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Resisting corporate communications: Insights into folk linguistics

Nick Llewellyn and Alan Harrison

ABSTRACT Focus group research is used to examine how employees read corporate communications, supplying empirical evidence of an apparently resilient and shared anti-management discourse at the shopfloor level. The main contribution of the article lies in showing how such traditional attitudes are reproduced through employees' cynical readings of corporate communications. The article complements more conventional modes of discourse analysis by exploring how employees analyse text; how they identify discursive controversies and find evidence of ‘conniving’ management. Considering such processes reveals points of interest about how employees’ folk linguistic competencies are locally deployed in ways that reproduce class-based logics and sentiments.

KEYWORDS anti-management attitudes • corporate communications • discourse analysis • folk linguistics • resistance

Introduction

Recent studies have pointed to the political and contested character of ‘language reforms’ and practices, such as the introduction of new words (Watson, 1994), the privileging of inclusive pronouns, ‘hypnotic propaganda’ (Knights & McCabe, 2000a: 1493) in training documents and ‘patronising’ language in organizational handbooks (Fleming, 2005: 1481). Confronted with managerially authored text, employees display an ability to recognize,
discuss and critique linguistic practices. In the present article, based on focus group research in two large organizations, we examine such matters further, exploring how participants analyse corporate communications as ‘text’ and ‘social practice’ (Fairclough, 1993: 136–7; Vaara et al., 2004: 8–9). We describe their knowledge of a broad repertoire of linguistic practices used in documents which – they argued – were written to engender a sense of unitarism. Participants’ uniformly critical interpretations of slick corporate communications, we argue, illustrate the continuing relevance of a coherent and shared anti-management discourse whose central motifs are class-based. We examine this discourse and how it was locally reproduced in cynical readings of corporate communications.

The present article considers how employees analyse examples of corporate communication. Whilst there are problems of defining exactly what counts as ‘corporate communication’, in recent years authors such as Townley (1994) have noted a rapid growth in practices such as the publication of in-house magazines and papers, the development of in-house television channels, news services, teletext services, brochures and radio stations. Such practices go along with, and often support, culture management initiatives (Grugulis et al., 2000; Fleming, 2005), corporate induction and training programs (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002); even the management of corporate storytelling (Boje, 1995) and the construction of organizational histories (Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993). The expansion and formalization of such initiatives and practices has been noted by a range of authors and has been conceptualized by Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 622) in terms of a change in the ‘modus vivendi’ of advanced capitalist economies, whereby:

The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability and fleeting qualities of a post-modern aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms.

(Ezzamel et al., 2000, quoted in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 622–3)

Previously secure relationships between identity, meaning and employment can no longer ‘be presumed or taken-for-granted’, but ‘have to be actively engendered or manufactured’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 623) through a variety of practices, including corporate communications. In their study of a team-based re-organization at a car manufacturing plant, for example, Knights and McCabe (2000a) describe a remarkable level of attentiveness to meaning, including the use of psychologists, the re-labelling of employees – irrespective of rank – as associates, the distribution of firm-based uniforms, ‘hypnotic propaganda’ in company training documents, the articulation of a
new mission statement and the construction of an in-house learning centre. Such is the extent of these interventions that some have heralded a new era, where employee relations are managed primarily through discursive, rather than coercive or remunerative forms of control (Kunda, 1992); where moral involvement, high commitment and social order are produced through the manipulation of abstract signs and symbols.

Rather than being entirely idiosyncratic to firms, there is evidence of a contemporary management discourse; a formation of common signs and signifiers that links seemingly disparate interventions across time and space. Traditional images of hierarchy, formalization and class-based antagonisms are displaced by representations that emphasize egalitarianism, trust and enhanced worker autonomy. Unitarist (Fox, 1974) conceptions of employment displace ‘old-fashioned’ images of authoritarianism and hierarchy. The relevance of specific textual practices within such articulations of work and organization is apparent. Casey (1995: 118), for example, considers the re-articulation of employees through the discursive labels ‘team’ and ‘family’, which ‘promote certain desired sensibilities among employees’, specifically a sense of new ‘de-hierarchicalized structures’ and employee participation and involvement (p. 112). Watson (1994) has also considered such initiatives, showing how inclusive languages are imposed in a top-down, authoritarian fashion; against the wishes of middle management. Knights and McCabe (2000a: 1493) consider the inclusive use of pronouns (‘we’, ‘all of us’) in mission statements and training materials, arguing that such textual practices form part of a larger effort to construct a unitary image of organization. Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 622) discuss the use of ‘we’ (e.g. of the organization or of the team) in preference to ‘The Company’, ‘It’ or ‘They’. They argue efforts to reframe employment in terms of community, ‘not matter how contrived’, ‘may engender individual feelings of belonging and membership’ (p. 622).

Such linguistic manoeuvres appear at the very surface of a discursive form; so they might be especially vulnerable to resistance. For instance, Knights and McCabe (2000a) report ‘bothered’ – as well as ‘bewitched’ – employees who describe willing recipients of managerial discourse as ‘scary’ (p. 1503). McCabe (2000: 942), reporting on the same case, describes how convenors and shop stewards resisted the labels ‘site representative’ and ‘senior site representative’. Watson (1994) describes resistance – by employees and middle managers – to ‘language reforms’ that represented employees in terms of ‘skills’ rather than ‘jobs’. Alvesson and Willmott (2002: 633) report resistance following an attempt to make employees say the word ‘business’ instead of ‘product’ thereby installing a shared market-orientation across the firm. Managerial power may operate by articulating subjects to specific
cultural formations (Clarke & Newman, 1993), but ‘knowledgeable and capable’ (Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998: 363) actors recognize such efforts and discuss with colleagues the futility of such corporate ‘bullshit’ (Kunda, 1992).

At one level, such practices of resistance trade on employees’ abilities to identify and discuss linguistic practices, for example, the use of pronouns and the introduction of new words and labels. They show how, at certain moments, textual practices themselves become the central focus of attention; the act of signification becomes politicized. The present article considers this matter further, questioning how far these folk linguistic competencies might extend. It could be argued, for instance, that vocabulary and pronouns are relatively obvious aspects of spoken and written discourse; things most people could spot and invoke as evidence of an author’s ‘cunning’. The very existence of terms such as ‘buzzwords’ illustrates a level of popular concern with such matters. But what about more subtle and routine (rather than obvious and new) textual practices; how far can assumptions about knowledgeability be stretched, when discussing linguistic practices?

