

Employee Training through Multi-Skilling

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Introduction

This article considers issues that pertain to the subject of multi-skilling. It will argue that, in order for Maltese industry to survive and remain competitive in an ever-changing and global environment, a serious and specific effort needs to be made from all involved in employee training to promote the use and development of multi-skilling.

A review of the major influences that have induced companies to seek newer and more progressive training systems will introduce this paper. This is followed by an overview of what could be the first formalised attempts to introduce multi-skilling within Maltese Industry. A critique is also made of the constraints and benefits that are likely to be encountered in promoting multi-skilling within the Maltese industrial environment. This is followed by an assessment of a local application of a multi-skilling programme as practised by a major industrial concern. Finally, a number of questions will be raised as a basis for further discussion.

The recent evolution of work processes is only the latest attempt by humans towards finding ways of how to improve any process and render it more efficient and effective (Mali, 1986:255). Different organisations are seeking the magic blend towards gaining competitive advantage through better resource utilisation (Armstrong, 2000:19). However, major world events during the last fifty years - notably wars, the end of the cold war period,

advances in technology and mass communications and ever growing demands from customers who want better value at less costs - have prompted organisations to take a closer look at their performance management models (Drucker, 1968:52; Richardson & Richardson, 1992:17).

Socio-Economic Context

A major shift has been recently observed in the way in which organisations are managing their resources in order to become more cost effective. In the beginning of the 1900's, machinery and technology represented the bulk of the capital outlay that an organisation would be making to produce whatever products it sold. Hence it was quite typical for firms at that time to try to achieve maximal use of their machinery, irrespective of the human cost. This was a time when production lines, shift-work and time and motion studies were introduced to increase piecework-based production methods in order to achieve faster payback periods. This was also a period when the world had mobilised huge armies for a world war. Thus, apart from the fact that consumer demand for products was at an all time high, people especially males, many of whom had spent considerable time conscripted in armies engaged in battle, were used to highly structured and disciplined systems such as the rigid reporting structures, responsibilities allocation and a "just do and don't ask" mentality as is common practice in any army of the world (Child, 1969:44). Consequently, the concept of specialisation was basic and widely accepted. The availability of surplus and consequently cheaper labour encouraged organisations to refine and adopt this approach to managing their people and thus a scientific approach to managing their resources was steadily adopted (Seymour, 1959:7-8; Braverman, 1974:168). Nationalistic and patriotic influences also helped to encourage people to contribute to the national effort in order to re-build their country's battered economy. Eager customers with little expendable income

encouraged organisations to provide more for less. Hence, only production methods for the masses justified the capital outlays that were made (Beardwell & Holden, 1994:44). This was also helped by the scant or total absence of any labour laws or form of regulation present at the time (Child, 1969:111).

However during the late 1960's, advances in communication and transportation systems, changing social, political, economic and technological influences brought about new customer needs and expectations (Drucker, 1964:43). Competition increased and customers had more options to choose from. Technology that up to then was very expensive to acquire was now increasingly affordable to wider social groups and individuals. School and education systems were more accessible to the masses; hence innovation or intellectual capital was no longer a leverage tool of industrialised nations only.

Global Village, Consumer Patterns and their Effect on Organisations

The information revolution of the 90's brought further drastic changes in the way business is being conducted (Byars, 1984:59). Now, not only did sales depend on the innovative, price, quality and technical content of the product or service; but also on the ability of the product to be delivered to the customer in the shortest time possible. It became clear that it was only people that could make the difference between striking a sale or losing out to the competition.

A complementary modern development is the manner in which consumers are purchasing their needs. Whereas it was quite normal for customers to buy things in certain predetermined qualities and quantities, it has become more common for them to buy single and customised items. An example of this change is the way in which production orders are handled at Playmobil (Malta) Ltd., a German owned toy manufacturing company. Whereas it was quite

normal for a production order within the plastic injection-moulding department to be of three to four month duration during the 1970's, today the same production order will run for a maximum of three days. Within the pad printing department of the same company, the production order times have gone down to as little as eight hours.

