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## A Skills Exchange for Unemployed People

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*This paper reports the results of a study of a voluntary skills exchange for unemployed adults in Liverpool. It combines investigation at the organizational level with an interview survey of satisfactions gained by 60 members. Questions posed are how far a skills exchange might go in alleviating the adverse effects of unemployment and then how effective the particular organization was at achieving its potential. Results showed that members attached high importance to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs either within the exchange or in employment. The average satisfaction gained from membership fell short of this. For the small group who were active in the exchange, members were engaged in the equivalent of part-time work. But the broad ideals of the organization and the unfamiliarity of the decision-making setting made it difficult to recruit and retain new members and, hence, increase the organization's impact.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many projects have been set up in recent years in an attempt to ameliorate the effects of unemployment upon individuals. In addition, studies have begun to identify with greater precision what these effects might be. Jahoda (1979) discusses the impact of unemployment in terms of the loss of those latent consequences of employment (time structuring, sharing and widening experience, a sense of usefulness, personal status, and enforcing activity) which meet the more enduring human needs, while Hill (1978) describes, in terms of psychological impact, the phases individuals go through

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as the length of unemployment increases. Morely-Bunker (1982) confirms a DHSS survey that it is activities outside the home which are the first ones to be given up when people become unemployed, and Banks, Clegg, Jackson, Kemp, Stafford, and Wall (1980) found positive correlations between unemployment and lowered mental well-being in unemployed school leavers and adults. If the distinction is made between employment as an economic relationship (Hartley, 1980) and work as structured activity (Shepherd, 1981), the conclusion emerges that effective initiatives for unemployed people must fulfill functions similar to those offered by work and potentially satisfy members' practical, social, and psychological needs.

A skills exchange is one such initiative through which a person may obtain all the satisfactions of working with the exception of monetary payment. This paper describes a skills exchanges which has been running since 1979. It presents the results of an interdisciplinary research activity which has been carried out concentrating on data collected from the middle of 1979 up until the autumn of 1982.

### THE NETWORK

The Network is a resource exchange organization accommodated in the center of Liverpool sponsored by a charitable trust. Facilities include a small office with telephone, a workshop, and lounge. Any person, employed or unemployed, can become a member by signifying some "offer" of skill or time and some "want" to be satisfied. There is no payment in money, exchanges do not necessarily take place reciprocally, and the basis of all transactions is reasonable give and take. The group who established the Network in 1979 expressed its aims in terms of a need "to find practical solutions to the problems of rewarding work" (MCVS, 1980). They felt that a resource exchange had the potential to provide the non-economic functions of employment and that successful operation would lead to changed attitudes in the wider society towards work, the unemployed, and welfare benefits.

The 12 founding members originally hoped for a large-scale operation in an area where the number of registered unemployed is around 100,000. They saw the key operational problems mainly in terms of coping with a large membership. Instead of this extensive impact, however, a smaller organization with average membership of 130 has emerged.

The total number of jobs (exchanges) done by 191 members in the 3 years to June 1982 was 469. The Appendix gives examples of jobs done and illustrates the range of activities undertaken.

The decision-making body is the weekly members' meeting which has rotating chairman and minutes secretary. Day-to-day running of the or-

ganization is carried out by a paid coordinator who was appointed after 1.5 years of operation, to supplement and partially replace a members' rota.

Network members have, in addition to exchange, been involved in group projects, workshops, and social events.

### THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

The research program is action orientated in that it collects data about the organization and its members and feeds this back to the members meeting at regular intervals.

The aim of the research has been to document the development of the organization, its structure and processes, together with an assessment of the satisfactions gained by the members.

#### Method

Activities at the group level have been studied by participant observation backed up by reference to the registers and records maintained by Network. Detailed notes have been kept of all meetings of the decision-making body and there have been *ad hoc* observations of administrative work, general discussions, and social events.