Of course, resistance also presupposes an ability to locate linguistic practices within broader systems of meaning; to establish how they should be interpreted. In this regard, the present article considers how participants’ uniformly critical interpretations of ‘slick’ corporate communications were underpinned by a coherent and shared anti-management discourse. The idea that – for an important proportion of the workforce – possibilities for resistance may continue to have a common and largely coherent basis has slipped off the map in recent years within critical management studies, potentially reflecting the demise of class as an analysts’ category. Instead, a series of recent studies have emphasized practices of resistance which are local, individualized and subtle. Fleming and Sewell (2002: 872) argue for an epochal shift whereby ‘traditional conceptions of resistance’ no longer apply, instead the researcher is directed towards ‘intersubjective tactics’ and ‘subtle identity politics’. Similarly, Casey (1995: 148–9) sees resistance in choices about interpersonal conduct, such as ‘David’s’ inclinations to ‘be a loner’ despite the corporate culture; Fleming and Spicer (2003: 172) give hypothetical examples, discussing the employee that affixes hundreds of company stickers to their car window thereby ‘ridiculing the whole ritual’; Knights and McCabe (2000b) point to simple acts of defiance, such as not reading memos.

Contemporary developments have certainly added nuance to understandings of resistance, rejecting the notion of a ‘pristine space of authentic resistance’ or singular identities such as ‘class warrior’ (Kondo, 1990). But this may have come at a cost. Arguably, contemporary accounts are so focused on the minutiae of highly individualized identity projects they have failed to adequately consider the question whether employee ‘cynicism’ might
have a collective element. This raises the question of whether theoretical frameworks deployed are able to accommodate the notion of a collective, inter-subjectively shared basis for resistance. The resolution of such theoretical matters is well beyond the scope of the present article. It focuses instead on empirical materials where we find, across a small number of focus group interviews, conducted at different sites, the clear articulation of coherent and wholly traditional attitudes towards employment.

The unity and familiarity of the attitudes expressed is worth discussing to challenge those who discuss with confidence the demise of a ‘traditional’ collective basis for resistance. Whilst it has been suggested that we need to look in new places to find resistance, perhaps in part the reverse is true. It is noticeable, for example, that authors such as Fleming and Sewell (2002) draw most heavily on empirical research conducted in non-unionized, often US firms, for example, ‘tech’ (Kunda, 1992), ‘Hephaetus’ (Casey, 1995) and ‘ISE’ (Barker, 1993). Their ‘continuing difficulty in identifying resistance in workplaces where systems of control and surveillance now explicitly target the hearts and minds of employees’ (Fleming & Sewell, 2002: 870), may reflect their lack of interest in considering the attitudes, for example, of ‘routine’ and ‘semi-routine’ workers in unionized manufacturing plants in the UK. Despite arguments about the ‘stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism’ giving way to ‘all the ferment, instability and fleeting qualities of a post-modern aesthetic’ (Ezzamel et al., 2000, quoted in Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 622–3), what we find in such settings are a familiar ‘pool of styles, meanings and possibilities’ (Willis, 1977: 59) where any attempt to conceal the asymmetrical character of the employment relationship is flatly dismissed in terms of ‘spin’ and managerial cunning.

The deployment of such resources in specific organizational sites is not merely a matter of local or micro-sociological interest. As employees utilize such shared discursive ‘styles’ in concrete circumstances they draw upon and reproduce, albeit in complex ways, broader cultural forms. This point is made by Willis (1977: 59) who argues that as themes, such as those discussed below, ‘are taken up and recreated in local settings, they are reproduced and strengthened and made further available as resources for others’. Whilst Willis’s argument is about persons in similar ‘structural situations’, our claims are more modest and they are open to empirical scrutiny, not least because one of the sites for the present study was explored, over 20 years ago, by Thompson and Bannon (1985). As strong continuities are apparent in the way employees interact with corporate communications, there is some support for the notion that local discursive practices ‘strengthen’ (Willis, 1977) overarching constructions, enabling future generations of employees to read managerial practice and text in similar ways.
In what follows we examine these discursive styles and resources, showing how they were locally deployed by participants to evaluate, interpret and critique corporate communications.

**Methods and data**

The analysis focuses in-depth on participants’ readings of three documents taken from two organizations, Marconi (GPT when the data were being collected) Communications and ‘company X’ (a supplier of telecommunication services). This section introduces the documents (available in the Appendices), presents some contextual information on each organization and discusses how the materials were approached.

What documents were selected? Two articles were taken from the magazine *GPT Challenge*. These were an authored front-page article by the then managing director regarding career development and an item about the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) in a shopfloor area of the company’s Liverpool factory, which took the form of a mock news report. The managing director is the animator and author of his text (Goffman, 1981); whilst the NVQ ‘report’ has no explicit (named) author or animator. The third item is a letter from the Managing Director of the Networks and Systems division to employees at company X. It deals with potential job reductions. The materials were thus not idiosyncratic to any single author or organization, different mediums were examined (a mock ‘report’, a front-page ‘opinion piece’ and an authored letter) and different topics were addressed.

The documents were taken from two organizations which were unionized, with high density rates. At company X the main union was the CWU (communications workers). At Marconi, union membership was split with the MSF (skilled professional) representing technical and lower managerial staff, the AEEU (amalgamated engineering and electrical) and TGWU (transport and general workers) representing manual workers and GMB-APEX representing clerical staff. Both organizations had recently made large numbers of staff redundant, although this had been managed differently. Marconi had made substantial redundancies in its recent history, many of them compulsory. The Coventry sites, for example, had been reduced in number from five to two, and the workforce from about 8000 to 3000 in the early–mid-1990s. At company X there had not been any compulsory redundancies. The organization had offered relatively generous severance terms which attracted enough ‘volunteers’.

Initially the documents are subject to a formal analysis in terms of
standard textual and linguistic categories, that is, lexicon, modality, transitivity, nominalization, pronoun use (see Fairclough, 1993; Vaara et al., 2004). At one level, this involved identifying relatively unproblematic objects. For example, the item ‘your life has been spared’ (rather than ‘I/we have decided to spare your life’) would have been coded under the heading ‘transitivity’, because the clause of the sentence has no semantic subject.

Applying such categories to a text is not a simple technical exercise. In the present materials, any occasioned use of ‘we’ could possibly signify ‘the organization’, ‘management’ or in the form of the disguised second person, ‘employees’. In such cases, the aim was not to formally state how such objects ‘really did’ signify, but simply to note them as problematic, to explore how or if such matters were resolved by participants.

Following this an attempt is made to access employees’ readings of the same documents. We explore employees’ ability to recognize and interpret different categories of textual practice ‘in their own terms’. Towards these ends, the present article draws on data from three focus group interviews (one held at company X, one at Marconi Liverpool – the site of Thompson and Bannon’s 1985 research – and one at Marconi Coventry).

In terms of membership, participants were selected in an effort to reflect the diverse make-up of the workforce. All participants were union members, reflecting high density rates in these organizations: at GPT Coventry, five were members of MSF, two GMB-APEX and one AEEU; at GPT Liverpool, all eight participants were members of MSF; at company X, all five participants were members of the CWU; a total of 21 respondents (eight at Liverpool, eight at Coventry, five at company X). They were mainly male (16 out of 21) and there was a mix of educational backgrounds; for example, five had degrees, eight were trained apprentices.

