will be bussed to

IPST on Monday, March 4, for a 4:00 p.m. program that will include a tour and brief presentations by IPST students and faculty. The program will be followed by a reception, from 6:30 until 7:30 p.m., where the students will be joined by members of the PIMA Conference Committee.

Strategies for Success

Tom Brown, President and CEO of Caraustar Industries, graciously accepted our invitation to visit CPBIS and share his thoughts about formulating business strategies. Tom’s talk was delivered at IPST on January 10 to an audience of more than 50 representatives of CPBIS and the surrounding business community. It was a fascinating and entertaining exposition of how market history and outlook in each of a company’s business segments can be the basis for formulating a successful corporate strategy.

Montreal Bound

A few cold-tolerant representatives of CPBIS will be in Montreal for PaperWeek International, January 28-31. You will find them at the Paper Industry Toolbar booth at EXFOR. Stop by to learn more about us and to explore ways to interact with and benefit from CPBIS.

Upcoming CPBIS/IPST Seminars

We invite everyone in the CPBIS, IPST, Georgia Tech, and Atlanta business communities to attend a series of seminars that promises to be especially interesting. These co-sponsored events will occur over the next few weeks at IPST, 500 10th St. N.W., at 11:00 a.m. in the Kress Auditorium. Each will be preceded by a reception at 10:45 a.m.

Friday, January 25 Dan Cenatempo, Jacobs Consultancy, “Creating Value in Turbulent Times.”

Friday, February 8 Dr. Karl Amundson, E-Ink Corp., “Towards Electronic Paper.”

Friday, February 22 Dr. Robert Wasson, Strategic Decisions Group. Topic: a process for making business decisions objectively.

Other Upcoming Events

February 15 Deadline for CPBIS proposals

March 4-6 Paper Summit, GWCC

March 6 “Rethinking the Paper Machine,” 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., GWCC. (See article above.) ■