Content analysis, based on the number of times issues have been mentioned, length and frequency of contributions, incidents giving rise to conflict, and decisions made together with observation of dominant persons has allowed the examination of the causes and management of conflict, power, control, goals, and implementation of decisions.

Following a ten-interview pilot study, all available past and present members have been interviewed using a schedule including socioeconomic data, open-ended questions, and specially developed attitude questionnaires.

The 21-statement personal needs satisfaction scale required subjects to report both the importance of and satisfaction with various aspects of involvement in Network. Similar reports were required in relation to importance of the same aspects applied to employment (a scale asking for degree of satisfaction actually obtained from employment was omitted after the pilot study, it made the interview overlong, respondents showing signs of boredom and restlessness).

Subjects were asked to respond to the questions "How important to you is/was (satisfied or dissatisfied are/were you with) this aspect of being a member of Network?" and "How important to you is/was this aspect of doing a job?" Examples of statements in the scale are:

Table I. Summary of Responses to Items in the Scale "Personal Need Satisfaction"

Subscale	Mean scores ( <i>SD</i> )		
	Network		Employment
	Importance response	Satisfaction response	Importance response
Activity needs (four items)	5.5 (1.29)	4.8 (1.48)	6.0 (1.14)
Social needs (four items)	5.2 (1.32)	5.1 (1.33)	5.6 (0.95)
Autonomy needs (three items)	5.2 (1.26)	5.14 (1.04)	5.7 (1.05)
Achievement and recognition needs (three items)	4.8 (1.41)	4.0 (0.85)	5.4 (1.00)
Learning and knowledge needs (three items)	5.6 (1.09)	4.8 (1.46)	6.0 (0.92)
Self-esteem needs (three items)	4.9 (1.11)	5.1 (1.05)	5.8 (2.32)
Number ( <i>n</i> ) in sample	<i>n</i> = 60	<i>n</i> = 46	<i>n</i> = 51

The opportunity to do something.  
 Being able to organize your own time.  
 Feeling a sense of belonging.  
 Having the opportunity to learn new things.

Responses were chosen from a 7-point scale with point 1 being "not at all important" (extremely dissatisfied) and point 7 being "extremely important" (extremely satisfied). A rotated factor analysis was carried out on all the responses, testing for possible solutions involving different numbers of factors. The selection of a six-factor solution and subsequent naming of factors was made on the basis of the perceived meanings of individual scale items, and their weighting on each factor. More precise details of this may be obtained from the authors. The six factors appear in Table I. Factor scores are an unweighted mean of the related responses.

Nineteen statements on attitudes to Network as an organization with question and response scales related to importance and satisfaction as described above, led to the identification of six factors and these appear in Table II. Examples of statements in this scale are:

Having an experienced full-time organizer.  
 Regular contact with members.  
 The development of other Network centers.  
 Advertising for members with particular skills.  
 Making members welcome even if they contribute little.

Eight statements measuring commitment to Network yielded three factors shown in Table II. These statements required responses ranging from "strongly disagree" (point 1) to "strongly agree" (point 7) to the question "Would you please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements?" Examples of statements are:

Table II. Summary of Responses to Items in the Scale "Network Structure and Procedures"

Subscale	Mean scores ( <i>SD</i> )	
	Importance response	Satisfaction response
Aspects of management (four items)	5.4 (1.07)	4.3 (1.07)
Organizational growth and development (three items)	5.8 (1.04)	3.9 (1.18)
Contact with and care of members (four items)	5.8 (0.81)	4.3 (1.20)
Supervision and control of activities (three items)	4.5 (1.56)	4.1 (1.10)
Response to members (two items)	5.7 (1.25)	4.9 (1.32)
Office situation (three items)	5.1 (1.26)	4.3 (1.12)
Number ( <i>n</i> ) in sample	<i>n</i> = 60	<i>n</i> = 46

I feel myself to be part of the Network organization.  
 I don't take the Network organization too seriously.  
 I would not recommend a close friend to join the Network.

