Using ADMINCAT® results to change the culture of administration

An interview about the value of ADMINCAT® with Anne Dening,
Senior Educational Manager, Teaching and Learning, TAFE SA Regional

Based on an interview conducted by Dr John Mitchell, 7 October 2011. The interview was fully transcribed then edited by Dr John Mitchell and validated as accurate by Anne Dening.

Purpose and audience

The purposes of this interview are to:

- stimulate ideas about how to use ADMINCAT® to revitalise administration practice

- encourage the development of a national community of practice among users of capability analysis tool (CAT) users who are focused on improving quality and performance in their registered training organisations (RTOs).

The intended audience for this document are workforce development peers of Anne Dening who can use ADMINCAT™ to enhance VET practice; or who wish to use ADMINCAT® under licence, to assist other enterprises.

Background

The ADMINCAT® survey was conducted at TAFE SA Regional in June 2011. 185 people completed the survey which represented 93% of the Institute's administration staff. The Institute later received eleven reports of over thirty pages for ADMINCAT® – one for each of the nine regions/sections as well as one on the administration managers and one for the whole-of-Institute.

THE INTERVIEW

Why are administration skills important in TAFE SA Regional?

I think that administration has become a much more important function to our business than it used to be. For the last four or five years in our Institute, fee-for-service activity has been almost 50% of our business and that means that managers need to keep track of the tenders they're writing, they also need to do a lot of research before deciding whether they

will apply for particular tenders. There is a whole lot of extra administration that is not there with state-based funding.

So the complexities of a range of funding sources, even of different kinds of students and different ways of working means that the higher-level administration skills are really required in the Institute. We're also moving to become a statutory authority by July 1 next year, and there will be a whole range of other complexities arising with a statutory authority.

The ramping up of AQTF to include the excellence criteria involves further documentation and means that quality is not confined to programs and delivery: quality is about the whole business and includes all business systems and requires higher-level administration skills.

Also, TAFE SA has implemented business systems that go across the state and when you have an organisation that's geographically as dispersed as we are, we have had to move from an oral culture to a written culture. That's why I was so interested in our administration staff's level of research and reading skills in the ADMINCAT® results. The administration manager may not be based on the same campus, certainly not every day; so administration staff can't rely on just speaking to them and hearing what they have to say; they will have to be able to move to that written culture.

As with VETCAT® and CURCAT®, everyone's impressed with your response rate. Why do you think you had such a high number of responses to the ADMINCAT® survey?

I set the managers a challenge. I said 'OK, we had 94% of the lecturers complete the VETCAT® survey, so let's see if you can beat that'. And I employed the same promotional techniques I did with VETCAT®; for example placing bar charts on the intranet, comparing response rates from different groups. The managers really came on board and did a great job in rounding up their staff and encouraging everyone to complete the survey. I know that most of the managers made sure staff actually had the time to do the survey as part of their workload. And probably staff felt that there was a focus on their administration skills; I think the admin staff really appreciated being in the limelight.

I also made a big deal of saying to them 'Look, if you support the survey, I have put aside money in the capacity-building budget, and I'm going to go and get whatever money I can from wherever to make sure your skills are improved and that you have a career path'. They have always had a little bit of money to put into their PD through their managers and I certainly have run programs for them, but the programs had not been taken up particularly well.

What ADMINCAT® data confirmed your intuitive grasp of administration capabilities in the Institute?

What was really confirmed for me was that we have low-level computing skills and low-level general business skills. And knowledge management as a separate set of skills was at a low level. When I read those results I could understand why we'd had such difficulties with the implementation of the new student management system, because our people just didn't have a computing headset. No computing system, regardless of what the salespeople tell you, rolls in smoothly, but we seemed to have more than our fair share of implementation issues.

For you, what are some of the most important types of data in your ADMINCAT® reports?