The adoption of a 'just-in-time' production orientation has also driven the point home that organisations need to take stock of what and how they were conducting their business if they wanted to survive and prosper in a global and seamless world (Markides, 2000:13). Following this self-analysis, many organisations came to realise that the key to success could only be achieved if they would take a closer look at one of the hitherto least developed and most often abused resource: the employee (Kanter, 1989; Lawson, 1997:4). The new logic stated that, for an organisation to perform, its people needed to perform. This realisation in turn led to a movement away from the traditional model of personnel management to the more strategically adept Human Resource one (Beardwell & Holden, 1994:6-21).

Although industry in Malta is still comparatively young when compared to other more industrialised nations, it is not extraneous to what has just been described. Moreover, due the size and geographical position of our Islands, Maltese industry has had its own specific share of limitations to overcome. After all, our lack of natural resources, absence of exploitable raw materials and micro domestic market does not make Malta an obvious choice to prospective manufacturing entrepreneurs.

Vocational Education & Employee Training in Malta

Malta is a peripheral micro-state, over populated and over burdened with demands which will always prove difficult to satisfy (Sultana, 1992:2-3). Although informal technical training had existed in the form of guilds with a complex system of apprenticeship and initiation since the fourteenth century (Ellul Galea, 1981:34),

organised vocational education knows its origins to the first part of the 19th century. While education was considered to be the tool to skill future workers, who would develop Malta's industrial base (Sultana, 1992:3) it was not without its birth pangs. Many a time, these pangs were related to the esteem or lack of it (Zammit, 1886:15) that this form of education had from all concerned. Education administrators who considered vocational instruction to be the life saver for children who were not that promising academically at school also saw it as a form of work that served as recreation between one lesson and another (Pullicino, 1857a:9). It is ironic that today, nearly 150 years later, some observers still view vocational education in the same manner (Sultana, 1992:369). It was also one that generally privileges males because the history of local technical education is predominantly a history of male education (Naudi, 1839:7, Pullicino, 1857b, Sultana, 1992:25). This perception was also helped by the parents who due to their high dependence on agriculture and cotton growing sought to entice their male offspring to work the fields, likewise girls were encouraged to focus on the spinning and weaving trades (Busuttill, 1973). It was only in 1893 that the first 'Technical and Manual School' was opened by the then Director of Education, Dr. A.A. Caruana. However it was not before 1952 that the Industrial Training Act provided for the regulation of the employment and training of apprentices. It also placed a new responsibility on employers to invest in the training of their workers.

The first real formalised and documented attempts at employee training were probably made during the time of the British rule in Malta. In fact since new employment opportunities were available to the Maltese in the building and repairing of ships, a whole range of new skills and crafts was developed (Blouet, 1989:166). In 1807, the Naval Commission issued a call for apprentices, who were to follow a seven-year course of instruction (Degiorgio, 1970:20). This was the forerunner of the Admiralty Dockyard School, one of the promoters of local technical education

(Sultana, 1992:36) and where a formal training programme in the different technical skills required at the Yard was instituted. Training programmes were normally established through a very centralised system. An interesting fact to note is that this apprenticeship followed a dual stream of learning; thus trainees had the opportunity to learn and train at the same time. For seven whole years, the trainee progressed through different pre-determined stages that helped the trainee make the conversion from a young 14-year-old schoolboy to a fully-fledged expert craftsman. During the first 2 years of the apprenticeship, trainees had the opportunity to experience various areas related to their chosen trade; but specialisation was the order of the day and trainees were then channelled to very specific trades within the organisation. By design their training programmes sought to cater for the specific requirements of the British Navy. When the Dockyard was privatised in 1958, the apprenticeship programme was reduced to 5 years while three distinctive streams of skills acquisition were offered: namely, the Craft, Technician and Student apprenticeship route to skills training. Still, in paternalistic fashion, it was a selection board rather than the apprentice himself that finally decided which final trade specialisation was to be undertaken (Hunter, 1964:3-4).

