

Canada Post Admail Case

Based on original research by Silvana La Rosa.

Mary hung up the phone and turned to Tom and said, "Well it has happened again. I've just told my Admail helpers that there wasn't a delivery this week, and now there will be one after all. Why can't the managers plan far enough ahead so that we don't have to go through this confusion? That's the third time this quarter."

Tom replied, "I've had two at my stations, it really is discouraging to the Admail helpers. They can't count on regular work or even regular time off."

Mary returned to the phone to attempt to recall her Admail helpers at the Oakville station in the hopes of tracking down enough of them to be able to get the advertising fliers for the grocery stores delivered before the specials they advertised had expired. She found this part of her job very stressful. She found it difficult to achieve what she saw as a good performance. The current situation was strictly damage control. If she put a lot of pressure on her Admail helpers to cancel their personal plans and deliver the mail, she could encounter resistance and resentment. Some might even quit. If she didn't get the mail delivered on time her manager would be critical of her performance. Neither prospect was pleasing and Mary was near the end of her patience with this job. She saw herself as an achievement-oriented person with good organizational and interpersonal skills as well as a flexible attitude. This new business venture by Canada Post seemed perfect for her.

Admail was a division of Canada Post Corporation which was created to accommodate the delivery of advertising mail. Prior to the creation of this division, advertising mail that went through Canada Post was delivered by the Letter Carrier sections on their regular routes. Recently, many of these sections were choosing to not carry this mail and Canada Post decided to explore an alternative strategy which might provide uniform service. Admail was in the planning stages for two years prior to being implemented across Canada.

Admail is a separate division of Canada Post and has a national director. The organization in Toronto is divided into Admail East and Admail West, reflecting the geographic territory that each covers. Each section is comprised of approximately 15 office workers and 400-500 Admail helpers who actually deliver the mail. A section has its own manager with a senior officer, junior officer, administrative clerks, and finally the Admail helpers. The Admail helpers are not full-time employees. The Admail helpers are further organized into sections which are smaller territories organized for delivery purposes.

From a structural point of view, Canada Post, Corporation as a whole is a largely mechanistic, relying on formal routines, well-established procedures, and a hierarchy with highly institutionalized relations and a full-time work force. Admail itself is a much more organic structure. Flexibility and the ability to cope with change are essential qualities in the office workers and extremely desirable in the helpers. The organization faces a great deal of uncertainty each and every week in that the situation may change at any given moment. For example, it might be that a particular station (i.e., Oakville) won't be receiving any mail this particular week. Therefore, as helpers from that station phone in to see if they have mail to deliver that coming weekend, the clerk in charge of the Oakville station tells them that they will not be working that weekend because there is no mail to be delivered in that area. As a result, these helpers may or may not make other plans, the delivery timetable requires that the officers and clerks must have

all the routes covered and the paper work ready by Friday afternoon when the drivers begin delivering the mail to the helpers. The household delivery begins the following day. A problem arises when the office staff is notified late Friday morning that there will be mail going to that station after all. The staff must quickly and efficiently choose among alternative courses of action with the prime objective being to get that mail delivered to the satisfaction of the client.

Because there are so many variables involved, it is difficult to establish too many rules and procedures. A sudden snow storm may leave the staff scrambling to have the mail picked up from helpers who refuse to deliver it and to either redirect it to other helpers who be induced (through bonuses, etc.) to deliver it, or to establish truck routes to deliver it at much greater expense to the organization. It may be discovered midway through the week that an Admail helper has dumped his/her mail in a heap somewhere rather than delivering it door to door as she/he was supposed to do. Again, the staff must find some way of honouring Canada Post's commitment to its clients.

There are two major patterns of communication at work in this subgroup of Canada Post. The communication that exists in the office itself can be described as "downward communication". Information and instructions flow from that manager through the junior officers, finally arriving at the administrative staff. The manager is the first to know what stations will be receiving the mail and in what quantities. This information is vital to the administrative staff in assessing what courses of action are necessary to ensure that the mail is delivered on time. If mail is to be delivered in station that are not fully staffed, then extra effort must go into finding helpers to fill those vacant routes and ensuring that they have their proper maps, crown keys, and any necessary special instructions. A delay in receiving this information often leaves the clerk scrambling to meet the deadline and prone to mistakes which will cost the organization time and money. For example, placing the wrong route numbers beside a helper's name and address on the pay sheet will result in that helper getting someone else's mail. If it is discovered before the helper delivers it, the best that will happen is that a special trip costing in the neighbourhood of \$35 will have to be made to pick up that mail and then deliver it to the helper who is supposed to have it. If it is not discovered in time, that mail will be delivered door to door on the wrong route. In this case Canada Post will have violated its agreement with the client and will have to pay damages. What's more, it could lose that client's business. Loblaw's may not want its flyers delivered to houses and apartments in Rexdale when its store is in Mississauga. The flyers being delivered are time sensitive because they usually advertise weekly sales. Thus, timely communication is of the utmost importance. However, all too often the information sits with the senior officer causing problems like the one discussed above.

