

Getting Out and Getting Dirty (Spend a Day in Their Shoes)

KEYWORDS:

Workforce Development, culture, drinking water, asset management

1 Introduction

Many organisations have divisions and departments that work together with varying levels of success. Office based staff may not fully understand what it takes to operate and maintain assets. Conversely operational departments may not fully understand decisions made by office-based staff. Spend a Day in Their Shoes is an initiative where individuals spend days in other teams, departments or divisions. Longer experiences, in the form of fixed term secondments, can also occur. The result is a learning environment where barriers are broken down and relationships built up across the organisation. This in turn can lead to increased team performance¹. This paper presents information on the initiatives. It includes case studies highlighting various exchange experiences in TasWater, the state-wide water and sewerage authority in Tasmania. One example is when a primarily office-based asset management engineer spent time with the field-based bulk water distribution team. The case studies demonstrate that this can be a straightforward, easy to implement initiative has many short- and long-term benefits for organisations.

Spend a Day in Their Shoes is not rocket science: it is giving people the opportunity to understand other areas of the business and make connections with people. The process can be quite simple, with two different processes depending on the duration of the experience.

2 Methods

Two different methods are applicable, depending on the duration of the learning experience.

Short term experiences (Spend a Day in Their Shoes)

These are experiences where individuals maintain their substantive role but spend hours or days in another team, with the objective of learning new things.

- The participant decides what team or area they would like to know more about
- The participant and their manager meet with the manager of the receiving team
- Expectations and objectives are discussed and agreed, including the frequency and duration of experience(s).
- The salary of the participant does not change.

Longer term experiences (internal secondments)

These experiences are where individuals leave their substantive role to temporarily take on a different role within the business. It is to address a short-medium term need in the business and on conclusion the participant returns to their substantive role.

- Advertising, applications and interviews are completed as per any other fixed-term position open to internal applicants.
- The successful applicant is provided with a document outlining the terms and conditions of their secondment (position, start and end date, salary, and substantive role to which they will return), which they duly sign and return to human resources.
- The salary of the participant may change.

Examples

Examples of Spend a Day in Their Shoes (short term experiences)

- Trade waste officers spending time with Sewage Treatment Plant operators
- Customer Service Officers spending time with Trade Waste officers
- Development Services Managers spending time in the Call Centre

¹ Margaret Heffernan: Why it's time to forget the pecking order at work, https://youtu.be/Vyn_xLrtZaY

- Asset Management Engineer in Bulk Operations².

Examples of internal secondments (longer-term experiences, up to 12 months):

- Capital Works Program Planner seconded to Manager Project Management Support Services
- Asset Performance Engineer seconded to Capital Works Program Planner
- GIS asset information officer seconded to Asset Performance Engineer
- Counter and Correspondence staff seconded to Project Delivery Admin Support.
- Billing Officer seconded to Revenue Assurance
- Revenue Assurance Officer seconded to Billing.

3 Outcomes

Both short- and long-term experiences have the benefits of developing knowledge and relationships, both for the participant and the receiving team. This has positive long-term repercussions, with future interactions between the colleagues likely to be more open and productive. Such was the case in 2016 an Asset Management Engineer spent time in TasWater's Bulk Water operations team in Hobart. The engineer still feels the benefits of that experience three years later; not only did their knowledge of the assets increase but the relationships they built continue to result in a genuine willingness to answer questions and provide information.

In each case:

- The participant is learning about another area of the business
- The receiving team learns about the participant's substantive role
- The participant and the receiving team members develop more productive working relationships.

A number of secondment participants and managers were asked to give feedback on their experiences, with responses summarised as follows:

Advantages of internal secondments:

- Career development
- learning new skills / bringing new skills
- Working with new people / feeling more valued
- Understanding other teams / fresh perspectives
- Provides job security if future business structure uncertain (substantive role to which to return).

Disadvantages of internal secondments:

- Uncertainty around secondment periods (when secondments get extended multiple times).
- Domino effect of backfilling positions / short-term drop in productivity
- Different team dynamics (less camaraderie in some cases)
- Can be difficult to implement new ideas in short time periods.

4 Conclusions

Spending time in other teams is beneficial for both employees and employers. Knowledge is exchanged between teams and relationships are improved. These social connections help team perform, in turn helping build a culture where silos are broken down and helping others is not a gift begrudgingly given. It is a cost-effective way to build knowledge and culture within organisations.

5 References

TED Talk - Margaret Heffernan: Why it's time to forget the pecking order at work, https://youtu.be/Vyn_xLrtZaY, accessed February 2019.

² Case Study: Getting Out and Getting Dirty. An Asset Management Engineer spent two days / week for four weeks in Bulk Operations, the bulk water team at TasWater based in Hobart.