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Completed Staff Work - the basics

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Introduction

This document describes a methodology which can be used for carrying out work assignments in a consistent, effective and efficient way. It is brought together from a number of sources which are listed later in the document. It can make the difference between an average employee and an outstanding one. It can also make the difference between an average supplier and an outstanding one.

If you are a supplier, would you rather be average, or outstanding ?

Contents

What is “Completed Staff Work” ?
This is a term borrowed from the United States military forces.

It is the study of a task, opportunity, or problem, which may require thorough research and analysis, and presentation of a *sound* solution by a team member to a leader. Sound solutions enable leaders to address issues efficiently and effectively.

The solution should be presented in such form that all that remains to be done by the next level of leadership is to indicate approval or disapproval of the *completed action* proposed.

The words "completed action" are emphasised because the more difficult the problem is, the more the tendency is to present the problem to the leader in a piecemeal fashion.

The concept of “CSW” recognises that finding problems is easy. What's hard is recommending the appropriate solution(s) for a given organisation’s resources, capabilities, culture etc., and then implementing the solution(s) that result in an improved situation.

CSW is a management tool that creates consistent and reliable problem solving and subsequent recommendations. It is a process that, when used correctly, does just what it says: It makes sure the people involved do the complete work of researching and considering all options before making recommendations.

Why is Completed Staff Work important ?

CSW is designed to help leaders and team members carry out their work effectively and efficiently.

Successful organisations create their own future by concentrating on and anticipating issues that affect service delivery. This process involves team members who seek out or respond to organisational problems and then develop innovative ways to solve them.

A leader’s job is made easier by an organisation full of people who are constantly seeking out potential problems and fixing them before they become real “show stopper” issues. On the other hand, a leader is frustrated when these same people seek out potential problems and then recommend solutions that don’t get to the root cause of the problem.

The problem for decision makers in medium to large organizations is they don’t have time for intimate involvement in every issue and, therefore, must rely on others to do research and report the pros and cons of a particular recommendation. For decision makers this process can be like walking through a mine field without a map: each step forward has the potential to end the journey or cripple the traveller. Even in the best scenario, the decision maker will be using a map of the mine field prepared by someone else, and that in itself is reason to have confidence the map was prepared correctly.

If no established and approved method is used to solve problems, the results can vary and be as inconsistent as the perspectives of the people doing the research.

Problems can be caused by a team member being asked to study and prepare a report on an evolving issue and not doing good research; perhaps not taking enough time to get all of the data or jumping to a premature conclusion as to the problem itself. It may be as simple as recommending a solution to a problem that creates another set of problems. It could be as serious as the decision maker moving forward on a project and then finding out that the recommendation was grossly under-funded.

Even if some might enjoy watching the leader step on a land mine or two, this never helps the organisation move in a positive direction. It is, therefore, always in the best interests of the organisation, the team members, and the customers who pay our salaries to solve problems in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

The value of this process is immeasurable for the leader of an organisation. Having confidence that team members have considered all aspects of an issue before making a recommendation significantly improves the success rate for the team member, the leader and the organisation.

The process also reduces the chance of team members being stuck in *reactive* work mode, usually less satisfying than the preferable *proactive* mode, in which they do not wait for direction before proposing action, and do not stand by helplessly watching problems develop and escalate.

When to use CSW

CSW can be used in producing written and verbal reports or presentations, establishing a new procedure or process, the evaluation of costs and benefits, initiating action and in the decision making process. Once learned, the principle of CSW can be usefully applied to any activity. It can be used by individuals or by a whole team working on the same activity.

Basic principles of CSW

It is your duty as a team member to work out the details of the task. You should not consult your leader in the determination of those details, no matter how perplexing they may be (other than for clarification if the task has been assigned to you by the leader). You may and should consult other team members, who can help you to take a comprehensive look at the problem or issues under review. The product, whether it involves the introduction of a new policy or affects an established one, must be worked out in a finished format when presented to the leader for approval or disapproval.

Team members tend to ask leaders to solve problems. This occurs more often when the problem is difficult, and may be accompanied by a feeling of mental frustration. It is easy to ask the leader for advice, and it appears easy for the leader to give it. Resist the impulse, and you will be well prepared to meet the challenge of your job.