This was in sharp contrast to a more liberal situation which Hunter (1964:1) describes thus:

“the boy who makes a careful choice now determines much of his future happiness at work and in life generally. It is our sincere hope and belief that those who are accepted will find that, as a result of this training scheme, they have been well developed to fulfil their parts as craftsmen or staff in the Dockyard and as responsible citizens of the Islands of Malta and Gozo.”

It is interesting to note that, even at this time, the apprenticeship programme sought to give the apprentice the chance to learn other skills such as leadership and teamwork (Hunter, 1964:68). Following this relatively long training period, apprentices normally

found employment with the Dockyard; however given the high level of specialisation achieved – an exceptional achievement in Malta at the time - employment with other private firms was also guaranteed. Even at this time, promising young males were given the opportunity through what was then known as the 'Equal Opportunity Scheme' to further their studies at naval colleges and universities in England after their fourth year of apprenticeship.

The same training model was applied to other areas that fell under the control of the British Services. However, with the exception of St. Michael's and Mater Admirabilis Training Colleges for Teachers, there were no structured training programmes to be followed. Workers engaged in occupations not considered of strategic importance had little or no opportunity to learn more than the bare essentials to do the job. Another major influence that helped inculcate this mentality was the fact that, at that time, employment was for life and only British citizens were normally offered career advancements. Thus, any careerist motivation towards learning and training was actively discouraged. Furthermore, a culture of rational ignorance took root, since the less one knew, the less one could be expected to work and perform well.

It was only just before the looming departure from Malta of the British Forces, that some locals started to realise that the future of the Maltese economy would depend considerably on the ability of the Maltese workers to learn new, marketable skills (Sultana, 1997:60). Of course, this was no easy cultural shift for the people to make after decades of working irresponsibly for "*il-barrani*" (the foreigner) (Balogh & Seers, 1955:28; Times of Malta, 1972).

Post-independent Malta presented a number of new challenges for the Maltese people. Efforts to attract foreign industry were coming to fruition. As expected, in our effort to lure foreign investments to our shores, much of the effort was being channelled towards high volume export industries that had a high content of low skill / low wage labour. Hence the priority then was for the provision of jobs for the masses with minimal costs to the

entrepreneur. To this effect a number of textiles, leather and footwear manufacturing companies know their beginning to this period. They were also the first manufacturing businesses in Malta to target female employees (Sultana, 1997:60).

Minimal effort if any was generally done to teach the employee other skills apart from those that were an absolute necessity. Hence, it was quite typical at the time for a sewing machine operator to learn and master a single sewing operation and carrying out that single operation, day in day out for the time that she was working at the firm. Yet, after this initial phase of Maltese industrialisation, an effort was made to bring another type of industry to Malta, this time focusing on the possibility that the employees would be learning the much needed new skills that would support both the organisation and Malta to grow and prosper. These were skills with a much higher value content thus bringing a higher contribution to the organisation. To this extent, a good number of German companies were encouraged to set up shop in Malta. This strategy was also based on the fact that the Germans have a robust business culture in favour of work-based training (Ellul, 1990). This was further enhanced by the 'Mittlestand' culture, which deemed quality to be of paramount importance. Slowly but surely these efforts were having a positive result on the Maltese economy. (Briguglio, 1988: 202).

Employee Training & Development within the new Industrial Scenario

This broader view towards employee training and development ushered in a number of new insights to the subject in general. Government was supporting this new culture towards learning by passing key legislation such as the Technician Apprenticeship Scheme Regulations in 1990 and the Industrial Development Act (1988) training grants schemes meant to encourage and help companies to assume, train and re-train their new employees.

Whereas up to this time, training had been considered to be much like any other cost, it was now being seen more as an investment. This transition was also supported by a number of other factors. One major issue was the move within a number of companies from the traditional 'personnel management' function towards a more strategically driven, 'HR' approach. Human resource management seeks to follow a more proactive approach towards doing things. Thus, whereas training was traditionally carried out or catered for in a reactive manner, the new HR philosophy encouraged a more proactive view to things. Training started being undertaken not only to cater for immediate needs but also as a strategy for the provision of future needs as may be driven by the marketplace. This brought in the concept of skill flexibility. This was considered important not only with respect to the number of skills the person knows but also as flexibility of attitude: to perform tasks in a different and more proactive manner (Atkinson & Meager, 1986:3-4).

