Design Work Teams To Increase Productivity And Satisfaction

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In the past, popular wisdom held that jobs could be designed to enhance either efficiency or employee satisfaction. But new thinking on work teams holds that these goals can be achieved simultaneously.

Organizing employees into work teams is a popular management strategy in companies today. Some people even call it a fad. Unfortunately, human resource managers may receive orders to move an organization to a team-based workforce without being given the tools and information that will allow them to design and implement effective work teams.

Many management scholars recommend two approaches to work teams. First, focus on the team as the unit of management. Rather than managing individuals within the team, focus on managing the team as a group and let the team manage its individual members. Second, work teams should be designed to enhance effectiveness, a term that includes both productivity and employee satisfaction. This new focus on productivity and satisfaction marks a departure from past practices that focused solely on team "process" variables, such as cohesiveness among team members, conflict, decision making, and so on.

At least two aspects of traditional thinking on work teams should also be kept in mind. First, work teams that are not managed properly can lead to negative outcomes, such as low productivity, poor team decisions, low satisfaction, and conflict. Poorly designed work teams can make matters worse for an organization than having no work teams at all.⇨

Second, remember that teams are a relatively new concept in the American workplace. Because there is still much to be learned, management must be willing to experiment, evaluate, remain objective, and change course if initial work team designs are not successful. Like any other process,

enrichment. Everyone knew that both objectives could not be achieved simultaneously. The trade-off between efficiency and employee satisfaction has plagued managers, work designers, and scientists for most of this century.

The great potential of teams is that this trade-off may be avoided in

productivity, and inefficiency due to coordination problems. The key is in properly designing the team.

TIPS FOR DESIGNING TEAMS

Drawing on research from the four scientific disciplines most knowledgeable about work teams—organizational behavior, social psychology, sociotechnical theory and industrial engineering—two studies using recommendations for designing work teams showed the link to both productivity and employee satisfaction. The studies were conducted in a large organization using team members who work together full time and report to the same manager.

A TEAM WITH A VARIETY OF MEMBERS WHOSE SKILLS AND EXPERIENCES DIFFER AND COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER CAN TAKE ON A WIDER RANGE OF TASKS.

optimal design is rarely achieved the first time, but is achieved only through feedback and refinement.

HIGH PRODUCTIVITY OR SATISFIED EMPLOYEES?

In the past, popular wisdom held that jobs could be designed either to maximize productivity—usually through the application of engineering-oriented principles such as specialization and simplification—or to maximize employee satisfaction—usually through the application of psychology-oriented principles such as enlargement or

designing work. For example, boring or stressful work can often be made more enjoyable with no loss in productivity through the workload sharing and social support found in teams. Likewise, the greater range of skills on a team can produce a wider range of potential solutions for a problem, and membership on a team can make work more enjoyable. In this way, work teams may be able to attain high productivity and satisfaction simultaneously.

However, this outcome is not guaranteed. A team could create the worst of all outcomes: conflict, low

Because the move to a team-based workforce has important implications for five areas of human resource management, the recommendations are grouped according to the area most likely to be affected. These recommendations work best for self-managed teams and are less effective for temporary or special purpose teams such as project teams and quality circles.

STAFFING

When organizations adopt a team structure, HR must re-examine its approach to staffing. Pay close attention to the following staffing issues, which may arise in the new work environment.

Diverse membership. Traditionally, managers focused on getting the most qualified employees for teams. But a team with a variety of members whose skills and experiences differ and complement each other can take on a wider range of tasks. Plus, members end up learning from each other.

Be on the alert though, for teams whose membership is excessively varied, because conflict and communi-

About the Studies

Two research studies were conducted in a large financial services company to develop and validate recommendations for designing work teams. The first study examined 80 work teams of administrative clerical workers and collected data from 391 employees and 70 managers. The second study examined 60 teams of professional workers and collected data from 357 employees and 93 managers.

In both studies, a detailed questionnaire was used to assess the degree to which each team met the design recommendations. Several types of work team effectiveness measures were then collected. The measures used in Study 1 were: (1) six months of data on the productivity of each team, (2) managers' judgments of the effectiveness of each team, and (3) employee satisfaction on an opinion survey. Study 2 used four measures: (1) managers' judgments of effectiveness of each team, (2) employees' judgments of effectiveness of each team, (3) employee satisfaction on an opinion survey, and (4) performance appraisals of team members.

cation breakdowns can result. Also, in composing a team with varied members, avoid choosing people who are unskilled or inadequately skilled just for the sake of diversity.

Team size. Teams should be staffed with the smallest number of employees needed to do the work. Teams that are too large require excessive coordination. Employees also may feel less involved in very large teams.

Preference for working in teams. Employee preferences for a certain type of work may influence reactions informally or through a scheduled program of rotating assignments. Cross training of this type not only provides on-the-job training for members, it can also help lessen disruption due to absenteeism and turnover, and it can increase flexibility in staffing.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Because people do what they are rewarded for doing, the organization's performance management system must be modified to support

motivate team-oriented behavior.

Workload sharing. In a workplace structured around individual jobs, managers have no problem determining which employees are pulling their weight. In a team-based workforce, this determination is more difficult to make, but making it can be crucial to the success of the team initiative.

