

Role-Play Exercise: ABIG Company

Directions for Instructor

1. Print copies of the role-play exercise pages (one copy of “Background” for each student in the class; one set of the roles for every seven students in the class).
2. Develop teams of five students (there are seven unique roles in ABIG Company).
3. Have each student read the “Background” as an introduction to the exercise.
4. Assign each student a role to play and provide the specific role description.
5. Indicate the desired outcome of the process (e.g., press conference, written and/or oral presentation, short-term plan, long-term plan, employee meeting, etc.) and create feedback mechanisms appropriate for the desired outcome.
6. Teams will need at least forty-five minutes to review, discuss, and prepare.
7. Link the key issues to course training and learning objectives.

Key Issues

Use of work email | Employee privacy | Employee incentives | Product quality

Background

ABIG Company is located in Denver. A subsidiary of a larger conglomerate, the Denver division of ABIG is a world leader in financial market research for both the public and private sectors. The operations group of ABIG is the backbone for product development and delivering high-quality research products for the company. The sales department depends on the accuracy of this research and the timeliness of delivery for clients.

The research specialists within the operations group of ABIG are college-educated, work independently, have a good deal of autonomy, and use independent judgment in their research analysis. This group is responsible for researching, collecting, standardizing, and presenting financial and market data. The specialists engage in internal training and development programs. However, most of their knowledge is gained through an extensive mentoring program.

Employees leaving the company often do so for higher-paying jobs. Historically, the turnover rate was 30 percent, but it is on the rise. Last year, the turnover rate was closer to 65 percent. There were noticeable repercussions as a result. Training costs skyrocketed, accuracy suffered, and timeliness slipped. Actions were needed to curb the turnover. For the first time, part of managers' bonuses was based on employee retention of direct reports. For managers in the research specialist department, this percentage was significant. These managers were also given extra tools to help them in their retention efforts.

A few months ago, a disgruntled research specialist sent out an email with blunt accusations regarding the operations group manager, Martin. He cc'd several of the other managers in the firm. A day later, he was called into Martin's office and was told that the way he worded his accusations was inappropriate and offensive. Later that week, ABIG updated the email policy outlining the appropriate use of corporate email. The research specialist seemed to cool down, and most in the firm thought the issue was over.

Yet a few days ago, the research specialist found out that all of his work emails were being monitored by management. He was issued a warning for emails that he had sent in the past that were deemed personal. He was also informed that his schedule was being rearranged to a more "traditional" workweek. The research specialist is outraged, and many other employees have expressed concerns that their emails are being monitored. The research specialist demanded an immediate meeting with management to discuss the matter. Riya, the Vice President of Operations, has deemed this situation unacceptable and wants to stop it before it gets worse. She asked management to come up with an action plan for how to address these many issues. This action plan must have recommendations for handling these issues that will take place in the short-term, mid-term, and long-term. Among the issues to be considered is the appropriate use of email, the current email policy, corporate monitoring of employee email, quality control, the bonus structure, and the flexible workweek policy.

Tom, Research Specialist

You joined ABIG company four years ago directly out of college. You are starting to get a little bored with the position but enjoy the benefits the company has to offer. You especially liked the fact that you had a fairly flexible schedule and got to come in whenever you wanted as long as you reached 40 hours and finished assignments. You are taking advantage of the company's tuition reimbursement program as you work on getting your MBA from Colorado State University.

During the past year, you have begun to question some of the decisions of your immediate managers and how those decisions affect your income. You and other members of your department have been assigned new people to train, something which you do not like. Due to the amount of time associated with training, you do not think your department will be able to meet your production goals or qualify for a full bonus payout. On a number of occasions, you have spoken to your manager, Martin, about the issue. You worry that without the bonus you usually receive, you will not have enough for tuition costs.

While you have talked with Martin directly about the issues, you feel that he has not listened to you. A few months ago, you realized there was no way your department was going to make its production goals. You got angry and sent an email to Martin. You copy other managers on the email because you have not had any success with Martin. You openly criticize management and express your fears. You also state that the quality of your department's work is not up to par and that you are "pawning" off old information. The next day, you are called into Martin's office and are chastised for what he thinks are "inappropriate" comments and accusations in the email. However, he assures you that management will consider your concerns. Later that week, the company releases an updated email policy dictating the appropriate use of company email.