Each focus group lasted for approximately one hour. All were tape recorded and latter transcribed. Initially, each group was briefly introduced to the research. They were told it concerned management–employee communication, we were interested in the ‘medium and the message’. Following this, each person was presented with copies of the relevant documentation. Whilst participants had seen the documents previously, each was given a fresh copy and a chance to read them through. In all cases this generated spontaneous open discussion, which started as groups were reading. We deemed it appropriate not to stop this. Having completed reading, participants would either spontaneously offer their interpretations, or they would be asked what they thought of the documents. Any silences were met with a range of standard interventions: points raised by one respondent would be presented to others for their opinion or assessment, persons yet to speak would be asked for their observations. Interventions were also made to
clarify points. Often, for example, participants would attribute a motive ('that’s a bit dodgy'), questioning would then try to uncover what they had seen, why they interpreted it that way.

The categories for the study

This section introduces the categories for the study, through an initial – albeit brief – analysts’ treatment of the aforementioned documents. By drawing on illustrative materials from the documents, categories are defined and specific instances considered. Table 1 presents an overview.

A. Pronoun use (document 1)

The first article (Appendix 1) appeared on the front page of the magazine GPT Challenge. It addresses skill and employee development. Below, the document is considered in terms of the deployment of personal pronouns.

In identifying employees, the author mainly uses pronouns and only three nouns, ‘the individual’, ‘employees’ and ‘people’ (usually ‘our people’). He uses the first person singular only twice. Like the company X letter (document 2), he appears to do so in order to emphasize his personal commitment (‘why I am committed to achieving IIP status’, lines 14–15). Of five uses of ‘you’, one (‘to beat the best you have to be the best’) is indeterminate. Otherwise, uses of ‘you’ are concentrated in the last few paragraphs, and signify the individual employee, made responsible for his or her own fate:

(1) Your challenge is to reach your full potential
(line 51)

The most heavily used pronoun is ‘we/us/our’, which appears 18 times in the article. Eleven usages appear to refer to the company (exclusive ‘we’), as for example the first three occurrences:

(2) . . . developing our people is our greatest challenge
(line 7)

(3) . . . our track record and successes
(line 12)
However, this is followed with an ambiguous usage, where it is not obvious whether ‘we’ is inclusive or exclusive:

(4) However, we cannot be complacent

(line 13)
In this and subsequent examples:

(5) Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?  
(line 21)

(6) We can’t leave it solely to the training departments  
(line 23)

the first person is potentially being used as the ‘disguised second person’. In other words, ‘we’ is used even though the author is not signified. In item (5), for example, the ‘skills’ being discussed appear to be those of employees, not managers. This ‘flexing’ of pronoun usage is a potential way of framing ‘top-down commands’ in an inclusive fashion. Further examples can be observed in the two potential rebukes.

(7) To do this we must get out of the mindset that ‘development’ equals ‘training course’ . . . We must learn how to learn on the job  
(lines 28–9)

(8) Far too many of us seem to find the last item a chore . . .  
This is unacceptable  
(lines 36–8)

In the initial example (7), it would seem that employees are signified; ‘learning on the job’ seems to be a characterization of employee (rather than managerial) work. If this is true, ‘we’ (line 29) can also be read as a disguised second person. Even though ‘we’ seems to mean ‘you’, ‘you’ is not actually used. Imagine if it were (‘to do this you must get out of the mindset that . . .’), the tenor of the discourse would change totally; two groups of actors would be apparent as would a ‘top-down’ command.

Extract (8) contains a similar example. The use of ‘us’ appears to be inclusive, as if both the author and employees find this a ‘chore’. Again, were ‘us’ replaced by ‘you’ (‘far too many of you seem to find this last item a chore’) the tenor of the discourse would be quite different. It is perhaps not accidental that these ‘flexed’ inclusive pronoun usages coincide with the handling of potentially conflictual issues. Whilst the author is effectively criticizing (‘this is unacceptable’) employees and espousing a ‘top-down’ imperative the textual organization of the piece potentially blurs this, maintaining a sense that ‘we’ are all in it together.
2. Pronouns and passive transformation (document 2)

The second document (Appendix 2) was written by an employee working for the GPT Challenge magazine and utilizes the genre of a ‘news report’.

Two lexical features are particularly noteworthy. One is the emphasis on the concept of qualification. The word ‘qualification(s)’ itself appears eight times, with two of ‘NVQ’ and one of ‘qualified’; stress is laid on the importance of externally validated qualifications.

(9) Following a hugely successful pilot scheme to bring nationally recognised qualifications to PNG’s assembly area

(lines 6–7)

(10) Some never believed they could get a nationally recognised qualification

(lines 28–9)

The second feature is what might be called a lexicon of pleasant surprise. The pilot scheme was ‘hugely successful’. Employees’ disbelief that they could get a nationally recognized qualification was overcome and they were ‘delighted’ with their achievements. Kathy is ‘amazed’ at her ability to resume soldering after 20 years. This lexicon contributes to a very strong positive modality of desirability in the piece.

Perhaps surprisingly in a piece with so high a proportion of direct speech, the article contains a large number of non-human subjects. Its most notable syntactic feature is its use of the ‘passive transformation’ (Fowler, 1991). Passive transformation switches the noun phrases of the clause so that the object of the active verb becomes the subject, occupying the normal position of the agent. The article contains nine examples, of which only one has an expressed agent:

(11) . . . the scheme is being driven by the employees themselves

(line 8)

In eight further examples, the agent is not mentioned (then lines 36, 43, 46, 48 and 54):

(12) The concept of NVQs was first introduced

(line 18)

(13) . . . St. Helen’s College was invited in

(line 20)
In only three cases (‘taken off the job’ and the two occurrences of ‘assessed’) is the syntactic subject a human being. Other subjects are an institution (the college), an abstraction (‘concept’, ‘quality’) and an impersonal ‘it’. A person or persons unknown introduced the concept of NVQs, invited a Further Education college to run courses, subsequently decided to take the assessment process in-house, suggested that Sharon and her colleagues should become internal assessors, and finally tested the quality of ‘our work and our people’.

Why is this relevant? We might argue it creates the image that developments ‘simply happened’ and were not the result of the actions of specific groups. In a sense the author ‘has their cake and eats it’. Where decisions did involve discussions between management and unions (see line 19) such linguistic practices do not appear; agents are included. Subsequent decisions that – we understood – were taken exclusively by management appear as if they ‘simply happened’. If anything, the impression is given that the initiative was employee-led, rather than motivated by management’s desire to gain the ‘Investors in People’ badge.

3. Nominalization and transitivity (document 3)

The final document to be considered (Appendix 3) is a letter sent to ‘All people in Networks and Systems’ on 3 May 1996. It was written by the managing director of company X’s Networks and Systems division.

