

Cross Training for Success

Why every spring company should have a cross training program

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Cross training: What is it? Is it the same as training? There is always talk about training, and there are many ways in which training varies, be it content or manner of delivery. Likewise, “cross training” can indicate a number of different activities, such as technical training to do a specific job, management training to hone supervisory and management skills, or cross-functional training, which means teaching someone to do specific tasks so they can fill in for someone else when the need arises. For the purposes of this article, we’ll focus on the latter circumstance.

Often when a company looks at its staffing needs, it considers what kind of people need to be added to perform specific duties in addition to how expenses can be saved or reduced by not hiring at all.

Many companies have had layoffs in the past year and a half because the volume of business has decreased. However, those employees who remain have a huge burden on them to perform multiple facets of more than one job. What does this mean? A company can train an employee to do one particular job, but when there are cutbacks, there is still a job that needs to be done and no one to do it. Cross training would have helped. Likewise, when business volume is high and an employee leaves, cross training makes it easier for others to step in and perform that person’s duties because they are already familiar with the tasks that need to be done.

In either case, when shifts in business volume or work force occur, time is at a premium and people are multi-

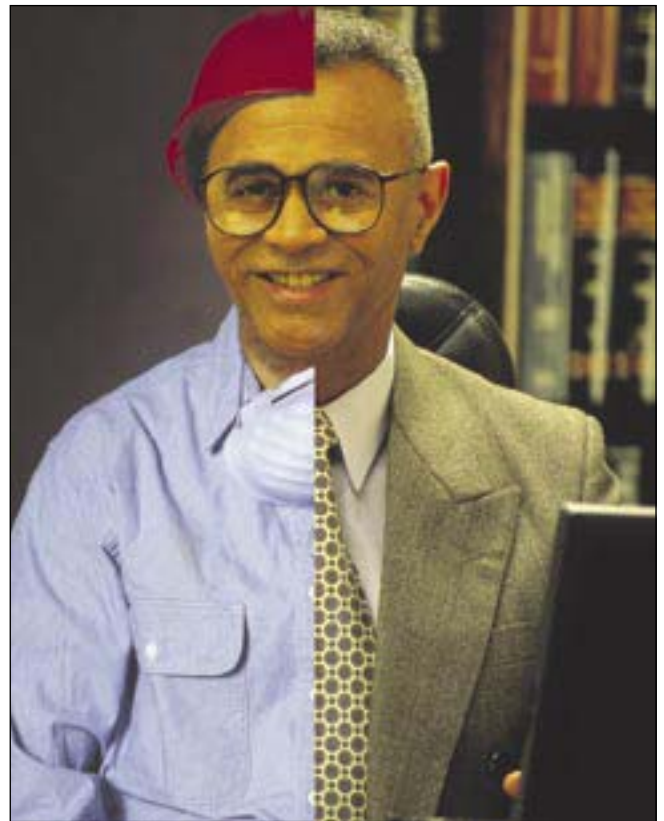
tasking, how much can you ask someone to do before they become stressed out and consequently less productive?

There has been much talk in the last several years about “knowledge management” and “knowledge capital.” Just as you have “capital management,” which refers to the management of equipment, facilities and other items that equate to hard dollars, you should have “knowledge management.” “Knowledge capital” refers to the knowledge that any one person has in his head when he has worked for a company for a while. “Knowledge management” refers to how it is managed.

It is a huge loss to a company when a person who has accumulated a great deal of knowledge walks out the door. No one could be so naïve to think that, if you give someone their walking papers, they will cheerfully share the years of knowledge they have gained. However, the knowledge they have can be captured when it is written down in some form, or it can be transferred when the person possessing the knowledge passes it on through cross training.

It is no secret that companies that have downsized in order to save dollars often don’t achieve their goal (cut costs and make money). Even though their expenses are lowered, they don’t make more money as a result. Rather, they are typically in far worse situations three years later than companies who do not downsize.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Research, manufacturers that downsize are less likely to see productiv-



ity gains than those that do not. In a study of manufacturing companies, the 250,000 manufacturers that downsized had an average 4.7 percent return on assets vs. a 34.3 percent return for those that did not.

What does all this mean? Several things:

1. Downsizing is a knee-jerk reaction that has proven not to be a wise move, both in the short- and long-term.

2. When looking at staffing numbers (or your human resources), there should be more of a strategic, long-term approach.

3. People should be trained to satisfy not only the current production needs but also future demands. This means cross training in other jobs, or portions of jobs, along with grooming for future growth within the company or, at the very least, within that person's career.