A few weeks ago, you interviewed for a position in another department. The manager for the department asked Human Resources for a copy of your personnel file. During the interview, the new manager referred to the emails you had been sending. You are surprised because you never sent an email to this particular manager. You realize your emails have been monitored and shared among management.

That same day, you are called once again into Martin's office. He issues you a written citation for sending certain personal emails that do not have a "business" purpose. You get angry because most of your personal messages were two or three lines and only used for mundane things such as reminding your aunt to send a birthday card for your son. You know that the majority of employees use company email for at least some personal use. You are told that the company is eliminating its flexible workweek program and that you must start coming in during set hours. You feel that you are being retaliated against because of the email you sent criticizing the company. You scheduled a meeting with management and made your grievances known. Much to your annoyance, the Vice President of Operations has assigned you to work with management on an action plan to deal with the disaster management has caused.

Martin, Operations Group Manager

You are one of twelve operations group managers. You oversee the work of ten research specialists, including Tom. Overall, you view Tom as a mediocre employee and a troublemaker. Because of the company's flexible work schedule policy, Tom usually comes in during off-hours when you are not around to monitor him and logs exactly 40 hours every week. You have caught him looking at non-work-related websites and have warned him that it is against company policy. In spite of these issues, you gave Tom a positive evaluation six months earlier, hoping a positive evaluation would inspire Tom to perform at a higher level. You also want to avoid conflict since Tom is a very confrontational person. You justify the evaluation by stating that Tom is taking on additional training responsibilities even though all of the more senior research specialists were being called on to do more training. Also, even though you do not particularly like Tom, you fear what might happen if he gets angry and leaves. The company is already short on staff.

The positive evaluation has not stopped Tom from complaining about his additional responsibilities. A few months ago, you received an angry email from Tom heavily criticizing the company's training structure, bonus structure, product shortcomings, and ABIG management. One of the accusations was launched directly at you. You feel that the language is inappropriate and decided to confront Tom about the proper way to handle conflict. Since Tom copied other managers onto his email, you worry about the impact this could have on your reputation.

You call Tom into your office the next day and confront him which leads to an argument. You end the meeting by saying that management will consider his concerns in due time. That week you work with other managers to update an email policy dictating the proper use of email. A key statement in the policy is that corporate email must be used solely for business purposes. You are still angry about Tom's behavior and suggest to your boss that you could monitor Tom's emails to ensure he is obeying company policy. Your boss consents to this plan of action, and you begin personally monitoring Tom's emails. You find that he occasionally uses corporate email for personal uses, a direct violation of company policy. You share this information with the other managers and write this up in Tom's personnel file.

Recently, you feel that Tom's erratic behavior is hindering production. You talk with senior managers and agree that the flexible work schedule the company has been offering is being abused. You call Tom into your office and issue him a citation for misusing corporate email. You also inform him that the company's flexible workweek policy is going to be eliminated and he would have to start coming in during normal work hours. As expected, Tom responded negatively, demanding a meeting with senior management. Riya, Vice President of Operations, was not happy to hear about all of the problems. She asked management to come up with an action plan to discuss possible next steps in dealing with the company's culture problem. She assigned Tom, the one who started all of this, to the team to develop the plan. You feel this will stoke Tom's ego and cause more conflict.

Felipe, Director of the Operations Group

You are concerned about the issues surrounding Tom. You know that the operations group is having a lot of difficulties, and it cannot afford to have disgruntled employees causing trouble. Your bonus is based on the productivity of the entire group. Like Tom, you are concerned with your bonus. You know how much the turnover rate has affected the bottom line. You are surprised and angered with the email Tom sent a few months ago criticizing management and the bonus structure. You are not fond of the bonus structure, but you feel that some language in Tom's email was inappropriate and should not have been sent to the entire management team. You feel that his comments were exaggerated.

As a result of this email, you are being asked pointed questions about the department's product. You are nervous because the department has been taking shortcuts due to staffing issues, but you do not think this threatens the value of the product. For example, you cut one of the quality control measures performed by the research analysts. You believe this step was unnecessary. So far, two clients have raised quality control concerns, but you think the mistakes were acceptable given the resources saved. Additionally, the mistakes were easily corrected and the clients were appeased.

