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Why aren't more organizations cross-training effectively?

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As I prepared this article, I realized the topic truly isn't novel in nature, so no shortage of articles and reference materials touting the benefits of cross-training exists. In fact, across multiple industries and over the span of the last two decades, one can find hundreds of articles with a simple search at the keyboard. And yet, this topic remains timely and relevant—so why? Perhaps, and I base this on both personal and client experiences, it's because cross-training continues to break down when it comes to implementing the actual process and maintaining an effective system with often limited resources. And why are those resources so limited, I wondered, especially with the plethora of literature espousing the endless benefits of this straightforward initiative.

If our respective industries aren't disputing the benefits of this concept, and continue to discuss multitudes of variables for bettering it, one would think implementation would be a given. So, in effect, as I looked harder and harder for what truly makes cross-training a timely topic, I actually found the real question is: Why aren't organizations using this concept, given all the positive literature? Thus, instead of writing yet another article touting the benefits of cross-training, I decided to instead examine why organizations aren't completing this process effectively — or at all. Perhaps if the hurdles and stop-gap measures are evaluated and demystified, then greater strides can be made to productively use all the existing literature I initially found.

Defining cross-training

First, one must understand the concept of organizational cross-training, and the benefits, before we can explore what might be perceived as the obstacles to implementation. Your organization can potentially overcome those challenges to reap the rewards.

In short, "cross-functional training means teaching employees to do jobs they currently do not do and were not originally hired for."^[1] This concept is applicable in almost all employee positions and across practically all industries.^[2] Commonly, you see it applied most effectively in various customer service representative and high customer-contact scenarios or in retail organizations. Yet, based on the litany of articles available, healthcare-based organizations are struggling to implement cross-education on a comparatively regular level.

Perhaps a deeper definition is truly required to be understood and digested for what appears to be such a straightforward concept to succeed in implementation. As I looked further, I came across a far broader definition that helped in this regard: "Cross-training means changing the way the employer thinks and training employees to learn a variety of job functions within his domain."^[3] This, I determined, was foreshadowing as to why this seemingly simple concept was far more difficult than it appeared to be when employed in institutions.

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