Yet, the will to succeed is not enough. A supportive structure is also required. This holds true also with employee training and multi-skilling. It would be a waste for any organisation to attempt to install any type of multi-skilling programmes without having the necessary support structure and or systems in place to maintain such a dynamic system. Hence it is being suggested that before even embarking on such a project one would need to have reformed other areas of the organisation such as recruitment, review and reward systems since all of these have a direct influence on the outcome of one's multi-skilling system (Crofts, 1990:16-17). Additionally, it is crucial for the organisation to have a very clear vision of what it is out to achieve; only in this way can multi-skilling give a direct contribution towards achieving the strategic goals of the organisation. Vision also provides focus that in turn provides direction. Direction is not only important for cost minimisation but also because any initiative will involve human effort that is not always as forthcoming as one might like it to be.

Management in organisations cannot achieve this on its own.

The support of other stakeholders - such as trade unions, government, politicians, schools, the church and the media – is crucial because all these have an important role to play since they all bear an influence on the employee. All are asked to convey a positive message towards multi-skilling, as well as to help educate people to develop a more positive outlook towards life-long learning in general. Line managers remain critically responsible for facilitating the learning of their subordinates since in them is vested the authority for deciding who learns what (Munford, 1988:23-27; Beardwell & Holden, 1994:350). They are answerable through their behaviour for engendering and enhancing a learning culture at work. This collective responsibility does not relieve the employee from the accountability for his/her own learning (Baldacchino, 1995). This accountability goes beyond the self but extends to the family and society in general. It is through our collective learning that we can increase Malta's intellectual capacity thus adding value, which in turn will create wealth.

Training & Development through Multi-skilling?

Although the words *training* and *development* are normally used interchangeably within the profession, they are not one and the same. Development cannot occur before training is imparted. However, for genuine development to happen, training needs to be bolstered by education. Learning happens when we manage to combine these three elements together (Armstrong, 2000:480). Hence the acid test for any multi-skilling system would be to see whether it satisfies these criteria and not at what level of complexity or structure does it operate. Why? Multi-skilling relates to people and people are by nature fluid. Consequently, if we want to have an effective multi-skilling system, it needs to be congruent with peoples' needs. It needs to take note of the whole individual and cater for the cognitive, active and emotive needs of the learner (Johnston, 1998:20-22). Only then can real learning happen. This

observation is being made since by default some organisations try to follow a systematic approach and they may try to implement a well-structured system more suited to satisfy accounting purposes, devoid of considerations for the “individual” rather than focusing on the “worker” hoping that this will not only teach the individual new skills but also contribute to his or her development. Yet experience tells us that, no matter how many considerations one makes, there will still be the need for periodical review and improvement. Here again multi-skilling systems need to be “live” systems, systems that respond to and adapt to an ever-changing environment. Only thus can organisations hope that what they are out to achieve is realistically within their reach.

Some Constraints

Learning, training and development are often taken for granted or seen to be ‘quick fix’ solutions. Thus, one has to exercise caution when trying to design and implement multi-skilling systems as one would do with other management initiatives. Why? Multi-skilling deals with people and people are individuals by nature. Hence, beyond those very basic needs that are common to other living creatures, individuals have their own set of higher order requirements - such as the need for security, association, self worth, ego and self actualisation (Maslow, 1954). Moreover, when dealing with the topic of learning, one has to keep in mind that not all people have a positive view or attitude towards learning. What seems simple for some can present a plethora of difficulties for others. Learning history, long-term absence from school and other school related difficulties all act on the learner to make the learning task more daunting (Beardwell & Holden, 1994:280). This must be taken into account during multi-skilling system design and implementation. Much sensitivity needs to be deployed here. Whatever kind of system used, it must respect the needs of the individual while building on whatever type of prior learning or

acquired experiences the person may have. Such an approach encourages the building of bridges between the learner and what is being expected of him / her to achieve.