I'm sure that none of this is news to you; you should have heard it all before. However, the big challenge is to break the habit of doing things the way you always have (even though those methods have served you well). Repeatedly, it has been shown that a well thought-out change is necessary for survival. This can be the role of cross training.

A few years ago, I was involved with a situation in which a key person for processing orders to be forwarded to production was absent. Having already realized that it was important to have a backup for this person, the company had taught parts of the job to four different people. Unfortunately, these four people did not perform the function they had learned on a regular basis, much less in the presence of the person who did the job every day. Well, the day came that the order processor was absent for a week. The company found that none of the four people who had learned parts of the function knew enough of the job to do it, nor was there sufficient clear and specific documentation to take them through the steps of their tasks. They each knew bits and pieces, which they had not practiced since they were initially given instruction.

Needless to say, production came to a grinding halt while the order processor was absent. Do you see dollar signs running through your head? Can you imagine stopping production for a week because of one person?! Not only did this company not do effective cross training but they also did not keep up the skills of those who were initially taught.

Upon the return of the order processor, the company decided to rectify the situation and have the order processor, plus one other person, learn how to train others in a complete and accurate manner. They hired a training consultant

to teach them how to effectively conduct cross-functional training and help them set up a complete program.

Another example is the American Kennel Club (AKC), which found itself in a pickle when it had dog shows to put on. There is much to be done behind the scenes to put on a dog show. There are many areas of competition that need to be organized and coordinated. The group of people who planned the event had nothing to do while the event was taking place, while those who worked the actual event were overwhelmed and shorthanded.

Additionally, each group possessed different behavior styles. Some were good with people, and others were good with numbers. Because of having people trained only to do their specific jobs and nothing more, there were some undiscovered skills in both groups.

Out of desperation, AKC decided to try cross training. In the process, the staff uncovered some new skills. The staff people liked the cross training because it provided additional career development, sometimes in supervision. The AKC benefited because it no longer had to hire outside

staff to run the actual show. Everyone was happy, and the staff was better utilized.

As you know, cross-functional training is no easy task. It takes much time, patience and commitment. However, the results are often an energized, enthusiastic and more effectively organized work force.

In your facility, cross training can be easily effected by training someone in a strategically important skill. Develop someone in an entry-level job to perform a task in another area that will be a horizontal expansion of duties. For example, if someone is responsible for bringing wire to a workstation, in slow times have him learn to package the finished product for shipment to the customer.

It is important to keep in mind that you cannot train someone in a task then not let him continue to perform it. Here is an example: You teach someone to thread a machine, and once he has learned this task, he goes back to performing his regular job. Because the need doesn't arise again for a while, the person does not thread a machine for another three months. Guess what? He can't do it because he only vaguely remembers how. To prevent this, set up a regular schedule once the initial training is done so the person can reinforce what he has learned and can practice threading machines for several more days. All should not stop there, however. The newly trained person should continue threading machines on a regular basis. Maybe now it is reduced

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to once a week or once every two weeks. Next, move on to teaching another task – perhaps setting the tension.

No matter whether you are cross training in specific tasks or training for an entire job, the commitment still needs to be there. The commitment has to come from the top, like so many initiatives.

We are experiencing interesting and challenging times. Having top-notch people (both technically and attitudinally) in your employ and who buy in to what you are doing is important. An article in the November 2002 issue of *TD* magazine (formerly *Training and Development*) states that change does *not* happen for two reasons:

1. A belief that if something different is introduced, it will be adopted and take hold.

2. There is no continuing energy put into the change effort until it is institutionalized and a way of life.

We typically don't have the stamina and commitment to make things happen. We want immediate results. Keep in mind, however, that you didn't get where you are in business overnight. It was a long, slow process. The same is true of any training effort. You must have a plan as to how you will implement cross training and then follow through to make sure it is happening. Make the necessary adjustments during the process.

Many of you are not risk takers, but you are tenacious (after all you are in the springmaking industry). Cross training and training are not risks; they are investments. Business is not done the way it was 10 or 20 years ago and never will be again. Everyone is struggling to adapt to globalization, a different work ethic and a diminishing workforce. You know you need to be competitive. Training and cross training will help you be just that.

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