The letter makes use of a general business lexicon, for example, references to ‘customers’, use of nouns as verbs (‘trialled’) and vice versa (‘our spend’) and various complex adjectival groups (‘market leading interactive multimedia services’). Much of this lexicon is directly aimed at identifying workers. For example, ‘our people’, the preferred identification within ‘the new managerialism’ (Clarke & Newman, 1993: 428; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 630). A further striking feature of the letter whose primary purpose is to warn of upcoming job losses is the heading ‘make change an opportunity’ and the positive modality, of desirability, apparent in the opening paragraph.

Perhaps the most striking pattern in this document is the use of nominalization to account for management decision-making. Nominalization means that a predicate is ‘realized syntactically as a noun’ (Fowler, 1991: 79) and can then be used as the subject of a clause. It deletes many features of the predicate it replaces, including participants, time (by omitting tense) and modality. There are more than 30 examples of nominalization in the letter. The second paragraph attributes the need for ‘change’ (itself a nominalization) to ‘competition’, the ‘regulatory environment’ and ‘technological
advances’. The third paragraph, breaking the news of ‘job reductions’ (again, itself a nominalization), contains six examples, as the ‘need’ for redundancy will be alleviated by ‘limited recruitment’ and ‘natural wastage’. Such uses function to remove the author, and indeed any agent, from the processes being discussed.

These two paragraphs contain a very high concentration of non-finite verb forms. Excluding ‘modal + infinitive’ constructions like ‘can give’, there are 16 non-finite verbs in the letter. Of these, five are found in paragraph 2, outlining the difficulty facing the company, and nine in paragraph 3, giving the news of job reductions. The use of these forms, which do not require a subject, may act like the agentless passive in distancing the author from the events being described.

Paragraph 5 contains two striking instances of nominalizations re-transformed into verbs by the use of another verb as an auxiliary:

(14) N&S of course will make the final decision  
     (lines 39–40)

(15) I must stress that we can give no guarantees  
     (line 41)

This may avoid the abruptness of ‘we will decide who goes’.

The most notable feature of transitivity in this piece is the frequency with which processes and other inanimate forces appear as the subject of finite verbs. Human subjects appear 18 times as the subject of finite verbs and once as the agent of a passive. Networks and Systems, or some synonym, appears four times. However there are 23 instances of an abstraction appearing as the subject, even sometimes appearing as the subject of two verbs: for example, indeterminate ‘this’, referring back to the previous sentence:

(16) This has been achieved . . . and is something of which we can all be proud  
     (lines 12–13)

In relation to abstractions, it may be significant that they vary from paragraph to paragraph. In the first paragraph that proclaims the company’s success, the abstractions are technical events. In the second, the abstractions, such as ‘competition’ are responsible for the company’s problems. In paragraph 5, abstractions predominate as subjects in defence of management’s prerogative to decide whether or not to accept volunteers for redundancy.
Folk linguistics: Reading corporate communications

The article now shifts to consider how participants read these documents. The analysis is centrally concerned with employees’ appreciation of linguistic practices. In this regard, it is worth making the point that formal sounding linguistic categories, such as those discussed above, describe mundane features of everyday language use. It is perfectly possible for individuals to deploy and identify instances of ‘passive transformation’, for example, without having heard of the term. Precisely because it is unrealistic to expect people to discuss ‘inanimate subjects of finite verbs’ and so forth, there is the question of how such practices are discussed? To the extent that resistance has a collective aspect, the availability (or otherwise) of a common set of ‘folk linguistic’ terms for textual analysis would appear to be a significant matter. In what follows, the aim is to examine the character and availability of such lay terms for discussing managerial text. Table 2 gives an initial overview.

A second, though closely interrelated, matter is how employees interpreted such practices. In this regard, we describe uniformly critical interpretations. This aspect of critique is apparent right from the start, for example, in participants’ opinions and beliefs about corporate communications per se within their organizations. Participants had access to a specific lay terminology for discussing organization-wide circulars, papers and magazines. All shared the sense in which they were ‘overloaded with information’. This was compared unfavourably with ‘the days when we got very little information but what you did get was important’. The most frequently used term was the pejorative ‘glossies’. Glossy magazines were seen to be ‘everywhere’ and were compared to brochures designed to ‘persuade shareholders the company is in good hands’. The perceived purpose of the documents – to persuade – was discussed by one participant who argued authors ‘took the same courses as George Orwell’ and on four different occasions the term ‘doublespeak’ was used. Participants also had suspicions about authorship; whether the GPT letter (Appendix 1) actually originated in the personnel function; whether attributed speech in the NVQ article was genuine or heavily edited. Without labouring the point, corporate communications per se were politicized in terms of issues of bulk, presentation and authorship.

As might be expected, participants spoke most explicitly and confidently about aspects of language where they had a grasp of relevant terminology. They were most able to talk about the use of specific words, discussing ‘buzzwords’ and ‘faddish’ terms. Considering the company X letter, for example, one participant commented that ‘it strikes me that he
must, sort of, at some time taken a holiday in Tokyo’. Another participant spoke of other aspects of ‘Japanization’ (his term), including the introduction of ‘another jargon word’, the term ‘involvement’. Other familiar examples were then cited, including (in GPT) the replacement of ‘people’ with ‘resources’ and the use of ‘our people’, which was seen as the ‘mandatory’ term for describing employees in that organization.

In addition, participants analysed management vocabulary in terms of discourse styles. One participant commented that the company X letter was ‘very wordy’, leading another to suggest it took a ‘Civil Service style’, meaning it could have been said in ‘a quarter of the words’. In this regard, most people used the pejorative term ‘waffle’ to describe a style of writing.

A third resource for analysing and critiquing specific words involved showing them to be euphemistic (although this term was not used). For example, one

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**Table 2**  Summary of ‘folk linguistic’: categories and interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Recognition</th>
<th>Examples/lay interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lexicon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Key works</td>
<td></td>
<td>Buzzwords, fads/fashions, jargon, Japanization, waffle, wordy, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discourse styles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Euphemisms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronoun</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inclusive/exclusive</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘He’s trying to say that there’s an egalitarian society’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Disguised second person</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘He’s trying to maintain that we’re all a team’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ‘I’ vs ‘we’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Passive transformation</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘New jobs will emerge and some jobs will go over the next 12 months’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Nominalization</td>
<td></td>
<td>‘I stress we can give no guarantees/we can guarantee nothing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitivity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Abstractions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attributing change to technological processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Desirability/responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td>Selling NVQs</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Good news/bad news</td>
<td></td>
<td>Job losses letter framed as ‘good news’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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participant pointed to the term ‘rationalisation’ arguing that ‘in my experience rationalization always means redundancies’.