Another constraint that organisations are still struggling with is the issue of employee poaching and the effects of multi-skilling on this. Sometimes, this phenomenon conditions organisations to have second thoughts towards multi-skilling and training in general. This fear is prevalent in small to medium enterprises (SME's) where firms are often competing for the same skills with a very limited skills base to choose from. Large organisations also have their own fears to contend with. Having invested thousands of Maltese Liri and other resources to train an employee (especially in the case of technical staff), it would be quite a big blow for an organisation to find out that in reality it had prepared someone else's prospective employee (Streck, 1989:93). Although certain companies try to "protect" their investments by specifying contractual obligations, still they end out being the losers in the equation. Poaching constitutes a constraint of quite some magnitude, which, if not resolved, can have serious implications on how much firms are ready to invest in human resource training and development.

Another possible constraint relates to organisational structure. As noted above, one of the major benefits of multi-skilling systems is that they impart more flexibility (Peters, 1988:22; Welford & Prescott, 1996:170). However it would be useless to try on one hand to increase flexibility whilst on the other hand to have an organisational culture with very rigid command and control structures, very formalised systems and strict adherence to the rule book. Organisation size is also significant as to how successful or not the implementation of any multi-skilling system will be. Whilst one would be tempted to say that the smaller the organisation the better the chances for success, it could also be that small organisations would lack the required structure or means to carry out such a task. Nevertheless, large organisations could

well be faced with the problem of being too dispersed or fragmented; hence uniformity in thinking and training delivery will be much harder to achieve.

Another problem associated with large organisations is the extent to which one would multi-skill the workforce. Is it ideal to train everyone in everything? To what level would learning be assimilated? If it is decided that not all training will be made available to all, on which basis would one base the decision as to who gets what? Needless to say, in undertaking such initiatives, some analysis in the form of skills identification and classification needs to be in place. Likewise proper and periodical Training Needs Analysis (TNA), monitoring and evaluations exercises need to be conducted so that one ensures that stated objectives can be better achieved. Closely related to this is the allocation of responsibility for the proper execution of these duties. One must also be clear at what level of involvement within the overall organisation would the job holder be involved. Unfortunately training and multi-skilling are sometimes given secondary importance, being allocated as an “added” task to either the finance or production manager who are usually more proficient and committed to their particular area of competence rather than the overall subject of learning and training.

Some Benefits

Mention has already been made of how multi-skilling increases flexibility, which in turn can help to improve production throughput time. This is especially important since, within the new manufacturing context, the price of technology is not as big a constraint as it used to be. Instead, a new constraint has come about in the guise of the lack of the right amount of expert or specialist workers to run the work process. This factor is further enhanced by how, in recent years, Malta has experienced periods of relatively low unemployment coupled with high levels of

employees pursuing or changing different career paths not necessarily with the same company. Thus, while some might argue that multi-skilling might diminish full productive capacity, it can be said that this inherent slight drop in productivity will be compensated by a faster reaction time and a faster throughput time. One could also argue that multi-skilling coupled with process redesign can reap enormous benefits by means of a high reduction of stocks of semi-finished products or items due to less work in process (WIP), which ties up huge amounts of much need cash as dead inventory. This is further helped by the elimination of bottlenecks resulting from a lack of sufficient expertise to perform the necessary work giving rise to better resource planning and utilisation. In some cases, order throughput times have been lowered from some 12 – 15 weeks to a more acceptable 2-3 weeks' duration.

From a service provider point of view, multi-skilling makes the setting up of a “one stop shop” operation possible. Just imagine how one feels when as a customer he or she is asked to run from one service counter to another as is the case in certain government departments when one can clearly note that the task can be easily catered for by a single person. Thus, not only can multi-skilling help satisfy the customer better but also weed out inefficiencies from the work system. Multi-skilling will also help to generate repeat custom from the satisfied customer.

