



From Workforce Planning to Workforce Logistics

By Yves Lermusiaux

Workforce planning is a popular topic of discussion, especially when an improving economy drives changes in corporate staffing needs. Although workforce planning is simple in concept, rapidly changing market conditions and the complexities inherent in large and global organizations may make it unrealistic to accomplish.

In workforce planning, an organization conducts a systematic assessment of the existing workforce, its size and composition, and how it compares to the workforce needed by the company in the future. Workforce planning then goes on to determine what actions must be taken to respond to those future needs. Workforce planning must take into account external factors (e.g., availability of skills in the local labor pool) as well as internal factors (e.g., age of the workforce). In theory, these factors then determine whether future skills needs will be met by recruiting, by internal redeployment, or by outsourcing the work.

Workforce Realities

But can we really plan our workforce needs? Staffing directors are often cynical about the prospects of workforce planning. A skeptical staffing director told me recently, "I don't put a lot of value on workforce planning. As soon as you plan, conditions change. Last year was the best example of that..."

In practice, workforce planning is often left far behind by fast-moving developments in business plans. Large companies are affected by a range of unanticipated circumstances, including global political shifts, natural disasters, or other major changes in lines of business, such as mergers and acquisitions.

Unforeseen events may dictate a fast ramp-up or scale-down. The shift to a more fluid workforce - for instance, project-based workgroups that form up and disband at a moment's notice - further frustrates attempts at workforce planning. Throughout, the new workforce realities require a fast response from staffing.

That doesn't mean workforce planning should be abandoned entirely. Its role is to provide a strategic overview of a company's anticipated needs.

Some organizations are approaching workforce planning in ways that take inspiration from scenario planning. Scenario planning involves the disciplined introduction of unorthodox assumptions into strategic thinking. Scenario planning contemplates more freewheeling what-if considerations in a wider range of internal and external factors.

Workforce Logistics

Today, responsiveness and planning that is well suited to a dynamic business environment can be derived from proficiency in workforce logistics.

Workforce logistics is an aspect of human capital management that deals with the procurement, deployment, and redeployment of an organization's current and future workforce, in relation to current skills possessed by the workforce and the future demand for skills. Workforce logistics focuses on a single, integrated view of the demand for skills in an organization in a timely fashion. A single technology platform is required to provide the ability to match demand flexibly and continuously to all sources of talent, from internal pools of talent to traditional sources of external talent: permanent, hourly, and contingent hires.

To excel at workforce logistics, talent supply must be able to be identified to meet demand, at all job levels - hourly, professional, and managerial. A consistent and scalable process for meeting enterprise-wide demand for talent, based on a database for defining the requisite skills for each position in the company, is key. The suppliers of talent - internal and external candidates - are then measurable according to those requirements.

Profiling the current workforce in an internal skill database in advance of any identification of a hiring need further enables fast internal redeployment as needed.

Single Platform

The ability to manage all hire types on one platform is the next major milestone in the evolution of human capital management systems. A single platform integrating all hiring done by the enterprise provides unprecedented levels of service and flexibility to hiring managers, who are the true point of demand for talent. Being able to hire a professional salaried, temp, contractor, student/new grad, or hourly worker all from one system delivers considerable value to hiring managers striving to meet corporate goals. For executives of global enterprises, one system provides complete and consistent data, which supports better decision making for realistic and immediate workforce planning.

Given the vagaries of the business climate and the powerful advances in technology, workforce logistics automation becomes the driver for timely responses to changes in workforce planning. Like business today, staffing will gain its superiority not by the best planning or crystal ball to predict the future, but by its nimbleness and ability to react and adapt quickly.

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