The open-ended questions, which were subjected to content analysis for frequency of mention of relevant items or opinions, are:

1. How did you find out about the Network?
2. Why did you join the Network?
3. What happened when you joined?
  - a. Explore experience and events surrounding joining.
  - b. What happened at initial contact?
4. How did contacts, after joining, take place?
  - a. Explore subsequent progress through Network.
5. What wants have you had satisfied? When? How?
6. What offers have you had taken up? When? How?
7. How involved are you in members' meetings?
  - a. Frequency of attendance.
8. What opinion have you of the members' meetings?
9. How involved are you in the office administration?
  - a. Frequency of rota duty.
  - b. Other office work.
10. What opinion have you of the office administration and procedures for getting exchanges carried out?
11. What do you think about group projects?
  - a. Management of them.
  - b. Involvement of self.

Table III. Summary of Responses to Items in the Scale "Organizational Commitment"

Subscale	Mean scores (SD)
Organizational loyalty and identification (four items)	5.0 (1.43)
Organizational involvement (two items)	6.1 (1.12)
Commitment to organizational aims (two items)	5.1 (2.29)
Number (n) in sample	n = 60

12. Why did you leave the Network?  
 13. Is membership of the Network better or worse than doing a job ignoring the fact that network involvement is not paid?

### Sample

Every attempt was made to interview, in their own homes or the Network office, as many members past and present as possible. The samples represent all those available and willing to be interviewed, 60 persons in to-

Table IV. Socioeconomic Data for Interviewees

	n = 60 (see Tables I, II, III)	n = 46 (see Tables I, II)	n = 51 (see Table I)
Employment status			
Unemployed	40	30	35
Employed	17	13	14
Retired	3	3	2
Sex			
Men	33	22	26
Women	27	24	25
Marital status			
Married	18	16	16
Single	42	30	35
Age			
Aged under 21	6	5	5
Aged 22-40	28	22	25
Aged 41-60	20	14	17
Aged 60+	6	5	4
Qualifications			
No qualifications	40	28	32
Some O levels	2	2	2
Above 3 O levels	18	16	17
Time unemployed			
Up to 6 months	7	4	7
7-12 months	11	9	11
Over 12 months	22	11	17

tal (see Table IV). Differences in sample size, according to response, occur because (1) relatively new members and those having little contact with Network were unable to express attitudes of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction), and (2) some members had never been employed or had forgotten what it was like so couldn't respond to the "employment"-orientated questions. Consequently, not all of the 60 answered all the questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented and discussed according to the following key areas:

1. Recruitment and retention of members.
2. Resource exchange activity.
3. Decision making and administration.
4. Satisfaction of members' practical, social, and psychological needs.

Shortage of space has meant that the data from the observations, record analyses, and open-ended questions have not been presented separately in detail, but have been incorporated in the discussion. These detailed analyses are, however, obtainable from the authors. Table I-III summarize the responses to the attitude scales and Fig. 1 is a sociogram of a sample of 125 of the tasks done by all members during the period September 1981 to May 1982.

It should be noted that the responses to the attitude scales have not been subjected to statistical difference testing. The reason for this is that the questionnaire data is intended to be considered in conjunction with the other types of data collected; it is only one indication of members' attitudes to the Network and should, therefore, be viewed in this context.

### Recruitment and Retention of Members

In the responses to open-ended questions, 50% of members mentioned "something to do" and support for the idea of mutuality as the reasons for joining, whereas only 6% expressed a belief in alternatives to employment. The promotion of interest in Network was initially seen as a problem of media access yet it has emerged from responses to the first open-ended question that personal contact is the more successful means of recruitment. These findings match the results of Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olsen (1980) who show how relatively unimportant ideology is in recruitment, whereas, they say that "links to one or more members through a pre-existing or emergent interpersonal tie" coupled with the absence of "countervailing personal networks" (p. 798) dominate. The need for something to do matches one of