Another major benefit of multi-skilling is that, coupled with job rotation, it leads to a reduction of work-related injuries normally classified as repetitive strain injuries. Organisations would thus incur less production loss days due to less sick leave, reduce occupational health & safety liabilities, more so now that Malta has overhauled its labour and occupational health and safety legislation. Yet, this is only part of the argument. Multi-skilling will also help people adapt and work in a smarter and less tiring, less stressful manner. A healthier environment coupled with less work-related conflicts and injuries also helps to increase people's

motivation to become and remain members of the organisation (Schein, 1965:207-22). This helps the organisation to achieve a maximum utilisation of its resources as well as to enhance ownership and employee commitment.

An example of this is the recent job reduction exercise that was proposed by the Malta Government to Drydocks employees. Although it can be argued that an attractive financial package was offered, the author believes that the somewhat uncertain future of the firm, young age and more than anything the knowledge of a number of skills helped many to arrive to the decision to leave the Yard and seek a new future elsewhere. Hence in a direct manner, multi-skilling also increased employability. This is not only relevant where redundancies are concerned but, as one might expect, today change is not simply a buzzword. It is a hard fact of life. Change not only in the way we do business but also in the way many individuals want to conduct their working life (Breadshaw & Palfreman, 1990:1-21). Consequently multi-skilling can help both the individual and the organisation to adapt and respond to ever-changing demands.

Another important element of multi-skilling is that it helps to breed self confidence in people to the extent that this increases a proactive approach to entrepreneurship. A recent trend is that, following a number of years working for an organisation, some employees opt to set up their own shop. This move is normally encouraged by the fact that these employees would through the years have accumulated a number of important functional and managerial skills. In the process of all this, one may assume that the firm would be losing valuable skills and knowledge. Once again one needs to consider the broader picture before arriving at any quick conclusions especially if the company cannot accommodate these employees' career progression needs, which in turn might lead to de-motivation. A smarter way of dealing with this is for the firm to encourage these people by providing them with support and forming partnerships with them. In this way, a

win-win situation can be achieved and the firm will also benefit by creating new opportunities for career advancements at other grades of employment.

Another major benefit of multi-skilling is that it offers the possibility of job enrichment. Job enrichment would in turn increase employee motivation. As noted previously, through the years employees may want to involve themselves further in the firm's development. However, in order to be able to give a valid contribution, one needs to have a broader view of what goes on in the firm and therefore one needs to broaden knowledge of the different processes that are carried out within the firm. It can also be argued that job enrichment will also increase visibility and ownership of the work that is being carried out; it should come as no surprise that many firms in Malta are opting to go for 'cell production' methods which take the concept of multi-skilling to new heights. As is expected within the cell production methodology, the productive process goes from raw material to finished item stage within a specific area of the operations, it being carried out by the same team of employees. Hence now employee will need to broaden their knowledge and learn all the required skills sets to be able to perform the operations needed for the production of such products.

Multi-skilling Models / Systems adopted

Different organisations adopt different approaches to tackle the multi-skilling of their workforce. One can note that the type of approach taken is conditioned by a number of different factors. This includes the amount of commitment the firm is ready to make, its size, structure, culture, management style, knowledge of the subject, competition, employee supply / demand patterns, type of product or service it provides and the financial situation within the organisation.

To a certain extent, it can be said that the type of system adopted

is also a reflection of the level of organisational development and health since multi-skilling is only one aspect of management in general. The multi-skilling system can provide a useful insight into how the organisation goes about the business of managing its resources. In all probability, firms that by default tend to favour a “production” orientation philosophy coupled by low professional managerial competence tend to prefer following a piecemeal approach meant to cater for the immediate rather than long-term needs. On the other hand, firms that are more market oriented, and who are supported with professional managerial competence, are more likely to follow a longer-term vision towards achieving their goals. However this is only a generalisation since even in Malta there are cases that show that, in spite of high “production orientation”, certain firms have undertaken concrete efforts to establish good multi-skilling systems.