The penny that dropped for me was our age profile: two-thirds of the admin staff is 40 or more and I realised these people are not the digital natives; they're not the young people I imagined. I'm on a campus where I see predominantly young staff who come and go on maternity leave and seem to be a very fluid kind of staff group and that's an issue too; but to have two-thirds of the staff over 40 was a major finding.

Figure 1 in the Executive summary showed a very low score for general business skills. And when I looked a bit deeper at that result for general business skills, two of the elements, analysis and risk management, had a very, very low score and I now realise that in our organisation we have structured it so that two people, the quality manager and the risk manager, probably manage all of that aspect of the business for us. But even at a lower level of administration, everyone should be doing analysis and risk management every day of the week, but it's not something that's embedded in their thinking yet. So for me that was very interesting.

The low result for the managing self skills set said something to me about the psyche of the place, the culture. It confirmed an intuitive feeling about what we needed to work on.

The other big thing that came out of the ADMINCAT® figures for me was that 70% have the qualification that is required for their job description but perhaps not the skills. They might have a Certificate III or a Certificate IV, but when ADMINCAT® actually asked them can you do this or that, they said no or partly.

The question we need to answer is whether we are looking to improve people's qualifications or people's skills. That's a very interesting question. Initially I am looking to upskill our administration people and if they decide that as part of that upskilling they want a qualification then I will put them in touch with the relevant lecturer to pursue that.

What does the data suggest about whether staff are maintaining their competencies?

Following on from my previous answer, 58% of our administration staff have three-quarters of a Certificate III according to the ADMINCAT® data. But the pie chart with the qualifications shows that 69% of the group have the whole Certificate III, IV or Diploma. Since the results came out, some of the staff have talked to me individually and admitted it's a long time since they did Certificate III. Obviously if they're not using the skills then it is clear that they lose them. While they may have done spreadsheets and databases as part of a Certificate course in their everyday work they will be using a product that has been built for the business and may be very different to a Microsoft product too.

What most surprised you about the ADMINCAT® report data?

The weakness in IT was the biggest surprise followed by the weakness in general business skills because I would have thought those two skill areas were absolutely crucial to do our business. And that's possibly because of my own headset: I go to meetings of the senior educational managers who are always talking about how the business is moving on. I'd not previously worked all that much with the admin staff and I was surprised that they hadn't picked up that these two areas of their work were absolutely critical to the Institute.

What is your explanation of these surprise results?

Well I think it's structural. The Institute made a decision about four years ago to have only ASO2s, Administrative Service Officers 2. That meant we no longer had trainees coming into the organisation but it also meant we didn't have any ASO3s with higher-level skills. And so structurally they were all on the same level apart from their managers. Culturally that means even if you were wanting to become an ASO3 there were no pathways for you in our organisation; you needed to go to the city and get yourself a job in a different government department.

So now we have the lowest common denominator effect where people actually say things like 'I'm only an ASO2, you can't expect me to do that'. It almost comes out in some of the data; that culture of 'you can't expect any more of me'.

What are the broad implications of the results for workforce development related to the administration staff?

The broad implications are that the business and its systems have changed but the administration group hasn't. We need new administration skills at higher levels. With the implementation of the new student enrolment system there won't be a front office counter service as such. The students will enrol online and they'll pay online so there'll be no money held at the campus office. That changes immediately the mix of skills of the admin people and how many staff you need at that level.

Interestingly too the Institute has now put in place a Director of Corporate Services and I think that will help to build a team of managers with a united kind of corporate culture for the organisation rather than having nine disparate teams spread all over the state.

Also, the Senior Educational Managers need to indicate the new jobs that have emerged for administration staff in education programs. Managers need to clarify what administrative functions are needed in order for the educational programs to do their new business. They are going to have to describe those roles. Do they want someone who is able to track projects and tenders? If so, you will need very good computer skills in Excel or Project Manager or whatever. Does the program need assistance from a Moodle administrator; or someone who is skilled in using a customer relationship management tool?

The senior managers from education and from the corporate area need to work together to come up with a corporate services structure which meets the needs of the new business. And it's not just a matter of structure; they need to work together so that administration understands that the work of programs is their work.