You also made a change to another product line. As alleged by Tom, old information was reused for up to two update cycles. The overall effect on the data was minimal. During informal conversations with the sales department, you were convinced that enacting the information reuse would not contradict anything that the sales department was telling clients. You feel that making these changes would make the department more efficient. You have been reluctant to share this information with other managers because you thought other managers would not understand. You also believe that the other managers do not face the difficulty you do of balancing quality of information with profitability.

Before talking to Martin, you viewed Tom's personnel file. You hope to find some trail of infractions. You were disappointed that Martin had given Tom a favorable review six months before. During your meeting, you agree to let Martin personally monitor Tom's emails and share the information with the other managers. Since it is a company email, you do not feel that this infringes on Tom's privacy. You were delighted when told that Tom had used company email for personal purposes. You also talked with top management and determined that the flexible workweek program the company offers leads to less productivity, and a decision is made to eliminate it.

When Tom was confronted with a written citation for misusing corporate email, he insisted on a meeting with top management. After hearing everybody's thoughts, Vice President of Operations Riya says the situation is unacceptable and is insisting on an action plan to deal with these issues in both the short-term and long-term. You are worried that a closer investigation of activities will show how you cut corners. You are frustrated that Tom has been appointed to the team since he is not a manager. You cannot understand why he gets what he wants simply by causing a ruckus.

Carol, Senior Director of Information Systems

You have been with ABIG Company for three years. A computer wizard, your main concern is keeping the databases that are the backbone of the company up and running. You have very little concern for anything outside of your job. When Martin and Felipe approached you about Tom's alleged email abuse, you explained to them that there was a way to bcc (blind carbon copy) them on emails that Tom and other employees in the group send from the office. You agree to set this in motion, but only if they check with Human Resources to make sure this is above-the-board. You do not have time to research the protocol yourself and see these types of tasks as diversions from your main database functions.

Even though you do not much care about these types of things, part of you is slightly satisfied that Tom is getting monitored. A year ago, you had entered into a relationship with Tom, but his acerbic attitude caused it to last only a short while. You feel that nobody in the company really likes Tom and that he takes advantage of the company using the "flexible workweek" program. When you learn that the flexible workweek program is going to be disbanded, you support the notion because you feel that everyone should have to work the same traditional hours that you have.

After asking Martin and Felipe to check with Human Resources, Martin called you a week later to tell you that Human Resources had approved the procedure to bcc him and Felipe on all emails that Tom sends out. After this assurance, you set in place the monitoring of emails for all of the members of the research group. You do not want to have to go back and recreate the same program numerous times for that department. The task takes you less than two hours to complete.

Now Tom is angry that his email has been monitored and insisted on setting a meeting with the management team. Riya, Vice President of the Operations Group, is making the team come up with an action plan with recommendations on how to address the problems and policy changes at the company. You are eager to get this over with so you can go back to your real job.

Darius, Director of Human Resources

You have worked at ABIG Company for eight years and love your job. You take great pride in the firm, and it is your responsibility to ensure that company policies are being followed. When Tom sent his incendiary email out to the managers, you were not sent a copy. Felipe later brought a copy of the email to you to read. He was quick to point out all of the misstatements and inappropriate language that were in the email. He also informed you of the two times he caught Tom using the Internet for non-business use. You point out that the violation should have been brought to your attention the first time Tom was caught misusing the corporate computer.

After reading the email, you agree that the language is over-the-top and inappropriate, thereby making it a misuse of company email. When Martin asks for permission to monitor Tom's email communications, you told him you would have to review ABIG's policies and procedures for monitoring email before giving approval. You are not aware of any precedent within the company where one individual is specifically targeted for email review. More typically, random emails were reviewed for proper business usage.

However, you find no strong arguments against it and feel that it is ethical as long as Tom is using the company's computer. After some research and a number of conversations with the corporate office, you decide that Martin is well within his rights as Tom's supervisor to review his email. You give the go-ahead to Martin. You located the specific document that explains to employees about the company's email policy and management's right to review employee email. However, you find some of the language a bit vague, so you help to update the policy to make it clearer and send it to all employees.

On the other hand, recently you have begun to have second thoughts about the appropriateness of monitoring a specific employee's computer usage. ABIG considers itself to be an employee-friendly company. General knowledge of targeting people for email review could result in a "Big Brother" view of the firm, further deterring hiring. You ask to be kept informed of all professional emails and that only essential persons be informed of what Tom or other employees might do doing on the Internet. You did not want the entire staff to have knowledge of what management is doing.