Any communication that does exist between the manager and the administrative staff is basically one-way communication. He speaks only in terms of the results that he expects and allows little room for discussion on what circumstances may keep the large organization from reaching its goals. Often times there are large discrepancies between the number of flyers that are supposed to be delivered and the actual amounts received from the printers. When approached with this problem, the manager's response is, "Well, do the best you can to get the job done." This in fact is not much of a response at all. What he's really saying is, "You figure it out." Once again, this is neither efficient nor productive.

The other pattern of communication which exists is that between the administrative clerk and the Admail helper. The clerk is the office's liaison with the helper who, in the end, must get the mail to where it is going. The nature of this relationship is such that two-way communication is essential. The clerks release information and instructions over the phone and are available to answer any questions or problems that the helper may have. The clerk must not only listen but also respond. For example, if a helper calls in to say that he is short a certain number of flyers to complete his route and that he can't

get into a particular apartment building because his key doesn't work, the clerk must find a way of helping to solve the problem or the job simply won't get done. In this case, it would be the clerk's responsibility to find out which key the help needs to get into that particular apartment building and to get that key and the necessary mail to the helper in a hurry so that the helper can meet his deadline. This type of communication is much more reciprocal in nature and is crucial to accomplishing the immediate goal of the organization; getting the mail delivered on time.

Admail helpers make \$12 per hour for the specified time value of their route (which is usually four to six hours) plus a \$6 flat bonus for any route which has more than three flyers to be delivered on any particular week. They receive their mail on Saturday morning and are expected to have it delivered by Tuesday night. Delays in getting the mail to them occur frequently, giving them even less time to meet their Tuesday deadline. When the weather is bad, Admail helpers usually feel that it is not even worth their while to complete or even start their routes. This usually means alternate and sometimes more expensive delivery means must be found, such as using the regular letter carriers on an overtime basis.

For the most part, the Admail helper is motivated by the opportunity to make some extra money. Often the degree of effort they put into delivering their mail (i.e., delivering it on time, putting it in the mail boxes and not throwing it on the front lawn, delivering even when it is cold and snowing, etc.) is directly related to how badly they want to keep their route, that is, how badly they value the reward. The amount of money to be earned by delivering Admail is small, and helpers have no guarantee that there will be mail for their routes on any given week. The value of the reward in this sense is quite low. However, there are those who value the exercise they get while out on their routes; they can get their exercise, talk to people, and make a little money while they're at it. For these people, the value of the reward is considerably higher and the rewards tend to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic. They do the job because they actually enjoy the job itself. It is interesting to note that this latter group of people are usually the more dependable workers. Unfortunately for Admail, there are too few of these helpers. For the most part, people take the job in an attempt to earn extra money. On average, an Admail helper makes between \$50 and \$80 per week when there is mail to deliver on their route. This serves as little incentive to keep the job or to do it well; as a result, there is a high rate of turnover in Admail helpers.

If Admail is to succeed rather than just survive, the rate of job turnover must decrease. The best way to do this is to increase the reward for an Admail helper. An increased cost of labour would be largely offset by the decreased costs of bringing new workers on board only to have them quit a month later. Every time a helper is hired, the organization expends resources to train him/her, put him/her on the payroll, set up a "new employee record", etc., not to mention the costs of picking up mail that has been bumped and compensating the client for not rendering the service promised to them. Motivation is a key factor in increasing productivity and efficiency.

Admail helpers rely on administrative clerks for guidance and instruction during times of uncertainty; however, the clerks are often poorly informed and not trained to handle these situations. The weekly deadlines for getting the mail out combined with a basic uncertainty about the strategy for achieving the goals of the organization often leaves the administrative staff frustrated and unmotivated.

Last month Mary left her job as an administrative clerk at Admail. She decided that the job could not be done as presently organized. Her manager was not interested in her suggestions for improvement. He is hopeful of getting a management posting back in to the main part of Canada Post.