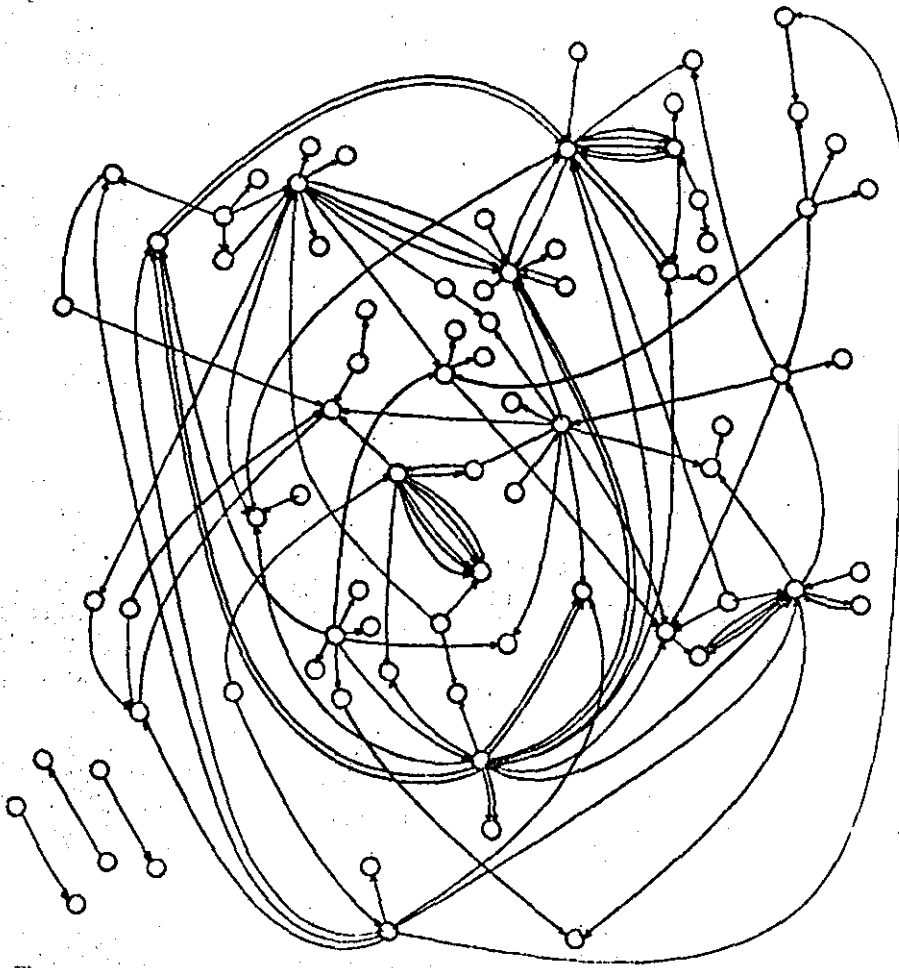


Fig. 1. Sociogram of 125 Exchanges (September 1981–May 1982). Each arrow represents a job done by one member for another, the direction of the arrow being from giver to receiver.

Jahoda's (1979) latent functions of work and also Hepworth's (1980) findings that "the best single predictor of mental health during unemployment was whether or not a man felt his time was occupied" (p. 139).

The impression that many of Network members had limited pre-existing social ties poses a problem in recruitment strategy. Such people are less likely to resist joining an organization yet are more difficult to reach by personal contact. Stark and Bainbridge (1980) stress the importance of the early development of interpersonal bonds in the induction process into organizations requiring membership commitments. However, reference to Table

II shows that although "contact with and care of members" was felt to be very important, satisfaction with this aspect of Network administration was not high. Until the appointment of the full-time coordinator, induction procedures were very haphazard, with the organization failing to satisfy two of the latent functions of work (Jahoda, 1979), maintaining contact outside the family and linking the individual to wider goals and purposes.