Finally, participants analysed vocabulary – specifically speech attributed to employees – in terms of social class. The news article about NVQs in GPT Liverpool relied heavily upon purported direct quotations from employees. This was the subject of scepticism in the Coventry focus group, and cynicism among the employees’ colleagues who participated in the Liverpool group. Purported quotations were read out to laughter from the group, who felt the statements bore no resemblance to normal working-class speech in Liverpool. At one stage the group picked up on speech attributed to Jack. They felt phrases such as ‘initial suspicion’ and ‘concerns proved to be unfounded’ were clearly inauthentic in class terms. Respondents were able to deploy their lay knowledge of social structures to find evidence of authorial embellishments; that Jack’s talk had been edited or wholly changed to fit the tenor of the piece. Suspicions regarding authorship extended beyond talk attributed to Jack, with the group imagining how the text had been assembled.

They probably sat around a table with a couple of tape recorders a bit like this (laughter) they may have said something along the general lines of some of these phrases, but I suspect that the actual word for word quotes were probably written by the people who wrote the article. I don’t believe they actually said word for word ‘they are delighted with what they have achieved and are looking to do more’.

In short, participants had access to an extended set of resources for analysing lexicon. They had access to a set of terms, a sense of discourse styles, a sense of what represents authentic working-class speech and a keen appreciation of the euphemistic character of certain words and expressions.

In the case of pronouns, participants were able to reflect upon and analyse different occasioned uses of ‘we’, ‘I’, ‘you’ and ‘us’. The authorial use of ‘I’ was identified by company X and GPT employees as a significant feature of the documents. As might be imagined, when asked about these items, the first personal singular was taken to signify personal commitment and taking individual responsibility. In the case of the GPT letter, the inclusion of a photograph of the author, placed alongside the text, was also seen as a further way of signalling authorial commitment. As might be imagined, this was also the butt of a series of jokes at the manager’s expense (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). One participant raised the question of why the photograph was included.
A: Just so people recognize him, when they knock him over

B: I think it’s a good thing, that we know if you see him coming around, you’ve got to look like you’re working

C: So you make sure you don’t let him sit by you in the canteen.

Of course, images of – hypothetical, threatened and actual – violence towards management are not unusual or idiosyncratic to this study; such images are part of a much broader ‘pool of meanings and possibilities’ (Willis, 1977: 59) through which ‘labouring men’ (Nichols & Beynon, 1977: 11), and women in the present study, discuss their relationship with management; foremen are told to ‘fuck off’ (Nichols & Beynon, 1977: 137), managers are threaten with having blunt instruments ‘wrapped around their bloody necks’ (Nichols & Beynon, 1977: 139) and so forth. Through the local deployment of such resources people draw links between action situations and overarching constructions that are more remote in time and space (Giddens, 1981). In this regard, there is a nice parallel here with Thompson and Bannon’s (1985) study of what would become GPT/Marconi’s Liverpool plant. These authors discuss the beginnings of slick corporate communication within the firm, including an instance where the new director appeared on a video to discuss the future of the plant. Similar resources and discursive styles, to those described above, were applied despite ‘distanciation’ in space and time (Giddens, 1981); employees wished they could create their own video showing the workforce shouting ‘get stuffed and waving two fingers’ (Thompson & Bannon, 1985: 80).

Returning to the data, in the case of both the company X and the GPT letters, the use of ‘I’ was seen as ‘temporary’ and ‘opportunistic’ because of the authors switching between pronoun forms. We recognized this switching in our reading of these documents and a company X employee discussed this when considering the statement ‘I must stress we can give no guarantees’:

he’s actually throwing everything back on the ‘we’, isn’t he? The ‘I’ is only used to mention that ‘we’ are going to do something.

In our analysis we also identified a number of possible examples of the ‘disguised second person’ (extracts 5 and 6), instances where ‘we’ – counterintuitively – did not seem to signify the author, but some other party. In relation to this, respondents at GPT Coventry also identified the item ‘We can’t leave it solely to the training department. To do this we must get out
of the mindset that development equals training course’. This was not discussed in grammatical terms. Instead, participants concentrated on the question of responsibility for training. They argued the author was trying ‘to pass the buck to individuals’, that he ‘wasn’t straight’. In this sense the group did appear to interpret ‘we’ as a ‘disguised second person’. They felt the author was saying ‘you’ have to take the responsibility for your training, even though he used the term ‘we’. Participants were able to interpret, discuss and critique quite a sophisticated practice, albeit without labelling it as a practice.

Participants’ sensitivity to inclusive and exclusive uses of the first person plural became apparent in these discussions. Regarding inclusive pronouns, participants drew on meta-assumptions about the structure of society to underpin their critique of linguistic practices.

He’s trying to give the feeling that he’s there at the head, together with us down here, and we’re all pulling together, he’s trying to say that there’s an egalitarian society, which we’d none of us agree with at any rate.

In making this statement, the respondent draws upon class-based constructions which divide the workplace neatly in two, ‘them at the top and us down here’. Whilst Coupland et al. (2005: 1059) might be right when they argue ‘traditional us and them attitudes’, whilst pertinent in the 1960s and 1970s, are now unhelpfully crude, in the present materials, it is apparent that at every opportunity employees separate themselves as a collective (‘none of us’) from management.

This is also apparent below. Considering the final paragraph of the company X letter (‘We face some exciting but tough challenges in the coming 12 months, and I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring approach to our people’), one respondent pointed to another example of the disguised second person:

He’s trying to maintain that we’re a team and that we’re all ‘invoked’ with this as well, well we’re not, are we.

Again drawing on irony and humour, the participant argued the first ‘we’ (above) must signify management, because he could not think of any ‘exciting challenges’ on the horizon. Others disagreed, arguing the author was actually mingling inclusive and exclusive uses (albeit without using these terms).

It starts off by saying ‘we face some tough challenges’, I mean, that’s all of us, I think, you know, but then later he moves on to ‘we will
maintain a constructive and caring approach’ that’s clearly, that’s got to be the leaders of the company, it’s also a lie.

Spontaneously, the group began to go through the document coding each individual use of the first person plural. For example, confronted with ‘something of which we can all be proud’, it was argued ‘well definitely that’s totally inclusive isn’t it’ (at no point had we used this term). In response to the item, ‘to remain successful we face some difficult challenges’ a participant responded ‘yeah, that’s not us’, only for another to argue ‘well, no, that’s a bit ambiguous isn’t it’. The character of the discussion changed in important ways. Albeit relatively briefly, participants began to analyse the documents in a pseudo-academic fashion, going through each example in turn. Whilst this highlighted participants lay competencies, it would be deeply misleading to think such documents were normally read in this way.