It is your job to *advise* your leader what *they* ought to do, not to *ask* them what *you* ought to do. The leader needs answers, not questions. Your job is to study, write, restudy, and rewrite until you have evolved a single proposed action; the best one of all you have considered. Your leader merely approves or disapproves.

If it is necessary for you to correspond with someone on a particular matter, and the correspondence is best suited to be sent by your leader, your complete thoughts and thorough analysis and research on the matter or issue should be expressed in the correspondence in final format, as though your leader had written it themselves. A leader will be inclined to send a thorough, well-written communication.

In most instances, CSW results in one or more documents prepared for the signature or approval of the leader without accompanying comment. If the proper result is reached, the leader will usually recognise it at once. If the leader wants comment or explanation, they will ask for it.

The theory of CSW does not preclude a rough draft. Remember that a rough draft must still be well-researched and contain well thought-out ideas. It must be complete in every respect except that it need not be neat. A rough draft must not be used as an excuse for shifting to the leader the burden of formulating the action. CSW may result in more work for the team member, but will allow leaders to perform their required duties, while enabling team members to develop further and gain more exposure and experience in their positions.

Steps to carrying out CSW

Like any process, "Completed Staff Work" consists of a series of steps to follow when preparing any piece of work for a leader. The steps can be defined as:

1. Identifying the issue and establishing a work process.
2. Collecting and analysing the data.
3. Developing and assessing options.
4. Developing recommendations and drafting the report.
5. Obtaining decision maker approval.
6. Presenting to the approving body.
7. Implementing the approved decision.
8. Follow-up.

Each step contains several elements to consider.

Step 1: Identify Issue and Establish Work Process

Determine the scope of the issue

- Is the issue a far-reaching and broad organisational issue, or is the problem of narrow focus, perhaps involving only limited numbers of people or small workgroups?
- Consider the parameters of the issue. E.g.
    - budget considerations
    - communications issues
    - deadlines for results
    - specific areas of exclusion
- What will the final product will look like? Is this a suggested governance change, or will the results just form the basis of a final decision regarding a particular problem?
- What are the key assumptions, and how will they be checked for validity ?
- Why is the work being performed ?
- What will the output be used for ?
- Who will receive the output ?
- Ask Questions !
- Check that nobody else is already working on the same issue, either in your local organisation or the wider organisation of your company. Avoid duplication and pool resources wherever possible.

Develop a clear statement of the issue

- This reduces the chance of starting out to resolve one issue and ending up working on something completely different, in which case your solution will address something other than the real root cause of the problem.
- Keep the statement concise, and focused on the outcome expected, which will help ensure that you doesn't stray from your objective and that the issue will be easy to understand.
- As work progresses and forces start pulling you off target, it serves as a reminder of the original mission.
- An example might be "What tasks need to be done to implement this change?"

Identify decision makers

- Who is the ultimate person(s) or group(s) that will make a decision regarding your recommendation?
- Consider the position and feelings of that person or group regarding the issue.
- Discuss the project with them early in the process so that all parties involved have a clear understanding of the issue, the statement of the issue, and the desired outcome.

Clarify needs/expectations of the decision maker

- Is the statement of the issue in accordance with the decision maker's expectations?
- Does it actually articulate what you will be trying to accomplish, and are you heading down the right path?
- When is the output (e.g. a report) expected to be completed?
- You and the decision maker need to come to some realistic agreement as to how long the process is expected to take.
- Agree how issues (those not anticipated by you or the decision maker prior to the start of the process) will be addressed.
- Ask how much autonomy you will have to complete the project and how often the leader wants to be briefed on your progress.

Assign a lead responsibility

- If you are working in a group, even mature and engaged teams need a designated leader, if for no other reason than to serve as a focal point for collecting and disseminating the group's work.
- Decide at the start who will be the group issue leader: the person assigned responsibility for the project and the outcome of the group's work. In addition, this person will make sure that the group completes its objectives and all deadlines are met.
- The issue leader must convey to the group the level of responsibility and accountability the decision maker has bestowed on them to get the work completed.
- The group leader will hold people accountable for their assigned functions and duties.