Kanter (1969) proposed that the retention of members has three aspects: continuance, cohesion, and control. First, continuance is sustained when members see profit in remaining as members. Network members build up a stake in the organization's success, by investing time in group activities and routine duties such as office work and leaflet distribution. Second, cohesion comes from participation in decision making, group activities such as gardening, and social rituals including parties and outings. Third, control requires a commitment to the norms of the group and is expressed through a constant appeal to ideology and, for new members, a developing mystique and reference to the "old days." Both Knoke (1981) and Etzioni (1975) show how normative control requires an intense flow of positive communication. Network records, observations, and interviews (Table II) show that, for the majority of members, this is lacking.

Only 12% of those interviewed mentioned "wanting a job done" as a reason for joining. Together with the responses to the subscale "organizational involvement" in Table III, this indicates that involvement is not instrumental and, therefore, continuance depends on the satisfaction of personal needs.

#### *Resource Exchange Activity*

An analysis of the pattern of exchanges is shown in Fig. 1. The arrows indicate a job done by one member for another, the direction denoting givers and receivers. Four features can be noted. First, the majority of tasks involved a few members (15 are engaged in six or more tasks) with a large number having been little involved. Second, most individuals were not in balance. There are those who supplied energy and those who consumed it. Since the number of offers always considerably exceeded the number of expressed wants, the consumers of work can be seen as having as important a function as the "doers"; voluntary workers need clients. Following on from this, the third feature is that the 15 more active members tended to do more tasks than receive them (ratio = 94:63). The organization can be seen as satisfying a need for work in a relatively uncritical atmosphere. Fourth, the medium of resource exchange was not a means of connecting most members with the core of the group to allow diffusion of ideology to take place. This is reflected in "commitment to organizational aims" (Table III) which show only moderate commitment to the aims of Network.

Fifty percent of those who enrolled did not take part in any exchange and these, together with those in Fig. 1 whose exchange involvement was limited, will have had difficulty in relating to the "core" group. This pattern has been followed throughout the life of Network with high activity levels being found among some 10% of members.

### *Decision Making and Administration*

More than half of the attendances at the weekly meetings have been by 14 members, a core group with a low turnover (two per year). This stability has enabled learning to be incorporated into a set of organizational assumptions and unwritten procedures, but it has made the meetings less open to newcomers; only 47 members attended over five meetings. It was decided, therefore, that one of the roles assigned to the salaried official from 1981 would be the induction of newcomers into organizational procedures. However, the commitment to democracy and the open style of meetings has enabled members to develop the confidence to speak and share the chairperson role.

Fifty-percent of those interviewees who had attended meetings indicated positive attitudes towards the democratic structure and informality while the other 50% stressed disorganization, feelings of frustration, and minority dominance as problems.

Content analysis of notes kept at meetings identified three main problems which are common in decision making in voluntary bodies (Otto and Armstrong, 1978). First, there has been the absence of clear operational goals by which day-to-day action may be guided. Eighty percent of meetings have discussed at least one item in which conflict over goals was the dominant feature. For example, the conflict between short-term and long-term aims has already been mentioned. Paton (1978) describes how a commitment to openness and democracy may result in high levels of manifest and latent conflict. Because dissent is encouraged by the multiplicity of objectives on offer, members have heightened expectations of being able to influence decisions; they may be confused by the unfamiliar setting and yet the degree of voluntary and personal commitment which has been encouraged will tend to intensify even minor differences.

The second problem, again observed in 80% of meetings, has concerned the structure of, and procedures for, meetings. In nearly three years the group has, in the words of Tuckman (1965), formed, stormed (become aware of conflict and confusion as ambiguities appear), normed (established formal and informal rules toward becoming an efficient unit) and performed (carried out some tasks through these norms). But these stages are not clear cut,

and there are frequent returns to storming and norming as new procedures emerge and become custom and practice.