Having considered lexicon and pronoun use, it is worth briefly commenting on the mode of analysis on display. Most apparent is the cynicism and irony underpinning the critical treatments being ‘dished out’. All discussions had a critical element; all lay terms for describing managerial text were pejorative. This refusal to take anything on face value, to treat everything with suspicion, is of course not idiosyncratic to the present case, but constitutive of a much broader language game played by persons ‘subject to similar ideological constructions’ (Willis, 1977: 59). Compare the attitudes of our participants, for example, with responses to early examples of corporate communication, where employees argued ‘it’s all guff here’, ‘it’s always their interpretation’ (Nichols & Beynon, 1977: 183). The basic attitudes are identical despite ‘distanciation’ in space and time (Giddens, 1981): all corporate communications are in some way tainted. Further, the circular character of the analysis is also clear: participants’ presumptions about management and society enabled them to observe practices – examples of managerial cunning – which could then be cited as evidence that their presumptions were right. This appeared to be what we were observing: participants were displaying to us and each other that their cynicism was routed in the realities of everyday experience, although at no point did they reflexively orient to the process in this way as they chewed-up and spat out ‘official accounts’ in their search ‘for more realistic interpretations’ (Willis, 1977: 59).

Moving on to transformation (the passive and nominalization), the function of nominalization in distancing events from human agents was also grasped by participants. For example, in the company X focus group one participant pointed to the item ‘New jobs will emerge and some jobs will go over the next twelve months’. He illustrated his appreciation of this
linguistic practice by generating a hypothetical contrast between ‘Unfortunately your father has been murdered’ and ‘I’ve murdered your father’. He argued the author was using the first form, thereby creating the image that jobs were coming and going of their own volition. The ability to spontaneously generate illustrative examples of contrasting grammatical practices is striking, but perhaps more revealing is the example, of somebody’s father being murdered (by management). In a further example, a participant pointed to an additional example of nominalization ‘I must stress we can give no guarantees’. He compared this with the alternative ‘we can guarantee nothing’ thereby, once more, displaying an ability to recognize and talk about textual practices at quite an abstract level.

In this specific instance, we asked whether the form of expression mattered; what if the author had said ‘we can guarantee nothing’? The group felt it did matter, with one respondent arguing:

of course it matters, it gives a totally different impression, it would certainly create an element of despondency amongst the staff.

This characterizes a further aspect of the language game participants were playing. This might be expressed as follows: attempt to ‘soften the blow’ and you are accused of not being straight; tell it straight (‘we can guarantee nothing’) and you are accused of ‘creating an element of despondency’. To the extent this is accurate; participants had their authors trapped between a discursive rock and a hard place. What struck us was the ease and skill with which recipients were able to play this game; they could manoeuvre between different – and sometimes contrary – positions to establish a critique. They were the antithesis of the totally socialized subjects described by Ezzy (2001) or the ‘bewitched’ subjects described by Knights and McCabe (2000a).

Across our categories, participants to the focus group interviews were least able to decode instances in which transitivity was used. This was recognized by employees from the company X focus group, who pointed to the author’s attribution of change to technical progress (paragraph 2, Appendix 3) arguing instead that management were ‘too quick to respond to city demand for headcount reduction’. In their version, decisions were taken by persons with agency; responsibility lay firmly with management. In this sense, participants were able to recognize the practice of using inanimate forces as subject of verbs. But there was no lay discourse at all for discussing such matters. Despite the fact that processes and inanimate forces appear so frequently as the subject of finite verbs, especially in the company X letter, this was rarely discussed or politicized.
In comparison, participants were much more attentive to matters which analysts discuss in terms of modality. In the company X case, all participants noted radical shifts in modality from paragraph to paragraph. This was a source of humour; with one participant joking that the opening paragraph was so ‘optimistic’ that it might have encouraged people to read no further, thinking it was another circular trumpeting the company’s success. They imagined people ‘frantically searching in bins’ once they had heard of the letter’s import. Others were able to recognize a series of shifts in the linguistic stance taken by the author (Fowler, 1991).

The first paragraph, first of all, it’s all self-esteem, the second paragraph tries to lead you to the fact they are going to sack you, which they are not going to do at the moment.

He seems to be sort of buoying you up in the initial part of it, giving you some sort of warning in the middle and then coming round to the nitty gritty that’s he’s going to get rid of a few people at the end.

During these discussions, and for the only time during the focus groups, participants suggested a more sympathetic reading. Whilst the author was critiqued for ‘buttering up’ employees, some argued that he had to preface the ‘bad news’ somehow; he could hardly start by saying ‘some of you will be going, we’ll decide who’. This would sound abrupt and authoritarian. In such a vein, one participant argued:

Yeah, but to be fair, don’t we all do this in standard English when we’re writing letters, isn’t this the sort of thing you’re taught at school, you say, ‘well, thank you very much, but’.

This was the only instance where the group explicitly considered alternative interpretations of linguistic practices, which did not presume managerial cunning and manipulation.

In the case of the NVQ document, participants were quick to identify what analysts would term a modality of desirability (Fowler, 1991). In this case, participants processed an entirely counter-explanation of the whole piece. The change to internal assessment (a boast of the article) was a cost-cutting exercise; managers demanded greater flexibility from people with NVQs; gaining an NVQs did not lead to extra pay. In these instances employees’ lived experience of the firm and its history become the pre-eminent resources for noticing and critiquing the author’s efforts to persuade them of the benefits of gaining qualifications.
Discussion

We are not suggesting the identification of these apparently traditional attitudes towards employment and management is ‘news’; other authors (Collinson, 1992; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Coupland et al., 2005) have clearly described such matters and in far greater detail. Our contribution lies, instead, in showing how traditional attitudes towards work and management underpin – and are actively reproduced through – the consumption of corporate communications. Rather than simply pointing to such attitudes, we have shown how they are applied to generate cynical readings of managerial activities and intentions. In this sense, the article complements more conventional modes of discourse analysis (see Vaara et al., 2004; Finch-Lees et al., 2005) where researchers consider linguistic practices and puzzle over how these might reflect and reproduce social structures. In contrast, we have examined how employees do this. We have explored ‘styles, meanings and possibilities’ that are locally deployed and by that token ‘strengthened and made further available for others’ (Willis, 1977: 59; Giddens, 1981). Considering such processes has revealed points of interest about employees’ folk linguistic competencies and how these are implicated in the reproduction of class-based logics and sentiments.

At a basic level, the present study has shown participants’ folk linguistic competencies to extend quite far indeed. Participants displayed an ability to distinguish between inclusive and exclusive uses of the first person plural, passive transformation, nominalization, they were able to critique the use of abstractions as the subjects of verbs, identify possible instances of the disguised second person and so forth. Participants displayed an abstract knowledge of textual practices when they produced comparative examples to those used by authors (unfortunately your father has been murdered/I’ve murdered your father) and when they noted alternative versions of expression used by authors (I must stress we can give no guarantees/we can guarantee nothing). Whilst it is quite common for researchers to mention – typically in passing – employees’ sensitivity to such linguistic practices (see Knights & McCabe, 2000a; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Fleming, 2005), the present research has placed such matters centre stage, revealing potentially surprising lay competencies.