Set the timetable

- How will your work be scheduled to meet the overall deadline set by the decision maker?
- One way to set the timetable is to write your projected beginning and ending deadlines on a board that separates them by date. From there you can take all of your project components and plug them in on the timeline based on how long you feel each will take. If they do not fit, go back and discuss options with the decision-maker, usually a change of
    - time (moving the deadline out),
    - cost (putting more people on the job) or
    - quality (reducing the scope) will help.
- Refer back to your earlier discussions with the decision maker about how broad or narrow the focus of the issue is, to validate your estimates.
- Consider whether the resolution of your issue will depend on another action or issue being resolved. If so, you must factor this in to your schedule.
- Agree how and when you will keep the decision-maker informed.

Identify internal and external stakeholders

- Identify the internal and external stakeholders that may be affected by the issue you are addressing. Who will be affected in the local and wider organisation ?
- Ask yourself not only who will be impacted by your work but also who can lend insight and expertise to your effort. Who is responsible for this elsewhere in the organisation ?
- Whose agreement or cooperation is needed ?
- By identifying the people who will be most affected and those who possess the technical knowledge and expertise needed, you will be a long way toward establishing key stakeholders and potentially those you may want represented on your project team.

Identify the resources required

- What will you need to complete the project? People, Materials, software etc.
- What information or previous work already exists which may help you ?

Determine the characteristics of the output (or deliverable)

- Do not confuse this with determining the scope of the issue (above).
- What will the project output look like? E.g.
    - a policy report,
    - an administrative directive,
    - a presentation to an individual or group,
    - a memo to inform the organisation of a change in methods or guidelines.

Check decisions against the original issue statement

Step 2: Collect and Analyze Data

The process to accomplish successful “Completed Staff Work” is grounded in how well you research the data that will be used to make your decision. This is the point at which successful people make their decisions based on *current actual* and not *perceived* reality.

The importance of data collection and research to the success of your project cannot be understated. It is the hard part of research and requires discipline and tenacity. When involved in a group process, there are always people who will persistently push the group to “just make the decision”.

Frequently, our perceptions regarding a situation are very different from the facts.

Until you get to the final stages of a decision-making process, experience and intuition are your enemies. Use them only when time is the critical factor in the decision-making process or when all of the facts lead to two or more possible recommendations.

Research data and information

- Make basic inquiries related to the issue’s history and background.
- Trace the issue back to its origin. Consider interviewing all people who are currently or were previously affected by the issue.
- Keep in mind that the information obtained through the interviews most likely will be based on the individuals’ perceptions of the issue.
- Once you have developed a clear, accurate picture of the history of the problem, examine the “current reality” of the situation. Write these facts down, and look very closely to see if any of them need additional research to quantify or raise additional questions.
- Look for gaps that may raise additional questions.
- Look for connections or trends that tie the information together and make it whole.

- Question everything until you have all the information needed to form a complete picture of the issue.

Involve stakeholders

- Consider how involved you want each of the stakeholders to be in the next phases of the process.
- Some stakeholders can be used to participate in discussions and be a part of a formal group. Others can be used as technical experts to answer questions pertaining to all the data you discovered.
- Do not waste people's time, but gain the positive results of meaningful participation.
- Consider who will write the report and review the draft, if that is appropriate.
- You should be comfortable that all of your stakeholders have been considered and have had time to participate and provide their input.

Seek customer input

- Customers may already accounted for, as stakeholders, however the nature of your issue and the type of business you are in it may make it difficult for you to use your customers as process stakeholders.
- If you haven't engaged your customers at this point, consider if their input is appropriate.
- If customer input is appropriate, ask yourself what these customers want from this process and how you know they want it. Keep in mind that we are in the business of working for our customers and that allowing them input is critical to the eventual implementation of your recommendation.
- The bulk of all your data collection should be written and documented regardless of the eventual presentation.

Check actions taken so far against the original issue statement

Check that everything done so far still relates to the original issue statement, and that nothing has been missed.

Step 3: Develop and Assess Options

Using all of the information you obtained in Step 2 should have provided you with a fairly clear picture of the issue. From there it should be easy to see what the root causes of the issue are and any issues keeping you from getting to your desired outcome.

Caution is suggested at this point: Often, people will collect all of the information on the issue and then recommend their original perceived solution. All of your options, no matter how many recommended, should be a direct result of the data you collected and not be influenced by emotion or your prejudices.

