

Trends in the Contemporary Workplace

This narrative explores the changing nature of the contemporary workplace. You will discover current trends and changes in the ways in which organizations are doing business.

A key point to remember as you read this content is that ***organizations are evolving to become more interdisciplinary in nature***. Some key factors driving this change are as follows:

- **Globalization.** The new global economy and marketplace have ramifications for virtually all business plans. The ability to exploit opportunities across national and cultural boundaries, as well as the ability to cooperate and team with diverse groups of people, are critical indicators of an organization's success. Modern technologies have helped create a world where geographical boundaries are becoming less relevant, and organizations have a wide range of options in terms of finding the most cost-effective solutions to their challenges. From relatively ubiquitous notions such as "off shore" manufacturing and outsourcing to more complex issues such as creating a stable global political environment, collaboration and competition now takes place on a much more level playing field.
- **Knowledge Explosion.** We are living in the "information age." Technological innovation and a rapidly expanding collective knowledge base have created an information rich society. Being able to access the right information, learn quickly, and pull together the appropriate resources to solve problems effectively are critical skills in today's workplace.
- **Hairball Problems.** The problems of the 21st Century are more complex than problems of the past. We struggle with important issues such as health services worldwide, global economic meltdowns, environmental degradation, war and terrorism, energy development, hunger and starvation to name just a few. Finding workable solutions to these types of problems requires that experts from many different disciplines (and cultures) work together. Interdisciplinary teams, effectively structured and managed, are absolutely necessary in attacking multidimensional problems such as these.

CHANGES IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



SMALLER ORGANIZATIONAL UNITS

Despite all of the news over the last twenty years about big mergers, acquisitions and consolidations, the fact is that organizations are moving toward smaller, leaner operating units. This change is being driven by two key factors:

- **Increasing Number of Entrepreneurial Ventures and Job/Career Shifting**

Large corporate downsizings, emerging niche markets, and technology-based opportunities are probably the most notable contributors to the increasing number of small business enterprises over the last decade. More often than not, people in the workforce view themselves as “free agents” versus “loyal employees” signifying the changing nature of the employee-employer contract of lifetime employment. As many organizations make “workforce management” a priority, many individuals are forced to be more flexible in their approaches to developing and maintaining a career over the course of their adult working life.

- **Corporate Refocus**

Even in large organizations, work is increasingly organized around leaner operating units and smaller more focused “profit centers.” Many of today’s most innovative organizations believe that smaller operating units allow for greater innovation and accountability as greater decision-making and bottom line responsibilities are distributed to these smaller units.



SIGNIFICANT STRUCTURAL CHANGES

In addition to the trend toward smaller operating units, several other structural changes are being witnessed in the contemporary workplace. These changes are necessary if organizations hope to remain competitive and responsive to customer needs. The most notable of these changes are as follows:

- **Flatter Organizational Structure**

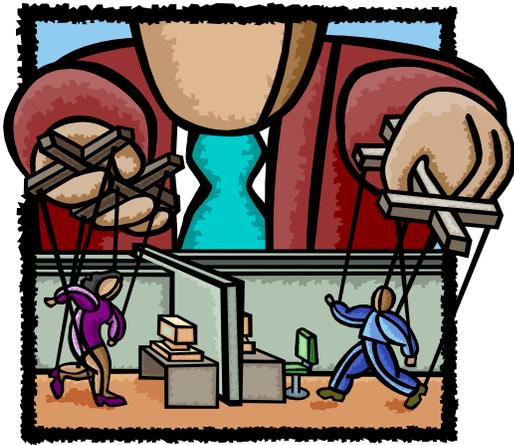
The “de-layering” of middle management in many large firms has yielded opportunities for existing “front line” management to assume greater levels of authority and responsibility. Flatter, leaner organizations provide opportunities for those who can demonstrate a willingness to assume responsibility and the ability accomplish corporate objectives. Less organizational layers mean greater visibility – existing managers must be more flexible and skilled at working with diverse groups of people and assuming diverse roles and responsibilities.