In response to the data, I understand you are looking at 're-culturing'. What do you mean by that?

I'm really fascinated by Edgar Schein's work on organisational culture. He says there are three levels of culture and the first most basic level is the visible organisational structures and processes, the artefacts that you see. The second level is what people say are their values and their strategies and their goals. The really interesting area for me is the third level which concerns the basic underlying assumptions, the unconscious, the taken for granted aspects, people's perceptions and their beliefs.

That third level is where I would like to work with a good professional development program for administration staff, in conjunction with some of the structural reorganisation. The structural reorganisation can happen but unless you get to the underlying beliefs you actually won't change much. You need to address the taken for granted aspects; some of which are that if I look good and turn up in the uniform and smile sweetly at the customer, then that's my job and I understand my role. Whereas really what I'm saying to the administration staff is I want you to have better skills than this because we need to provide a better service. And better skills will involve a deeper understanding of aspects of their job; not just a superficial knowledge.

This issue is quite difficult to work on particularly at some of the really small campuses where there is only one administration staff member at the office; if they go to lunch they have to actually shut the office. They don't even get a chance for professional development by osmosis: there's no one else around them.

The re-culturing of the administration staff will involve challenging staff to upgrade their skills, even though they scored themselves quite highly in terms of what percentage of skills they felt they currently had to do their job. My challenge to them is to say: You've got 80% of the skills you need for the job; but which job is that? The one that was there two years ago, or the one we need you to do now or next year'.

Broadly speaking, how are you unpacking the data with different people and groups within the Institute?

I've had a meeting with the Institute's Managing Director to let her know what the results were. I've got another meeting with her to provide more depth. I've had teleconferences or face-to-face meetings with each of the nine PACS (Program and Campus Service) managers individually. I have met with them all for the first time as a group of managers and I have an afternoon planned with the Director of Corporate Services. I had a meeting with all of the Senior Education Managers and the corporate managers because everyone needs to see where this might go and to own the solutions.

I must say the education managers were fascinated by the data. I did one of my red, yellow and green spreadsheets about the skill levels, as it gives people a really quick snapshot and a visual, and then if they ask questions we can go to the whole report. I'm also going to write something to go out in Regional Communications for all of the admin staff to thank them for their honest participation and to let them know the possibilities for professional development.

Individual admin staff are starting to have performance development interviews with their managers and they are voluntarily bringing along their individual reports, which is good.

What are your next steps in responding to the ADMINCAT® data?

My next steps are to develop a communication strategy for the staff and to write a funding submission for extra money for PD for our admin staff. I'll develop some really good PD programs that are focused on their roles and the emerging roles.

I understand you are interested in licensing ADMINCAT®. How do you envisage it being used by the Institute?

We'll use it to develop workforce development plans for admin staff in the large companies in regional South Australia, for instance in the north and west we have quite a few very large mining companies. We're doing a lot of training for them in truck-driving and other mining-related skills and also in front-line management and supervision. We could use ADMINCAT® for their administration staff.

The wine industry here in the Barossa Valley has big companies with large groups of administration locally and in the south-east we have timber companies and service companies such as Elders and Landmark etc. I envisage with a licence for ADMINCAT® we could access some of the funding available for workforce development on behalf of those big companies or with them as a partner, and use ADMINCAT® as a tool for identifying where their skills need to be upgraded.

Is there anything else you would like to comment on that I haven't asked about?

My last comment would be that it is very important for me to work not only with the PACS managers but also 'on' them because the ADMINCAT® report we received about their skills would indicate that they also have some skill gaps that need filling as well. If we are going to be successful in re-culturing this big team into something that is creative and able to upskill to meet the needs of the business, it will only happen if we actually work on these managers as well. I did tell them yesterday that I was developing a plan for their own PD and that I would get it back to them. This was an unexpected aspect of the ADMINCAT® project, but we are going there.