One way to analyse your current reality information is by using "gap analysis":

- Identify the "gaps" between current reality and where you want to be (the desired outcome).
- Proposals for actions that fill the gaps are the potential answers to the issue or problem you are addressing. They are the alternatives you should consider for your final recommendation.

Use criteria to develop a final recommendation

Whether you develop a weighted criteria filter depends on the complexity of your project and the overall potential impact any particular recommendation would have on the organisation.

It is done by determining the criteria on which the recommendation will be judged, and then rating each one as some percentage of 100 percent, depending on its relative importance when compared with the other criteria.

e.g.

Criterion	Weighting
Cost	40
Risk to the business when implementing	40
Number of people who will need to change working habits	20
Total of all weightings is always	100

Then using a standard 1, 3, and 5 scale, with 1 being worst and 5 being best, you can set up your formula to calculate the total based on the value you assigned the criterion and the percentage you established for its relative importance.
e.g. for three possible solution options:

	Cost score	Weighted	Risk score	Weighted	Change score	Weighted	Totals by option
Option 1	3	120	5	200	3	120	440
Option 2	5	200	3	120	3	120	420
Option 3	3	60	1	20	5	100	180

The "weighted" column is the criterion score for each option, multiplied by the percentage given to that criterion. The "totals" are all the weighted scores for each option, totalled. The highest score indicates the best recommendation. Others options, though feasible, are not as well recommended.

Using this approach to prioritisation is objective, and aligns the best solution with the priorities of the business.

You will be able to explain to the decision maker the criteria used in assessing the options and why a particular recommendation was made over any other included in your report.

The following criteria should be the minimum set to use when assessing your alternatives:

Develop cost options

- What is the cost associated with the alternatives?
- Each alternative will normally carry with it a potential cost to the organisation, and knowing that is important to the decision maker.
- The cost of an alternative *can* cause a decision maker to be misled. Some consider the best alternative the lowest cost option.
- Your task is to make the best recommendation based on the criteria you used to rank the alternatives. Cost should never be the only criterion used to make the decision.

Consider budget impacts

This is the effect each alternative will have on your current and future budgets. i.e. Recurring costs which are the budget impacts of the decisions that will appear year after year.

Consider policy impacts

- How do the alternatives mesh with current policy? It will not be helpful to start a cascade of problems because your recommendation conflicts with existing policy.
- Ultimately, make sure policy problems are addressed prior to (or as a part of) the overall recommendation.

Consider non-cost impacts

For example:

  - The amount of change your organisation can tolerate at one time .
  - The prevailing culture.
  - Political considerations.
  - If the timing is correct with relation to other activity in the organisation.
  - If the decision maker has the political power or will to see the recommendation through to successful implementation.

Consider public relations and marketing aspects

- If your recommendation is going to have any effect on internal or external customers, good or bad, consider public relations. Making sure all stakeholders understand the need for implementing your recommendation is one of the keys to success. Open and honest communication is vital in public relations.
- Closely associated with public relations is marketing. In this case, successfully market your recommendation by using a defined communication process and your key stakeholders to spread the word about why the recommendation is the best for the organisation.
- I can be helpful to float an idea out in the organisation and then wait to take its temperature. The temperature in this case reflects the overall feeling of the organisation and determines who the potential sabotaging members are (if any). Identifying these up front will allow you to do some lobbying prior to releasing your report. This action will save the decision maker time and trouble.

Check recommendations against the original issue statement

Ensure that recommendations still address the original issue.

Step 4: Recommendations and Draft Report

At this point, you will have run your alternatives through the filter and considered all of the issues involving assessing the best option. You are now ready to start the final process of making a specific recommendation.

Seek consensus of stakeholders on recommendations

- There comes a time in all team processes when the team needs to line up behind a particular recommendation. Evaluating all of the facts using the information gathered in Steps 1-3, you must generate some sort of consensus on what the final recommendation will be.
- If you are the project leader, hold group members accountable by reminding them of your desired outcome statement.

Select the best option

- Your criteria should have guided you to the best option.
- It should be a formality to review the facts and draft a report.
- Take time to go back and review your current reality information (the data) and make certain your final recommendation is based on facts and gets you to your desired outcome.
- The focus should be on how well the recommendation answers the organisation's issue and serves the best interest of your customers.
- Identify any situations which will be exceptions to the recommendation, and ensure they are justified, for inclusion in your final report.

Resolve conflicts

- This should be minimal; however, some members might not agree with the "best option" selection. In this case, see if there is a solution or compromise that addresses everyone's concerns and still provides the desired outcome.
- If you have members who, with the best interest of the organisation in mind, just prefer one recommendation over the other, let them know it is okay to disagree but not to be disagreeable. This sort of situation doesn't normally occur; but if it does, give all members time to voice their opinion, and then use the criteria filter to further guide the consensus process.
- The best tactic in this case is always open, honest communication-lots of it.

Consider presentation method

- Consider the most effective manner in which to present your report. Research regarding the decision maker's learning style (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_style) can mean the difference between success and failure of the recommendation.
- When choosing your presentation method, consider how you are viewed by the decision maker. If you are a trusted and proven team member, you may only have to provide a bulleted list of information. If the decision maker is not familiar with you and your issue, consider the most appropriate way to fill in the information gap.
- Don't give loads of data and graphs to a decision maker who wants only an executive summary. Likewise, don't short-change a decision maker who likes to get into the facts and understand how you reached your conclusion.
- Decide the form in which your information will be provided. Some people like the full report along with an electronic presentation that highlights the important points. This way, if questions arise from the presentation, they can go back to the report for more information.
- Consider also how "visual" the decision maker is when it comes to comprehending information. For some people, charts, graphs, and maps are the ticket. Others just want the facts in words.
- No decision maker only moderately concerned about your issue wants to be read to or suffer through a boring presentation. There is nothing wrong with asking the decision maker(s) which type of presentation they prefer so you can be certain that you get the most out of the decision maker's time.
- It is best to give the decision maker a report even if you do not expect it to be read. It is a resource in case there is a question later.
- Make sure your formatting is professional and all the words are spelled correctly. Use a spellchecker (carefully !), preferably with a context checker.
- Present a single, coordinated proposed action. Do not be vague or ambiguous.

Draft the report

- Your final piece of work will most likely come in the form of a report. This will speak to your professionalism and to the quality of your group's work. Make certain it is a quality work and represents everything you want it to be before it is handed off for review.
- Along with the appearance of the report, make certain the report is complete and, above all, accurate. With regard to context and clarity, your goal should be to produce a report that any casual, or even uninformed, reader will understand.
- If you were the decision maker, would you sign off on the research and recommendations included? If your answer is yes, you are ready to release the draft for review.

Circulate your draft report for feedback

- Pick out a select group of stakeholders for a more in-depth review of your document.
- Consider including in the review process some people who have an in-depth knowledge of your issue and also some who don't have such a depth of knowledge. This will give a better chance of detecting something you may have overlooked because you were so "close" to the issue.
- Give your reviewers plenty of time to look over the document and provide you with feedback. Don't rush this part of the process, because you want the feedback to be meaningful and useful to your final product.
- When you receive the feedback, give it honest consideration, even if it is critical. Make sure you address deficiencies when mistakes are brought to your attention.

Check report against the original issue statement

Does the report still address the original issue ?

Step 5: Obtain Decision Maker Approval

- Use the presentation method decided on in Step 4.
- You need to be comfortable with your media if you are going to present your recommendations to the best of your ability.
- If using electronic media for your presentation, make sure you arrive early to ensure that everything is correctly functioning. Check your media.
- Practise for the presentation by delivering it before your staff or another group before the “big show.”
- Advise the decision-maker what to do. Do not ask them.
- If actions are required, make it clear, and ensure they are assigned to someone with a target completion date.

Alert decision maker to potential unresolved conflicts

- Especially if you are dealing with a controversial subject or the affected persons are going to resist changes the recommendation will bring.
- Advise the decision maker who is happy with the report and who is not happy with it, and why.
- The decision maker will also want to know to what degree the affected stakeholders will support the recommendation.
- Advise the decision maker of any minority opinion, even when the recommendation is overwhelmingly supported.
- Advise the decision maker of any political strategies you used to seek input and formulate your report and of any recommendations you have regarding the political strategies you feel will help ensure successful implementation of the recommendation. E.g. pre-briefing certain individuals.

Determine senior leadership involvement

- Consider, with the decision-maker, whether the report needs to go to a higher level of leadership for approval (if you do not already know).
- Sometimes, your leader may want others made aware of the report as a matter of courtesy.

Step 6: Present to Senior Leadership (if appropriate)

Consider the presentation approach just as you did for the decision maker.

Determine the best presentation method

- This now has less to do with what the output looks like than how it can best be communicated. The process used will depend on the complexity, seriousness, or perhaps the political potential of the recommendation.
- Dealing with multiple learning styles can be challenging. Often, you can be successful by presenting the information so that visual people get the basic idea of the situation, but don’t make it so visual that the “analysers” in the audience are put off by the whole thing.
- As earlier, it is always better to provide the full report as backup, even if the decision makers don’t take the time to read it.
- Senior Leadership do not need a wealth of written information that is very technical in nature.

Publish report and make presentation

If you have properly done your work this far, what happens as a result of your published work or the presentation that results from it will come as no surprise. You have done your work, and the recommendation is aligned because of the criteria used to determine it was the best option. Stakeholders have been advised, conflicts were resolved and communicated, and now all that is needed is a decision in your favour.

Obtain senior leadership decision

Up to this point, you have done a tremendous amount of work to make sure your recommendation is in the best interest of all those involved. That is what this process is all about. Keep in mind that even if you conduct the entire process perfectly, there is still a chance that you won't get a positive decision on the recommendation.

- Arrive in plenty of time to check your media before the presentation.
- At the end of the presentation, make it clear what you want from the group. E.g. "I need your approval of the proposal in order to go ahead".

Step 7: Implement Approved Decision

Plenty of work still needs to be done to communicate the approved decision, distribute the report, and develop an implementation strategy.

Most of the time, a recommendation to make a change will cause some group of people to actually experience change. When this is the case, you should ensure your final report is communicated to those involved stakeholders. Just as you have done during the entire process, make sure all participants and stakeholders are briefed on the next steps in implementing the action.

Determine implementation strategy

- Review the many previous steps involved in your process to see which will be helpful in developing a strategy for implementing your recommendation.
- Make certain at this point that your project doesn't fail because you didn't give any thought to how it would be implemented.
- An approach based on project management principles (e.g. Prince2), even if scaled down for smaller activities, will ensure that everything is planned appropriately, and that implementation activity is tracked to ensure it completes correctly.
- Define the project deliverables (what tangibles it will produce) and completion criteria (e.g. signoff from customer groups, confirmation that all deliverables are produced).
- Plan timescales by setting milestones which will mark when intermediate tasks have been completed.
- Make sure that delegated tasks are accompanied by specific instructions and clearly outlined expectations.
- Agree who will be the project executive (the leader who will sponsor the project, sign off at completion, and assist with issues beyond your control).
- If multiple people or groups are involved in the implementation process, it is wise for you to maintain the lead role. You are the person most familiar with the project and with the greatest stake in successfully implementing the recommendation.

Step 8: Follow-Up

At the beginning of the process, you checked current reality and desired outcome. These concepts become more critical now since the implemented recommendation must be evaluated to see whether it delivered its intended outcome.

Approval for your recommendation is just a step toward the desired outcome. The real test of the research and recommendation is whether it actually solves the problem by addressing its root cause.

Monitor implementation

- The project leader must effectively monitor implementation activities using project management principles.
- Issues, and changes to the original plan must be raised to the project executive, with recommendations.
- Completion of the implementation will be measured by confirmation that all deliverables have been produced, and by completion criteria set at the start of the implementation.
- CSW principles should be used throughout the implementation as for making the original recommendation.

Evaluate implementation

- The real benchmark of success will be if the recommendation solved the problem.
- Evaluation should involve a review of current reality to see if the desired outcome has been achieved.

Final check

When you have finished your completed staff work the final test is this:

If you were the leader would you be willing to sign the paper you have prepared, and stake your professional reputation on its being right?

If the answer is no, take it back and rework it, because it is not yet completed staff work.

Sources

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  JE Lincoln and Associates: The Top 10 Frequently Asked Questions

Note: A search on the UK Intellectual Property Office and the United States Patent and Trademark Office web sites found no registered trademark containing "Completed", "Staff" and "work". The string "CSW" is registered for an entirely different purpose.
http://www.ipo.gov.uk/tm/t-find/t-find-text/ UK IPO web site
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