As the group has become more committed to performing, the third main difficulty has emerged. Indeed, some 65% of meetings have discussed the inadequacy or non-existence of procedures for the implementation of decisions and control. This concern for, but frustration with, "aspects of management" is confirmed by interview responses as shown in Table II. Since the appointment of an official with responsibility in this area, the record has improved. Indeed, the full-time coordinator is significant for the survival and expansion of Network. Sarason, Carroll, Naton, Cohen, and Lorentz (1977) show how a leader's role was crucial to the success of a network in the United States. By means of appropriate cognitive ability and the power to remove blockages, a leader can ensure that success becomes habitual and continues through positive feedback. The task-orientated leader (Bales, 1955) becomes more important than the socio-emotional leadership hitherto provided by the core group.

Office work is a function which all members are invited to take part in. Of the total membership, throughout the 3 years, 127 members have worked in the office for varying periods and 32 members have worked in the office on more than 15 occasions. Even so, 50% of all visits involve only 14 members. Only four of these 14 figured as active members in the analysis of exchanges in Fig. 1. This indicates that office work may be alternative to other activity, perhaps appealing more to members needing temporal structure and defined tasks.

The low involvement of many members in the various Network activities indicates the organization's failure to provide for them the latent function of maintaining contacts outside the family. In addition, responses to the subscale "organizational growth and development" in Table II show a similar failure to link individuals to wider goals and purposes.

### *Satisfaction of Personal Needs*

Table I shows the responses for each factor developed from the "Personal Needs Satisfaction" attitude scale. It indicates the high degree of importance attached to the satisfaction of social and psychological needs both by membership of Network and by conventional employment. Apart from the factor "self-esteem needs," there is a correspondence between reported expectations from Network and from employment. Although people may not be joining Network for ideological reasons, participation seems to lead to an expectation that Network may be an alternative to employment, but a mean score of 5 to the subscale "organizational loyalty and identification" in Table III, indicates that there is some uncertainty.

Table I shows moderate satisfaction of the important need for activity. Data from participation rates in meetings, administration, and resource exchange, shows that for a few people (no more than six at any one period) "working" in Network approximates to part-time employment. However, for others, this important need has yet to be satisfied.

The need for autonomy (Table I), is fairly well satisfied. Members appear to appreciate the autonomy they personally enjoy. However, reference to "supervision and control of activities" in Table II indicates that this aspect of organization is not entirely satisfactory. There is some difficulty in interpreting the responses to both these subscales when taken together. Impressions gained during interviews and observations suggest that members want autonomy for themselves but, in an organizational sense, want to see some more definite system of supervision and control.

The gap between importance of, and satisfaction with the "knowledge" factor may relate to the lack of qualifications of most interviewees who saw this as a handicap in the employment stakes. Membership can offer the important shared experiences outside the home. These are frequently early casualties of unemployment (Morely-Bunker, 1982), so it is not surprising that, as Table I shows, the importance attached to satisfaction of social needs is quite high. Friendship analysis has shown that where few social bonds have been formed, the likelihood of dropping out has increased. Seventy percent of those interviewed were unmarried and 74% had no children living at home. If it is to achieve its potential, Network will need to pay more attention to the processes of building social ties through activity.

## CONCLUSION

A resource exchange may be an alternative to employment in that it can provide for most of its latent functions. The Network has recruited more members and survived for longer than many comparable organizations. It has achieved some success in that many members have had needs satisfied at the practical and sociopsychological levels. These satisfactions come not only from the exchange activity itself but also from participation in the decision-making and administrative process of the organization.

There is no evidence of great economic benefit. Exchange may be more of an idea which initially attracts recruits and legitimates their involvement, but it is clear that this does not, for many, constitute a strong enough bond to ensure continuing commitment. A successful resource exchange could develop as one of a number of related activities which essentially provide the latent functions of employment, especially sharing and widening experience, time-structuring, and the satisfaction of activity itself.

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## APPENDIX: RESOURCE EXCHANGE

### *Examples of Jobs Done by Members for Other Members*

Jobs done by members include typing, repairing lawn mower, hair cutting, plastering, household repairs, assistance with money management, transposing music for blind member, transporting goods, sewing, electrical repairs, gardening, motor bike repairs, carpet laying, and photography.