Whilst participants possessed these competencies, they did not accomplish their analysis in terms of ‘formal’ categories. Rather they deployed a wide range of terms and cultural resources for doing lay analysis. At the level of textual practices, respondents discussed glossies, buzzwords and fads, waffle, wordy and ‘civil service style’ writing, corporate bullshit, George Orwell and doublespeak, information overload, etc. As well as
possessing a largely critical vocabulary for text, lay analysis was underpinned by various presumptions about: 1) social structures – the egalitarian (or otherwise) nature of society, management fashions, processes of Japanization, authentic and inauthentic class discourse – and 2) organizational processes; hidden editorial processes, authorship and – of course – the ‘realities’ of work. Through such assumptions employees were able to see euphemisms (rationalization always means redundancies), attempts to put words in people’s mouths and modalities of desirability (in the case of the NVQs).

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the present materials was the unerring and persistent expression of anti-management attitudes by participants. Whilst Coupland et al. (2005: 1071) point to the gradual demise of stereotypical ‘us and them’ characterizations, this is not reflected in our data, where senior management were accused of doctoring articles, hypothetical murder and of near pathological levels of dishonesty. Any right thinking employee should knock them to the ground given half an opportunity. What is apparent is a playful, familiar and entirely coherent expression of employment in terms of division (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Regardless of differences in medium (newspaper, letter), gender and educational background, the focus group discussions had the same basic tenor. The ‘news article’ about NVQs, for example, was subject to the same thoroughly cynical reading as the letter about redundancies. As mentioned, in and of itself this is clearly not news. What we have shown, however, is how these attitudes give rise to – and are reproduced through – particular ways of reading text. Inclusive metaphors were readily dismissed as fanciful, social divisions between ‘the boss’ and employees were emphasized in discussions of pronouns, presumptions of an ‘egalitarian society’ were quickly identified and similarly dismissed. Participants imposed over the materials a hierarchical and asymmetrical model of employment, anything that contradicted this was subject to strong critique. They called for a more ‘traditional’ discourse (Clarke & Newman, 1997) where, from their point of view ‘everyone knows their position’.

Whilst we have downplayed the empirical significance of ‘finding’ these traditional attitudes towards work and management, some important questions do arise. There is the matter of whether, for example, the laudable desire to emphasize diversity of response and the ever-changing character of workplace identities (Knights & McCabe, 2000b) has concealed from view a pool of styles, meanings and possibilities which are stable and at least partially shared across organizational boundaries of time and space. Matters discussed above – and of course elsewhere – would include jokes at the expense of managers, hypothetical images of violence towards managers,
metaphors of division and antagonism, distrust of all forms of corporate communication, the rejection of inclusive grammatical forms, etc. By using such discursive resources in local settings, we have argued actors make wider class-based constructions relevant to local workplaces and by this token reproduce and strengthen those constructions (Willis, 1977; Giddens, 1981), not least by making them available to others within the self-same settings.

We are sure that additional research, such as one-to-one interviews with our participants, would reveal additional nuances and diversities. But this does not diminish the political significance of what has been shown above. At that point, with good humour and commitment, participants were willing and able players of a language game whose central motifs were class-based. We are also sure that research which charted the daily activities of our participants would reveal further contradictions, diversities and ironies.

It might be apparent, for example, how people with anti-management attitudes nevertheless actively reproduce the conditions of their own exploitation (Willis, 1977; Collinson, 1992). But even so, at some level there remains this common, underlying set of identifications. Whilst it is not advisable to view such sentiments as logical or automatic reactions to the real class basis of society, by the same token it is important not to ignore the possibility of a shared basis for collective acts of resistance. It may well be the case that for a great many employees ‘us and them’ (Coupland et al., 2005) remains the central discursive axis for discussing and engaging with managerial text and practice.

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, it is important to reflect first on the limitations of the study. In addition to the limited scale of the research, mentioned above, the focus group approach actively shaped the responses that have been analysed. Albeit for a short period of time, participants were able to voice dissatisfaction and enjoy ‘space’ to exercise autonomy (Edwards et al., 1995). The focus groups not only produced evidence of resistance in the world beyond, there were examples of resistance. Employees were temporarily positioned as tellers of truth; they were given freedoms to critique and deride management. At the same time, individual group members may have found it hard to undermine the dominant account of conniving and devious management. The singular, coherent and shared character of the attitudes discussed may have reflected the method deployed, although few participants appeared to be unwilling animators of their views and, albeit very occasionally, more consensual readings were suggested.
Despite such limitations, it is possible to make some concluding comments. Whether corporate communications ‘engender feelings of commitment and belonging’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 622) or further embed employees’ cynicism and suspicion is an open question. But concerns must be raised about the value and character of such practices in the organizations we have, albeit partially, considered. If our respondents are remotely typical, these organizations are paying large amounts of money each year to produce documents that either further alienate employees or are flatly ignored. Given the attitudes of those we spoke to, and their apparent resilience over time (see Thompson & Bannon, 1985), whether this is inevitable is a moot point. Perhaps there is some scope for change. All participants seemed to resent the promotional character of ‘glossies’. Like other mediums, including job adverts (Fairclough, 1993) and annual reports (McKinstry, 1996), internal communications have become instruments of persuasion. Removing the more obviously promotional aspects of ‘glossies’ might be worthwhile: including 1) the use of the mock ‘news report’ genre, akin to fake adverts seen in the national press; 2) euphemisms (‘making change an opportunity’) when discussing redundancies; 3) the appropriation of the ‘employees’ voice’ to espouse managerially approved views, admit to mistaken ‘suspicions’, attest to ‘supportive’ management; 4) the disguised second person. To the extent that corporate communication reflects and reproduces overarching social relations, such changes might be a small but nevertheless important step in the right direction.

