

Eliminate the Crummy Jobs

Henry Ford revolutionized business by creating the first really efficient workflow. He designed jobs so average people could do them and made sure they produced an adequate result by having the work come to the worker at a predetermined rate. The result revolutionized American business.

Without trying to diminish his contribution, there were also some negatives to this approach. The jobs tended to be boring, repetitive and unfulfilling. It was hard to get quality results and continuous improvement because most people didn't really like what they were doing. Few kids grew up wanting a career on an assembly line. Parents did this work and then discussed the value of an education to their children so they could do better. This is the American way. We continually find better ways of doing things. We build on the past to make a better future.

We are now at a point where the best companies recognize that it is in their self interest to design jobs that are interesting, fulfilling and efficient. They understand that treating employees as stakeholders results in a new, more vibrant company culture and a significant competitive advantage. So how do they do this? First, let's look at the negative side of this discussion; what do they eliminate:

- Jobs that focus on tasks or activities. These are small jobs where employees may contribute in some way to a result but they can't be held accountable for it or, in some cases, even see the result. These include service positions where the major activity is taking messages or routing calls to others for resolution, ill-defined "helper" positions and jobs done better and more accurately by computers.
- Jobs with little authority or decision-making ability. These include information gatherers, helpers and employees in training situations that never seem to end. These especially include small units of people where the supervisor makes all of the decisions.
- Starter jobs that don't go anywhere.
- Management jobs with responsibilities that are too narrow or have too few employees to need a manager. These include "working manager" positions.
- Any job where there isn't a good fit with the employee doing it. (In some cases this isn't a problem with the job. It could be you need a different employee.)

It's relatively easy to identify poorly designed jobs. Just ask yourself, or the people in them, if they like their job. Would they recommend it to a family member? Would they want to continue doing it for a long time? Then start changing. And involve the people in the jobs. They probably have a lot of ideas.

So, what are some of the things that great companies do to make their employees more effective, efficient and to build a culture that recognizes employees as stakeholders? Here are a few ideas that we've found successful:

- Focus on what people do and contribute instead of the job they do. Allow job design to be more fluid. Create a structure where jobs are constantly being redesigned by employees and management.

This concept was first tried and then developed in the very fluid and efficient environment within multifunctional teams. Because employees become more involved in determining how things are done, this approach develops strong feelings of ownership and accountability. For this to work well there must also be an intense focus on being more effective and productive.

- Establish team and unit goals and success measures and then hold everyone accountable for accomplishing them. This keeps everyone focused on accomplishing solid business results and provides a clear "line of sight" so they understand the importance of their results. Focusing on team measures encourages teamwork and a better, broader approach to continual improvement.
- Open up (and sometimes redesign) your management information so everyone, management and employees, can measure results and effectiveness. Stomp out the "knowledge is power" management syndrome and give everyone access to useful information. Treat all employees as intelligent, creative partners and give them access to the knowledge they need to participate.
- Get employees more involved in identifying work process improvements, their own training needs, their own career path development and other ways to improve their contribution to their team and the company. Make sure everyone understands that this is a "win-win situation." When done right, the company and the employee wins from these improvements.
- Create a true ownership culture within the company by providing Gainsharing or other incentives that encourage and motivate employees to be more entrepreneurial and more accountable for attaining core business results.

Most executives and companies believe in these concepts and want to treat their employees as stakeholders. The problem or disconnect is frequently in the execution. They fail to implement well. They fail to put the infrastructure or processes in place that allow this idea to develop and work well.

The best time to make the initial effort in identifying and redesigning jobs is to do it while you're looking at and improving work processes. Job redesign is a natural part of improving workflows and it ensures that whatever is done will result in better overall results.

In our management consulting practice we help companies become more effective and efficient. We can help you implement these concepts. Please visit our website (McDonaldConsulting-Group.com) for other topics of interest.