- **Matrix or Project Based Structure**

Competitive forces in an increasingly global marketplace are pressuring large organizations to do “more with less” – focusing on efficiency and effectiveness. Many organizations are moving from a structure built around functional departments (as can be seen on the typical “top down” org. charts) to a structure built around customers and processes.

Smoothly functioning cross-functional teams, effective inter-departmental communication, and distributed decision-making are critical factors helping today’s organizations remain competitive and responsive to customer needs.

CHANGES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP



CHANGING ROLE OF MANAGEMENT

As organizations adapt to the demands of doing business in a more global economy, the roles and responsibilities of management are also changing. Following are a couple of examples of some of the more positive and notable trends:

- **Servant Leadership**

The most effective managers today are concerned more with service than with control. The notion that managers work “for” their employees (as opposed to the other way around) points to the importance of management skills such as coaching, removing roadblocks and “red tape” and obtaining required resources for your team.

- **Investments in Training and Coaching**

Employee turnover is expensive. Keeping good employees and training them effectively is critical in today’s marketplace. Managers need to be able to identify talent, breed commitment, facilitate the development of cohesive, goal-oriented teams, and help others make effective decisions. The most effective managers in organizations today think of themselves as “sponsors,” “team leaders,” “coaches,” or “internal consultants” (as opposed to the “boss” or the “manager”).

- **Importance of Transferable Skills**

Managers must draw on a wide skill base to be effective in today’s workplace. The most important of these skills are **not** discipline specific. Effectively accomplishing organizational objectives in today’s marketplace means that managers must be able to: get employees buy-in and vested interest in their contributions; distribute information and

responsibilities effectively; create cohesiveness among a diverse set of employees; and identify potential problems and opportunities in time to do something about it.



EMPHASIS ON VISION AND VALUES

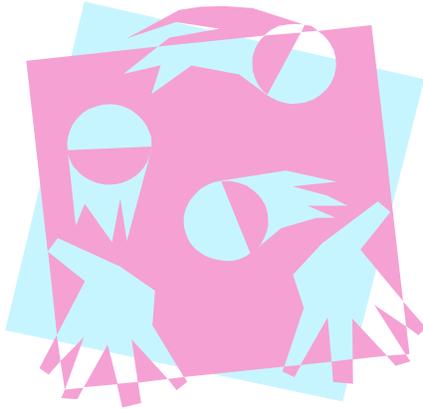
Having a clear organizational vision and well established organizational values are critical in today's competitive workplace. A clear vision and well established organizational values serve as a template for the development of strategic and operational management goals and priorities. Several notable academic researchers in the field of Leadership / Management have noted that this is a key common characteristic of world-class organizations.

Managers must communicate the vision and values of the organization and help employees make personal connections.

As organizations become leaner, and operational goals are effectively tied into the overall organizational vision and values, employees can begin to see a clear connection between their individual contributions and success of the organization. The ability to translate vision and values into tangible goals and objectives is a critical management competency.

We'll explore these ideas more fully later in the course when we dig into how notions of interdisciplinarity relate to best practices in organizational leadership.

CHANGES IN MARKETABLE SKILLS



DEMAND FOR EMPLOYEES WITH A BROAD SKILL BASE

More and more in this knowledge-driven society, organizational needs are trending toward a greater demand for “generalists” versus “specialists.” This trend is fueled by the rapid rate of technological change and availability of information.

The most productive employees will be those who know how to continue to learn from phenomena that are not presently in view. These employees will know how to respond to (and capitalize on) the resources of the social, technological, and practical environment in an effective manner.

This idea points to a premium on one’s ability to learn and adapt quickly to technological, societal, and environmental changes. Transferable skills such as problem solving, creativity, flexibility, and the ability to learn quickly are rapidly becoming more important than “discipline-specific” skills, which in many cases can be effectively learned on-the-job.

