

Boost productivity & retention with a formal job-rotation plan

Small and midsize organizations, by necessity, often temporarily rotate employees between jobs. Having relatively few employees means there's not much back-up if an employee in a key role is absent. And important work can be left undone if someone quits. Cross-training employees to do a variety of jobs builds in skills flexibility so the organization's business isn't disrupted by small staffs and turnover.

A formal rotation plan can teach new skills, increase employee engagement and provide career paths for stagnated top performers who've outgrown their positions.

Advantages of job rotation

A formal job rotation program improves the workforce's skills base. It helps exempt employees improve business skills by exposing them to different operational functions. For nonexempts—those who work on a shop floor, for example—job rotation teaches new skills so they can fill in when necessary.

Organizations can use job rotation to identify promising candidates for promotion and give them experience they need to advance.

Institutional knowledge increases because workers know more about the business and can perform more jobs.

On the other hand ...

Productivity drops temporarily as workers learn new jobs, make mistakes and possibly fail some assignments.

The workload will increase for those who don't rotate. As a result, department managers may balk at including their most productive employees.

Studies show that early-career professionals and managers are most interested in rotation because they believe it benefits their advancement. Later-stage employees are least attracted.

5 guidelines to a smart program

1. Create a job-rotation policy that defines eligibility and explains which jobs are included. It's difficult to include highly specialized jobs that require special training or degrees.

2. Make it clear that job rotation is voluntary, not mandatory. Employees who do it willingly are more likely to succeed.

3. Make it inclusive. Include professional, management, and exempt employees of all ages and experience. Don't rotate new hires and younger employees faster. Reason: Broad inclusion helps managers and employees discover hidden talents that can benefit the organization.

4. Define the skills that employees should learn in each rotation. Explain management's expectations.

5. Let the learning sink in. People should spend enough time in each task to learn the skills required to perform it well.

Final tip: Job rotation requires teamwork from the entire organization, including managers and employees who don't participate directly.

Job sharing requires more formal arrangements

Don't confuse job rotation with job sharing. Nothing (except perhaps a union contract) prevents you from implementing job rotation.

However, job sharing—in which two or more people work part-time to perform a single job—requires paying careful attention to compensation and benefits issues, wage-and-hour compliance, scheduling and even performance appraisal systems.

For that reason, you must draw up a job-sharing agreement for all affected employees to sign. Have your attorney review it first.