All members of a work team must carry their fair share of the workload and not depend on others to do the work for them. Members should know that their work can be distinguished from the work of the team, and that their individual rewards will be linked to their individual performance.

CROSS-TRAINING CAN HELP LESSEN DISRUPTION DUE TO ABSENTEEISM AND TURNOVER, AND IT CAN INCREASE FLEXIBILITY IN STAFFING.

to a job. Some employees prefer to work in teams and are good team players. Others prefer to work alone and are better as individual contributors. To enhance the probability of team effectiveness, consider these preferences when choosing team members.

TRAINING

As with any major organizational change, employees will need training to acquire the skills needed in a team-based workforce.

Team training. Proper training is critical to developing and supporting effective work teams. Training courses should cover such topics as the philosophy of teams, how teams make decisions, and interpersonal skills for team members, as well as the technical skills team members will need to perform their jobs.

Flexibility. Every team member should receive cross-training on the jobs of fellow team members, either

teamwork. Changes should take into account the nature of the teams within the organization, their objectives and the organizational culture. A variety of modifications may be workable, but the following factors should be incorporated.

Goal interdependence. Goal setting is a well-documented technique for managing the performance of individual employees. Work teams also should have a clearly defined mission or purpose. The importance of team work can be reinforced by linking the goals of individual members to the team's goals. Such interdependence ensures that each member is pulling in the same direction.

Interdependent feedback and rewards. The outcomes for team members should be interdependent or linked, just as the goals are. It is essential that all members have a stake in the success of the team. Giving individual members feedback and rewards based on the entire team's performance is one way to

JOB DESIGN

Despite its strong relationship to other human resource issues such as employee satisfaction, training requirements and compensation levels, job design has not traditionally been considered an HR function. However members of the HR department can add value to their own roles by serving as advisers to line management on how work should be structured in the new team environment.

Self-management. Often called "self-regulating" or "autonomous," self-managing work teams make their own decisions about assignments, procedures and schedules. A team can be designed to fall anywhere on the spectrum, from manager-led to self-managing to self-designing, depending on the maturity of the employees, the nature of the jobs and the culture of the organization. Some degree of autonomy from management control is essential for effective work teams.

Participation. Management involvement aside, all team members should be empowered to make decisions. Self-management and partici-

pation increase members' sense of responsibility and ownership in the team's work product. The quality of decisions can be improved by increasing the amount of information available to the team members responsible for a decision and by putting the decision-making power closer to the point where the operational problem occurs—in other words, let the employees who most frequently encounter a problem decide how it should be fixed.

Task variety. Each member should get a chance to do a variety of the team's tasks. Variety allows employees to use a wider range of their skills, and it spreads both interesting and dull tasks among team members.

Task importance. Team members need to know that they are doing important work for the organization, so communicate that message at every opportunity. The importance of the team's work should be presented in terms of its consequences for customers, other employees, the organization's mission and business performance results.

Task wholeness. Make the team responsible for a distinct piece of work, such as an entire product or segment of the business. This type of responsibility can increase motivation by enhancing each team members' sense of responsibility, ownership, and control over a meaningful piece of work.

Task interdependence. A team is only a team if its tasks are interdependent in some way. Without interdependence, there is no need to form a team. Linkages can be established by making the output of one employee's job the input for another employee's job. Other good ways to foster interdependence are requiring team members to share resources, or making them dependent on one another in completing a project. Interdependence motivates mem-

bers by increasing interaction and enhancing the sense of responsibility for the work of other people, resulting in greater shared satisfaction from the team's accomplishments.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

Many functions fall under the umbrella of employee relations, such as morale building, communications and labor-management relations. As with job design, HR may not perform this function throughout the organization, but may serve as an adviser on employee relations issues to line managers and supervisors.

Team spirit. Teams must have a "can do" attitude and the confidence that they can and will be effective. Supervisors and managers can have a positive effect on team spirit in their roles as team leaders or coaches. A positive attitude fosters commitment and a willingness among team members to work hard.

Social support. Work teams are more effective when members support and help each other. Leaders throughout the organization should be supportive and encourage positive interaction within the team. Social support is particularly important when working on mundane, difficult or stressful tasks.

Communication and cooperation within the team. Communication and cooperation are critical among employees assigned to a work team because of the heightened interaction and coordination required. Managers can take the lead in facilitating communication and cooperation among team members.

Communication and cooperation between teams. To be effective, the team must be integrated within the rest of the organization, and the boundaries of its responsibilities must be properly managed. In other words, teams must communicate and

cooperate with one another. Team managers play a key role in this area, ensuring smooth communications so that competition and conflict between teams do not result.

Managerial support. Finally, the best laid plans for a team-based workforce will fail without management support. Support for an empowered workforce must be uniform across the spectrum—from top management to line supervisors. If management is not prepared to embrace the changes brought by the move to a team-based workforce, employees may well become disillusioned.

CONCLUSION

A team-based workforce can increase both productivity and employee satisfaction. But to realize those gains, organizations must take care in designing their teams at the outset. Otherwise, they risk alienating employees, who may view the move to teams as just another passing management fad. ■

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