Now you are questioning even that decision after Tom found out about the monitoring and brought up the issue to management. The conflict has alerted employees to the fact that the company might be monitoring their Internet usage, and you have begun to hear some complaints, although none directly. You are tasked by Riya, Vice President of the Operations Group, to offer input on an action plan to address human resource issues. You are considering whether it would be the best idea to get rid of the employee monitoring program.

Harriet, Senior Director of Sales

You have worked at ABIG Company for three years and interact with the research group on a regular basis. You are proud of ABIG's reputation for quality work and products. Lately, however, you have been distressed to see problems with some of the products. For a long time, you did not know why problems had been arising when previously there had been none. You know the company has experienced high turnover and is strapped for new hires, but you are a firm believer that quality should never suffer as a result—even if it means cutting back on production.

A few months ago, you were cc'd on an email from Tom with criticisms against the company. While the criticisms seem mostly directed at management as a whole—as well as Operations Group Manager Martin in particular—you are most interested in accusations claiming that the group had been taking shortcuts by cutting out certain quality control procedures. You become very angry at this because it would explain the recent problems that were appearing with the product. You tend to hear most of the customer complaints and had noticed that recently the number of customer complaints had increased. You had attributed the problems to the steady rise in turnover and had assured your clients that all issues would be resolved shortly. You have also reassured them that the company's product offerings were still of the highest quality. Until now you had believed all that to be true. In your eyes, misleading the client is one of the worst things a salesperson can do.

After reading the email, you fired off a litany of questions to Felipe, the Director of the Operations Group. You feel he should be the one held responsible for any shortcuts since he is in charge of the group. You have a suspicion that he already knows about the "shortcuts" alleged in Tom's email, and that he even authorized them, but you cannot prove it. You wanted to give Felipe an appropriate amount of time to respond to your inquiries, but you heard nothing back.

Recently, you were informed that Tom's computer usage had been monitored. You feel that this is a direct breach of employee trust. You also are certain that this is retaliation against Tom for "causing trouble." While the email you read could have been phrased better, you strongly believe he was well within his rights to send that email and inform everyone in management about the problems. After hearing Tom's complaints, Vice President of the Operations Group Riya has assigned you and other managers to create an action plan to address these issues. You are dismayed to see that Felipe is part of the team. You strongly disagree with this because one of the things you wanted to discuss with the team is whether he engaged in questionable conduct in quality management.

Riya, Vice President of the Operations Group

You have spent six years working at ABIG Company and are also the General Manager for the entire Denver operation. It was not easy working your way to the top, and you have little use for internal problems that might compromise the quality of the business. You are frustrated with how the high turnover rates are impacting business operations and are determined to get to the bottom of it.

Recently, one of the research specialists, Tom, approached you and asked for a meeting with top management. During the meeting, he accused certain managers of retaliating against him for being a whistleblower. You remember reading the email and thinking that it was crass, but you had other things on your mind and didn't want to bother with it.

Tom also claimed that his supervisor Martin was "spying" on him whenever he used his computer and that he had been issued an unfair citation for using the computer for "non-business purposes." You are well aware of the company policies against using corporate technology for non-business use, but you are also realistic and know that employees do sometimes use corporate email systems to send a quick personal email. Tom claimed that Martin had infringed on his privacy and employee rights by sharing the information he had monitored with the rest of management and placing them in his personnel folder. He also alleges that the company's elimination of the flexible workweek policy it had had in place for the past two years was merely a way of getting back at him for blowing the whistle. He demanded to know what you are going to do about these issues.

As an extremely busy person, you really don't have time for this. However, you know this could cause damage to ABIG if word gets out that managers are monitoring employee email. You certainly don't want rumors being spread that managers retaliate against employees for bringing up concerns, especially with such a high turnover rate. You determine that the situation is unacceptable.

You assign a team to develop an action plan for addressing these issues. Once they have a draft, you will go over it with them and put in your own input. You hope to submit a finalized action plan to headquarters at the end of the month. You know this action plan is going to have to address a myriad of issues but believe if effective it will help increase employee morale and make the company more desirable for potential employees.