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References


Appendices

1 Appendix I. The letter
2 Keeping ahead of the game .
3 It all depends on skill factor
4 This magazine is well named.
5 The development and creative application of people's skills is the key to success in business today and therefore developing our people is our greatest challenge.
6 In a competitive environment, to beat the best you have to be the best. This means having competent, experienced, flexible, motivated employees in every job in every business.
7 Training and development plays a vital role in this and I am proud of our track record and successes in the past. However, we cannot be complacent. That is why I am committed to achieving Investors in People (IIP) status in all businesses.
8 IIP helps to ensure that we have the necessary processes in place to effectively manage and develop our people.
9 It also ensures that we focus our training and development effort on supporting the goals of the business. This is vital, particularly in times of rapid change. The faster change occurs, the more difficult it is to keep skills up to date. Whose responsibility is it to keep our skills current?
10 We can't leave it solely to the training departments.
11 Every one of us has a responsibility for keeping our skills and knowledge current, or better still, ahead of the game.
12 To do this we must get out of the mindset that 'development' equals 'training course'. This severely limits the learning opportunities to just a few days a year. We must learn how to learn on the job. To make every day an opportunity to learn, develop and improve.
13 There are many ways of doing this. For example, by reviewing successes and failures, effective delegation, project work, secondments, increased responsibility and good career planning and management.
14 Far too many of us seem to find the last item a chore. A recent analysis of 4,000 appraisals across GPT showed that only about 20% of the sections on career goals and objectives were properly completed. This is unacceptable.
15 Building on the skill factor
16 Planning your career properly builds skills, knowledge, experience and flexibility, enabling you to enhance your contribution both now and in the future.
43 As a business, we must support this process by encouraging more cross-functional and cross-business
44 job moves. Such moves not only significantly develop the individual, they also help to break down
45 barriers between functions and businesses. This increases our collective capability and effectiveness
46 and often improves the ease of doing business for our customers.
47
48 The only thing that is certain about the future is that it will not be like the past. As GPT moves
49 into new
50 areas, with for example more emphasis on software development and exports, we need to draw
51 heavily
52 on the skills of our people. Your challenge is to reach your full potential. GPT’s challenge is to make
53 maximum use of that potential.

1 Appendix 2. News item – National Vocational Qualifications
2
3 NVQs are a success story
4 Spreading the word . . .
5
6 Following a hugely successful pilot scheme to bring nationally recognised qualifications to PNG’s
7 assembly area, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) are spreading further into manufacturing.
8 What is particularly satisfying is that the scheme is being driven by the employees themselves, in
9 conjunction with St. Helen’s College.
10
11 After the pilot in which all 12 volunteers achieved level 2 qualifications in PCB Assembly and Repair,
12 the workforce decided to expand the scheme further in order to:
13 • Increase the number of employees formally qualified
14 • Offer the opportunity to achieve higher qualifications
15 • Develop the capability to run the assessment process themselves
16
17 Challenge talked to Sharon Stanton, Sue Bell, Kathy Tierney and Jack Hewitt of the manufacturing
18 unit at Edge Lane. The concept of NVQs was first introduced as an integral part of Investors in People
19 (IIP).
20 After the Tandem group (on which management and trade unions are represented) gave their
21 support to
22 their introduction, St. Helen’s College was invited in to give further information.
23
24 ‘There was some initial suspicion but these concerns proved to be unfounded. At the end of the day we
25 had nothing to lose,’ said Jack.
26
27 So successful was the initial phase that more employees wanted to join in. A further 49 achieved
28 success. Some never believed they could get a nationally recognised qualification.
29
30 ‘They are delighted with what they have achieved and are looking to do more,’ said Sue.
31
32 As more achieve the level 1 qualification, others have the opportunity to move up to levels 2 and 3
33 where they have to broaden their skills and demonstrate competence in areas not normally required of
34 them in their day-to-day job.
35
36 ‘Trying for more advanced qualifications gives us the opportunity for further training,’ said Jack.
37
38 To do this, they are taken off the job at a convenient time to train and be assessed in the new skill areas.
39 There is no pressure, people can go at their own speed and the results have been amazing.
40
41 ‘I hadn’t soldered for 20 years,’ said Kathy, ‘and I was amazed I could still do it.’ This has led to her
42 doing other types of work to add interest and variety to her job. ‘I even got the opportunity to do some
43 overtime soldering.’
The story doesn’t end there. It was later decided to take the responsibility for the assessment process in-house.

‘Management have been very supportive,’ said Sharon, ‘and when it was suggested we could volunteer to become internal assessors, I welcomed the chance.’ So did 28 others! To become an assessor they all had two afternoons of training by the college and were then themselves assessed. ‘The assessment process is very comfortable and fits well into my job as an inspector. There is a lot of paperwork for the assessors to do and this is new to me, but I’m learning how to deal with it. This in itself is a new skill and may be useful in the future.’ Jimmy Grimes the production Manager is delighted with the achievements of those involved.

‘Having these qualifications means that the quality of our work and our people has been tested against national standards. I am proud of the way everyone has supported this initiative and made it work. In the future we hope all 270 employees in the manufacturing area will have the opportunity to undertake an NVQ.’

‘I would recommend any group of people to consider NVQs,’ said Sue. ‘After all in this day and age you have to move with the times and this is definitely the way forward.’

Appendix 3. The company letter

To: All people in Networks and Systems
Dear Colleague,

Making Change an Opportunity – Workwise

Networks and Systems is a major success story since the launch just 12 months ago. Service provision has improved and network faults have fallen. Innovative services such as Callminder and the next generation COMPANY X Chargecard have been introduced. Market leading interactive multimedia services are being successfully trialled in East Anglia and we are developing plans for the wider deployment of broadband technology. This has been achieved through the skill, professionalism, teamwork and commitment of N&S people, and is something of which we can all be proud. Thank you for your contribution to this success, which is recognised by our customers.

In the telecommunications and information systems business, nothing stays the same for very long. Competition is hotting up, the regulatory environment is more challenging and technological advances are accelerating. To remain successful, we face some difficult decisions. In building our plans for the coming year we have taken into account the longer term trends in the industry. We have balanced customer demand for service with the competitive pressure to continue to cut our prices and hence our costs to their lowest practical level. We can take advantage of technological advances, rationalisation and market changes in order to deliver what the business needs more effectively.

New jobs will emerge and some jobs will go over the next twelve months. The reductions will be partially met as people leave N&S before September 1996, under the Release Scheme. By balancing limited recruitment with natural wastage, reducing wherever practical our spend on overtime, agency and contract labour, and actively helping our people to reskill, we intend to minimise the need for further voluntary redundancy. Building on our successes in 1995/96, when over 1,000 people were deployed into new jobs within COMPANY X, we are working hard to create reskilling programmes to enable those people whose jobs are affected to develop new skills and competences. This will make it easier for them to find a new job, either in another part of COMPANY X or outside the Company.

N&S is a big organization (NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES) and the planned changes will impact on specific parts of it. The vast majority of our people will be unaffected. The N&S Board is now
identifying the areas where jobs will be reduced; your Director will be writing to you shortly about the plans for your directorate, and how they will be achieved.

I should mention that in response to feedback from a number of you, we have decided that we should consider individual expressions of interest in redundancy, before the year end. COMPANY X of course will make the final decision on whether or not to progress the enquiry. Further details on this will be publicised in due course, but I must stress that we can give no guarantees. The big difference with our new approach is that the on-going job losses will occur at different times during the year and will be specific to particular departments/units, skills/work areas and tasks/activities. In our search to help the people affected, no opportunity will be overlooked to find alternative employment and general requests for redundancy could create such openings.

We face some exciting but tough challenges in the coming 12 months, and I am determined that we will maintain a constructive and caring approach to our people, helping everyone in Networks and Systems to make change an opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

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