It is not uncommon within our small Maltese industrial environment to find small to medium sized enterprises (SME’s) operating for the local market, normally having less than 10 employees (Bonello, 2000:6). These would have limited structure and organisational skills (see Cassar, this volume). Quite typically, multi-skilling is carried out in a very informal manner: the owner / entrepreneur most probably viewing multi-skilling as a quick shot in the arm to miraculously save the ailing patient. At the other extreme, one would find the big multinationals that are more likely to have a formal and organised set-up to cater for their training activities and whose training programmes are more corporate driven. Between these two extremes, one would find a number of hybrid systems that make use of a mix of models and methods, possibly focusing on the latest management fad.

Brandstätter Group Malta - A Local Experience of Multi-skilling

Multi-skilling was introduced at Brandstätter Group Malta in

1996. The introduction of multi-skilling formed part of the new collective agreement negotiations held with the trade unions. This novel initiative sought to pave the way for the company to change from a strict division of labour and specialised type of organisation to one that is more fluid in nature. This initiative was also in line with the company's philosophy of seeking more flexibility and increasing its capacity to respond faster to customer needs. The introduction of multi-skilling posed a number of challenges to the organisation and its workforce. Not only did the people and management have to change their *modus operandi* to embrace this new concept; but they also had to come to terms with the fact that through generalisation some categories of workers (in the short term) were going to lose out in their take-home wage packet. This was due to the fact that through multi-skilling, employees would not be able to achieve previous levels of productivity; hence a reduced probability of achieving output based production bonuses. It is also to be appreciated that multi-skilling as a concept was also new to the Maltese Islands.

These challenges were further compounded by the fact that flexibility and multi-skilling became hot issues of debate between the two major political parties in their respective 1996 electoral campaigns. All of a sudden, both concepts of multi-skilling and flexibility became muddled; hence management had a harder time trying to convince and drive home the message to employees that this was a topic that goes beyond party politics but one which was essential to the company's survival.

In order to lessen and counterbalance the above influences, management reviewed its reward system from one that was solely based on output (bonus based) to one that rewarded employees who took the initiative to learn more skills. Thus, although the production bonus system was kept, employees were now also getting another allowance that was proportional to the number of extra skills that they learned. In effect, a compromise solution.

One of the major challenges during system design was that of

equity among the different production departments. Not only did management have the delicate task of balancing the different skills sets within the different departments but it also had to make sure that these multi-skilling matrices (as they came to be known) had to offer equal opportunities to both male and female workers.

In order to facilitate and gain more ownership of this initiative, a number of key employees were asked to help in the organisation and mapping out of these new skills. Following this, a skills-pairing exercise was carried out so that skills were grouped by their common process characteristics. An attempt was also made to cluster these skills according to the learning effort needed to gain competence in the said skills. This was a difficult task because, while managers and trainers may have had the competence to identify and group these skills by their natural task grouping, neither of them was qualified in pedagogy. Too often these groupings were based on intuition rather than academic principles. However, the process did not stop here. Concurrent with the identification of new skills, these key employees were also asked to formulate training programmes relative to each skill.

As would be expected, every innovation would itself lead to new improvements. Recognising this, management sought to introduce flexibility within the system by introducing review and updating procedures as part of the system design. As mentioned earlier, the major challenge faced with working with such a system was that of equality, meaning the extent to which different skills groups required the same learning effort to be learned. Another major ongoing challenge is that of balancing the human, organisational and pedagogical requirements of the system. Throughout the years, several attempts have been made to counteract these influences; however since every organisation is very dynamic in nature, a delicate sense of balance needs to be sought to keep these components working and collaborating in unison.

Some Questions

At this point, one is tempted to ask: why bother to multi-skill one's employees in the first place? Which is the better system? How would one go about adopting a system that is better suited to one's needs? What payback should one expect, and within what time frame? What risks would one face in training and multi-skilling one's workforce?

Specific answers to these and similar questions go beyond the scope of this chapter. Furthermore, it is the organisation in its own capacity that needs to come to terms with the challenges of multi-skilling and devise answers to the questions that it poses for itself. After all, it is only through such an ongoing, reflective exercise expected from 'learning organisations' that a successful human resource strategy is assured.

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