This is not to say that the need for specialists will dry up. Specialization is critical in moving our collective knowledge base ahead and in capitalizing on emerging opportunities. The key point here is that there is an increasing importance being placed on transferable skills, and that many organizational leaders believe that college is not preparing students effectively in these critical skill areas.

THE SPECIALIST VERSUS THE GENERALIST

There are, of course, are disadvantages associated with both overspecialization and overgeneralization. One old adage goes as follows:

The specialist: *“Learns more and more about less and less until he knows absolutely everything about nothing”*

The generalist: *“Learns less and less about more and more until he knows absolutely nothing about everything.”*

These are both exaggerations – but they make a point. Developing a healthy level of competence within a specific field (or fields) is important, but not to the exclusion of the development of critical transferable skills. Different types of jobs dictate different types of specific skill requirements, but virtually all jobs require certain transferable skills. It is the development of these domain-general skills within the context of traditional academic disciplines that many leaders in industry claim is lacking among college fresh-outs.

A broad skill base is critical for individuals interested in interdisciplinary inquiry or project management. *Consider this: **ASU’s Career Services recently found that 85% of the jobs requiring a college degree do not require a specific type of degree.***

Many organizations believe that they can train new employees in the specific areas of expertise relevant to the job at hand. This is one reason why many organizations are relying on behavioral interviews and personality / communication style instruments to help determine the best person for a given job.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

As discussed above, transferable skills such as problem solving, creativity, flexibility, and effective learning are rapidly becoming more important than “discipline-specific” skills, which in many cases can be effectively learned on-the-job.

What are the specific personal characteristics and skills of an individual best suited for the 21st Century workplace?

According to Barker, Gilbreath & Stone (*The Interdisciplinary Needs of Organizations: Are New Employees Adequately Equipped?*), the following skills are identified by employers as interdisciplinary skills most needed (and most lacking in fresh-out college graduates):

- Communication skills in speaking, writing, and interpersonal relations
- Cross-functional / interdisciplinary methods
- Team-oriented skills
- Change receptivity / flexibility
- Intercultural awareness and sensitivity
- Life-long learning skills

Be sure to read the article (one of your assigned readings) carefully and consider the nature and value of these skills. Begin to consider how you might continue to improve in each of these critical skill areas. What specifically would you do to improve in these areas? How would you demonstrate your effectiveness in these areas?

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS AS INTEGRATIVE SKILLS

In addition to Barker, Gilbreath & Stone's findings, other interdisciplinary researchers have reached similar conclusions regarding the skills that help facilitate effective integrative efforts.

Following are some of the most critical transferable skills / personal characteristics for success in an increasingly interdisciplinary workplace and society:

- **Flexibility.** The ability to acknowledge many possible ways to conceptualize an issue or problem. The ability to embrace change.
- **High Risk Tolerance.** The ability and desire to “shake up” the status quo. Not easily satisfied. Interested in continuously improving.
- **Resilience.** The ability to “bounce back” from temporary setbacks, not prone to the “ugly baby” syndrome (refusing to challenge your own “pet” ideas in light of refuting evidence), somewhat “thick-skinned” – a healthy level of ego-strength.

- **Sensitivity to Others.** The ability to bring out the best in others. The ability to understand that others may see things differently. Demonstrating empathy and interpersonal skills.
- **Preference for Diversity.** The ability and desire to “multitask.” Not inclined to fall into a “rut.” Interested in working with a diverse group of individuals on a diverse set of priorities. Varied interests across many domains.
- **Excellent Learner.** The ability to learn quickly and efficiently. Values learning, large knowledge base in areas of interest, high level of meta-cognitive functioning, effective self-regulator, curious, values learning, mastery oriented.
- **Comfortable With Ambiguity.** The ability to create structure out of chaos.
- **Open minded.** The ability to view the world in “shades of gray” or better yet, “in living color” - as opposed to someone who tends to see things in “black and white.” The ability to see multiple perspectives on an issue.
- **Humility.** The ability to “check your ego at the door” has significant advantages with respect to working collaboratively with others who have different forms of expertise.