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Managing

BY RICHARD A. SWANSON

Nurturing Workplace Expertise

Companies must analyze critical jobs and understand how to nurture the expertise workers need to perform those tasks.

WORKPLACE EXPERTISE is the fuel of an organization. Experts are good problem solvers in their field because they have a high level of training, skill, knowledge, and judgment concerning a specialized domain. Successful companies know this, and they learn to develop and foster expertise among employees.

Consider the case of one large corporation that set out to increase the expertise of first-line supervisors in its manufacturing plants. The company determined precisely what knowledge plant supervisors needed to have to function as experts. Management then implemented a training and support system to develop and sustain this level of expertise among all supervisors. As a result, the business realized a 900 percent return on investment in two years.

This strategy was not an academic approach, nor was the solution a generic off-the-shelf model of good supervision; it

was production-specific and company-specific. That made all the difference.

In contrast, a large financial corporation used an expensive off-the-shelf program for ten years to improve management techniques. As an auditor for the results of the program, I could find no evidence that the program had any impact on the corporation. The generalities covered in the program were interesting but did not represent what people were required to know and do to perform well on the job. In other words, the program's generalities did not hone workplace expertise.

Most organizations are ill-equipped to develop and maintain expertise in their work force. Rather than learn to do so, many businesses simply decide to outsource work requiring specific expertise. Sometimes that's appropriate, but much workplace expertise is company-specific, and it is impossible to hire such expertise in the open market.

Whether they outsource it or not, many companies fail to document the knowledge and skills that comprise the critical expertise needed to achieve the organization's mission. Without that documentation, when an employee leaves or when the outside expertise is no longer available, companies must start over. Organizations that want to survive and grow must deal purposefully with the problems of procuring, developing, and maintaining workplace expertise.

Managers must also be able to accurately gauge the expertise of employees. Organizations that overestimate the innate capacity of workers can pay a heavy price. In extreme cases, companies have been forced to close down large-scale operations when their work force had neither the expertise nor capacity to meet the demands of new processes. Conversely, underestimating the capacity of the work force can hurt performance.

There are three aspects of workplace



expertise that managers can document, thereby establishing a path that new workers can follow: the job description, task inventory, and task analysis.

Job Description

A job description defines the boundaries of a job. Consider the following job title as an example: corporate director of human resources. Most managers would agree that this is an impressive title, but what does a director of human resources really do? Let's take a look at the job behind this title in one company and compare it with the job behind the same title in a second company.

In Company A, the corporate director of human resources heads the corporatewide human resource department, supervises

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15 professionals, and manages a \$2 million budget. At Company B, the HR director heads the corporatewide HR department, supervises an administrative assistant, and is responsible for proposing and implementing performance improvement

agement duties. Such employees rely on communications skills or an understanding of human nature that is hard to capture. For example, a knowledge task might be to develop positive working relationships with third parties. Though clearly a critical task, it cannot be directly observed and does not

in-process documents, should be computerized, because they will need to be revised. They can also be used as a basis for quality improvement efforts, training materials, and various forms of certification. For the documentation of expertise to be fully implemented, it should be readily available to as many people in the organization as possible.

By following this process of documenting job descriptions, task inventories, and task analyses, every company can put itself on the path to developing and maintaining in-house expertise. ■

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programs with no budget. In two quick sentences, these seemingly similar jobs are shown to be very different.

Task Inventory

The task inventory will provide a list of the specific tasks a job entails. Managers can determine what these tasks are by conducting surveys or by having employees provide detailed reports of their activities. The most effective method, however, is for the manager to observe an employee's work and then compile the inventory.

Task Analysis

A task inventory highlights the discernible parts of a job or work process. After developing a task inventory, managers must place each task into one of three categories: procedures, systems, or knowledge. Observing procedural tasks can be relatively simple because these involve step-by-step processes. For example, developing a task inventory for a line worker on a manufacturing floor will consist of listing each step the employee must take to complete the work.

Other task inventories can be more difficult to compile, however. Some employees are involved in systems tasks, meaning that they must rely on other employees in different departments to achieve their goals. Developing a task inventory for this type of worker involves interviewing the employee's colleagues and understanding the work of everyone in all of the interrelated groups.

Even more difficult are task inventories on employees who perform knowledge tasks. These tasks are often related to man-

occur over a defined period of time.

Despite the difficulty, each of these tasks should be formally documented in a standardized format. The results should be arranged in a matrix or chart that clearly identifies each applicable tool and lists each item from the task inventory and how it is used by the employee.

The final documents, and many of the

Richard A. Swanson is the distinguished research professor of human resource development and the Sam Lindsey chair at the University of Texas at Tyler. This article is excerpted from his book *Analysis for Improving Performance* published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers of San Francisco. To order the book call 800/929-2929 or visit www.bkconnection.com.