



Managing TODAY'S

**Automating The Employee
Discipline/Grievance Process to Improve
Efficiency, Reduce Risk, and Build
Workforce Morale**



WORKFORCE

By Frank Roth and Judy Montoya

While utilities plan for the workforce of the future and worry about how to replace long-term skilled and trained employees, it is equally essential for them to better manage the workforce they have today. And, as managers know all too well, corrective action and discipline are an inescapable reality of managing employees. Looking at employee disciplinary procedures through the lens of “effective utility management (EUM),” those procedures should be designed to reinforce the EUM principles of employee development and leadership and to

facilitate employee engagement and retention. Achieving this goal is not possible without a disciplinary process that is fair, equitable, and transparent.

Ensuring and maintaining such a process requires identifying and fixing those areas where the system of discipline falls short. For the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority (“Water Authority”), a big part of the fix came in the form of a computer-based process called Positive Corrective Action (PCA), which was developed in partnership with HRefficient.

“PCA is a very useful discipline and grievance system that works through a custom-built, web-based application,” says Peter Auh, General Counsel for the Water Authority. “It has helped to solve a number of challenges that the Water Authority and its employees faced in the disciplinary process. It also helps me in defending imposed discipline before our Labor Board or in court.”

Auh explained that, prior to implementation of the PCA, the disciplinary process was decentralized, and disciplinary issues were handled in discrete operational centers without direct oversight from the utility’s Human Resources or Legal departments. According to Auh, “this contributed to violations—intentional or otherwise—of personnel rules and regulations.”

With various divisions and sections administering their own disciplinary processes, consistency problems arose.

With various divisions and sections administering their own disciplinary processes, consistency problems arose. Record-keeping was not uniform across divisions, and an employee’s disciplinary history could walk out the door with a retiring supervisor. Moreover, discipline was not always enforced in the same manner from department to department, leading to disparate treatment of employees who had committed similar infractions. PCA offered an automated, paperless solution to these problems, which did not require any change in management, since the implementation was simply automating and improving the entire disciplinary process.

Enforcement of disciplinary procedures was perceived by most supervisors as a cumbersome and time-consuming endeavor. Because of

the effort involved, some supervisors chose to overlook employee infractions rather than become involved in a lengthy and burdensome disciplinary process.

The PCA application is easily operable from a desktop or mobile device, allowing supervisors access to a centralized, automated system that takes them step-by-step through the disciplinary process. It creates a standardized procedure that assists in human resource, legal reviews and choosing legal pathways, as well as maintains and disseminates coaching, discipline, and appeal responses in a workflow and approval application.

“I receive an email alert that lets me know that there is a matter in the PCA that requires my attention,” Auh explained. “I log in, review the wording of the notice to the employee and the listed violations of policy or regulations, make revisions as necessary, and then send it along the routing process.”

This has significantly decreased the time necessary to administer disciplinary procedures. Furthermore, the PCA system’s built-in oversight mechanism ensures that HR, legal, division managers, chief officers and—in circumstances where pay or continued employment are affected—the executive director are all involved at critical points along the way.

PCA also tracks policy or procedure issues, incidents, and an employee’s disciplinary history. All documentation is stored in the web-based application, including audio files from meetings or hearings, as well as video files from surveillance cameras. The PCA also provides a permanent record-retention platform and allows for real-time information to better inform management of where and how employee problems are occurring and being resolved. Statistical data is easily retrieved to analyze which policies are most often violated, what areas of the utility’s operation seem to be the most frequent source of misconduct, and other such trends that allow management to focus its attention on improvement.

How PCA Connects the Company



Since employee grievances have been reduced under PCA, the system appears to be contributing to employee satisfaction. Certainly, the knowledge that standards are being applied uniformly and fairly across departments and that the PCA system holds

supervisors accountable in the

disciplinary process is a morale builder.

And, by relieving supervisors of some of the more burdensome aspects of the disciplinary process (e.g. paperwork, record-keeping, calls to HR for instruction, etc.), the system allows them to focus more fully on their jobs, which contributes to improving the operation and maintenance of utility assets.

To the extent that the process has become more transparent and streamlined for all parties involved, it has abated a source of internal conflict and resulted in employee engagement. This reinforces the contention that a thorough examination of disciplinary processes should be included as part of any utility's implementation of EUM principles with respect to employee development and retention. 💧

For supervisors and personnel staff, PCA provides for quick and easy historical record retrieval, which is vital in positively correcting employee behavior and ensuring compliance with prescriptive corrections. With the use of pre-approved legal templates, PCA improves the legal framework by generating notices, letters, and findings. Moreover, PCA supports consistent discipline for similar infractions and the ability to meet the strict deadlines set in collective bargaining agreements.

When the PCA system was initially rolled out in 2010, HR personnel were surprised to see an uptick in the rate of reported disciplinary procedures. This suggested that a significant number of procedures may have been going unreported to HR before a centralized recording system was in place. After PCA implementation, however, the number of grievances filed by employees dropped significantly. This statistical development warrants further analysis, but the fall-off suggests that inconsistencies in disciplinary enforcement, which may have led to grievances in the past, are now being addressed.

.....

Judy Montoya is the CEO of HR Efficient.

Frank Roth is the Policy and Performance Improvement Manager of the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority.