

CROSS TRAINING - VALUE IN TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT

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Win Win - As employees' values and needs are changing, so are those of organizations. Cross training is an effective method that may be used to align the values and needs of both the employees and the organization.

Cross training occurs when employees are trained to perform job duties other than those normally assigned. Cross training may be a short-term ad hoc fix or an ongoing planned process. It can take many forms, from one- to two-day temporary assignments to a sophisticated process of job rotation typically lasting six or more months.

Historically, cross training focused on broadening employees' skills to reduce costs and provide job coverage. Along with on-the-job training, it was often used in trade jobs and administrative functions as a way for employees to learn new skills. Originally, cross training provided back-up help when the primary jobholder was unavailable for a day or two. It filled the void and allowed the manager to juggle priorities. It was also invaluable if a jobholder left the organization, as someone else was able to cover until the position was filled.

Today, the reasons organizations implement cross training go beyond these traditional needs. It has many more benefits for employees and organizations. Along with improving productivity, it increases employee commitment and motivation.

Cross training increases employees' knowledge and ability to perform different tasks by using current skills or by learning new skills. It is a good way to add variety to employees' workdays, to add new challenges to their jobs and/or to try out new skills for future career development. It offers the opportunity to work with different employees and supervisors, adding to enhanced self-esteem in both the employee learning the new skill and the employee teaching the skill. In addition to enlarging jobs, performing different but relatively equal tasks, cross training may be designed to enrich jobs. Job enrichment adds more responsibility to the employee's work. Through exposure to a variety of jobs, the employee gains a better understanding of the interrelationships between jobs and work groups and can develop a "bigger" picture of the operation of the organization.

Today's employers are looking for versatile and flexible workers. They want team players willing to accept or even volunteer for duties or projects outside their normal job responsibilities. The last things they want to hear are "that's not my job" or "I don't know how to do it." By accepting cross training assignments, employees show management that they are willing to learn new skills. Employees can then demonstrate the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for future advancement by showing how quickly they learn and how well they carry out new tasks. Cross training usually does not result in immediate promotion or advancement to a higher pay grade, but it does indicate that an employee is interested in learning new skills and the skill diversity may help them meet the qualifications for future career advancement. Also, if downsizing, rightsizing or restructuring initiatives occur, employees with broader skills and the ability to assume larger roles are more valuable and often the ones that are retained.

To maintain a talented and broad-skilled workforce, the organization's recruiting and retention strategies must be considered as part of the process. The creation of selection and performance management criteria must include competencies and behaviors that enable the organization to employ individuals who value personal development and growth. Recruiting and selection are often enhanced when an organization markets development opportunities through cross training and job rotation. Today, individuals entering the job market expect to continually learn new skills. Their focus is on career growth and the ability to improve their marketability both internally and externally. Cross training is especially important if your organization's strategy includes college recruiting. Students want to know, "What will I learn and be able to add to my resume if I join your organization?" Employees just starting out in their careers are usually more eager to demonstrate their willingness to learn, to advance and to take on more responsibilities. Cross training may improve employee commitment if they can see opportunities for development and possible promotion. An employee who has reached a plateau in his or her career is often a retention risk. If employees are valuable and the organization wants to retain them, providing cross training may help re-energize them.

Employees are also looking for work/life balance. If personal needs cannot be met, attrition can occur. Large organizations may offer expensive initiatives such as on-site day care and concierge services to be more "family friendly." Some small organizations also can accommodate their employee's time off for personal reasons with the implementation of cross training. It increases an organization's ability to also offer family-friendly policies such as flex-time, job sharing and more liberal paid-time-off (PTO), since someone else is prepared to perform the job duties when employees take

advantage of these benefits. Cross training develops more individuals with needed skills. With this pool of skilled resources, the employer may be able to accommodate an employee's personal needs even during peak times, seasonal work cycles, rush orders or special projects.

Most organizations benefit from cross training as it:

Creates a more flexible and versatile workforce.

Enables organizations to reduce the number of different jobs and hence reduce work jurisdiction.

Prevents stagnation.

Improves productivity.

Allows for effective succession planning.

Leads to better coordination and teamwork.

Motivates the workforce and instills commitment.

Enables employees to understand organizational goals and objectives.

Supports implementation of family-friendly policies.

Increases retention and avoids recruiting costs.

Increases organization marketability and supports recruiting initiatives.

Helps create a learning organization.

Most employees benefit from cross training as it:

Keeps work interesting.

Supports their desire for promotion.

Enriches their job and utilizes more of their abilities.

Creates an environment that enables employees to grow and learn.

Develops self-esteem.

Enables employees to be part of the big picture and feel valued.

Allows employees to support colleagues' needs through family-friendly policies.

Provides opportunities to be recognized and rewarded for initiative.

Makes employees more marketable, internally and externally.

Cross training is not for every organization. There are impediments and costs associated with implementation. The barriers can be internal or external and involve both organizational and individual issues. Even when such barriers are overcome, the design of a cross training program may be flawed, resulting in the organization failing to realize the potential benefits.

If an organization is unionized, it may be more difficult to implement a cross training program. Unions typically protect job jurisdiction and fight strategies that broaden jobs or enrich them. Discrete or highly defined jobs are thought to maintain or increase the total number of union-represented employees. However, many unions have begun to recognize the need to rethink their position and collaborate with organizations to create more flexible and cost-effective workforces to compete in the global economy.

Unions are not the only barrier that may need to be overcome. Once a job is mastered, some employees become comfortable in their jobs, as they are presently defined and structured. The introduction of learning something new can create apprehension and fear. The change is often resisted, especially if employees perceive it to cause a loss of control. Employees may not only fear having to learn something new but they often want to protect their job and keep others from learning it, thinking it provides more job security for them. The need to understand and answer the question "what's in it for me?" becomes critical to gain employee buy-in to a cross training program.

Organizations that can effectively address concerns of unions and fears of employees need to ensure that appropriate resources are available for cross-training implementation. Resources include sponsorship from senior management and cooperation from line management. Sponsorship and cooperation must extend beyond

agreement with the concept. It is imperative to "walk the talk." Cross training impacts daily operations, requires the ability to schedule work differently, may temporarily alter workflow and processes and temporarily reduces productivity. These elements can result in increased costs.

The cost for cross training was estimated to be two days' pay for each employee's temporary assignment. It was believed that any time beyond two days could not be considered training as the employee was now performing the job. This estimate appears to be based on training on non-complex jobs. As jobs have become more complex and many systems can be impacted by cross training, the costs are normally much greater. Costs can be minimized if the program is well planned and executed.

An effectively designed and implemented cross training program can overcome barriers, reduce associated costs and realize many benefits. Implementing a cross training program should not be attempted in a haphazard manor. It should be planned to ensure the design is aligned with the organization's strategies, the components are developed considering the employees' needs and the implementation is focused on change management.

To ensure alignment with the organization's strategies, information on these strategies must be obtained from senior and line management. One way to accomplish this is to conduct interviews with them. Not only can this step supply valuable information, it also is an opportunity to understand management's needs and concerns to ensure that they are addressed. Through this process a great deal of management support can be garnered.

In addition to management, employees have a vested interest in making cross training successful. Obtaining their input through such methods as surveys and/or focus groups is critical. This avoids employees feeling that they are being exploited and gives them a feeling of having more control. Getting all stakeholders involved to buy into the process can be the key to success.

Input from management and employees can be part of a change-management strategy but change management does not end there. Communication is a critical element in change management and needs to be provided frequently, effectively and continuously. Training management on how to deal with resistance to change also should be considered, along with a process that gives employees other opportunities to raise their

concerns and issues. Once cross training is infused into the culture, the value to both the organization and the employees will become obvious.

Understanding the benefits, barriers and implications of a cross training program should be part of your thinking process before implementation of cross training. Another element to be considered is whether cross training is right for your organization. Where is your business in its life cycle? Cross training is probably not appropriate for a start-up or the beginning of a growth cycle as you are hiring and training to meet immediate needs. However, towards the end of the growth cycle and into the maturity cycle, cross training may be the initiative to re-energize an organization. Cross training also may be important if your organization is considering re-engineering. If your organization is in decline, cross training is not appropriate. The organization must focus on the critical few to ensure survival. The stage of the life cycle your organization is in must be recognized and considered when making decisions to implement cross training.

In any one of the life cycles, organizations may want a flatter, less hierarchical structure and need to push responsibilities out and down into the organization. To accomplish this, employees are required to assume more diverse roles and responsibilities. There are fewer levels in the organization that provide support, training and oversight. Hence, employees not only learn to carry out new tasks, but also have to become less reliant on someone else to make decisions, provide direction and rally resources for them. Cross training is critical as job scope is broadened and non-traditional responsibilities are expected.

In summary, considering the benefits, barriers, implications and business life cycle will assist in determining if a cross training program is right for the organization and whether it will "add value." Understanding the needs and values of the organization and its employees provides the opportunity to align those interests in the design and implementation process. A planned and well-thought out program can produce a win-win solution.

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