

Workforce MANAGEMENT

Multiskilled Employees Sought as Versatility Becomes a Workplace Virtue

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Appeared September, 2010

As companies slashed their workforces during the recession, employee specialists became an endangered species. Firms needed generalists who could adapt quickly, think on their feet and competently perform duties often beyond their job description.

Those jack-of-all-trade workers remain crucial to companies for their ability to handle multiple assignments. And versatility has emerged as a key quality that recruiters say they consider when filling vacancies these days.

A study released this year by consulting firm Accenture PLC asked U.S. employers why they added employees during the downturn. While 46 percent of the executives reported that they launched new products or entered a new market, 45 percent also said they needed workers with more or different skills for future business.

“Who are the people who can work under pressure, work harder and earn less, who can take on new tasks, who can be OK out of their comfort zones?” says David Lewis, founder and president of OperationsInc., an HR outsourcing and consulting firm in Stamford, Connecticut. “Companies need people like this now.”

Cynthia Good, founder and CEO of Pink, a publication targeting young female executives, retained the people who could handle multiple assignments when the magazine cut staff and went online-only in late 2009.

“I used to have one copy editor, one rewrite editor, two event managers, a designer and several writers and salespeople,” Good says, adding that publishing online only (although she says Pink still provides some custom

publishing) was based on reaching readers who are more tech-savvy and like to receive the publication’s content on mobile devices.

“Now I have a half-dozen people working for me. My designer is also my media and video person, my line/copy editor also writes, my events person is now doing sales and is good at it. One person can wear a lot of hats in this economy where you must do more with less.”

Herndon, Virginia-based DLT Solutions Inc., a reseller of software to federal, state and local governments for companies such as Autodesk Inc. and Oracle Corp., also needs employees to wear several hats.

Since the passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, DLT Solutions’ salespeople have had to take over what would normally be considered order-fulfillment tasks because of changes in requirements for federal documentation, says Chris Laggini, DLT Solutions’ vice president of human resources.

The new requirements—especially the mandate for transparency in government—meant additional customer information had to be collected for order fulfillment to do its job. However, because the information had to be obtained from the customer, with whom order fulfillment has no contact, the sales staff was asked to collect it.

“The salespeople don’t like that, but the customer is happy, and it’s more efficient for the company,” Laggini says. With that approach, “new pieces of business mean you don’t have to hire new people or create new divisions.”

With the new value placed on adaptable employees, hiring managers appear to be seeking workers who are willing to take on different tasks, even if employees grumble about the extra work.

“We define [adaptability] on two levels,” says Nels Wroe, partner and product director for Princeton, New Jersey-based SHL USA, a division of U.K.-based SHL Global, which provides talent assessment and HR solutions such as succession planning and recruitment for companies such as American Express Co. and Barclays PLC in 30 languages across 50 countries.

“Adaptability is thinking on your feet. It’s a tactical, short-term characteristic,” Wroe says. “Embracing change is not tactical. It’s at the root of someone’s work behavior. It’s more about being thrown curveballs and instead of just reacting, you look at the potential, see it and deal with it. It’s adapting to how the world is changing.”

Wroe says conventional recruiting tools such as résumés, background checks and interviews won’t reveal if job candidates possess such traits.

“For the last 15 or 20 years, most people have been pretty successful” at managing their careers, he says. “But these tools show recent success, an upward trajectory. It’s a little difficult to see if someone embraces change, because only recently have we” experienced economic difficulty.

Wroe is among those advocating the use of personality and talent assessment tests for recruiting and hiring.

“When most companies do interviews, they are as unscientific and unanalytic as possible,” OperationsInc.’s Lewis says. “The days of going from a gut feeling in hiring are over. The interview has become a chess game, and the candidates have become masters. Companies need a more strategic and scientific process. There is a lot of value in personality testing. I started off being a skeptic. Now I’m a convert.”

Lewis adds that tests can validate what occurred in the interview.

“Tests don’t tell you yes or no to hire,” Lewis says. “They tell you the characteristics of the individual and the environment where they’ll do well.”

target audiences, looks for specific adaptability traits during interviews. For executive-level positions, that involves a three-person panel.

“Candidates who deal well with pressure talk about the excitement of change in their work,” says Marcella Barry, Adaptivemarketing’s vice president of HR. “Someone leaving when there was a lot of turbulence indicates they may not adapt well to change.

“In this age of turbulence, it’s good to know you have a person who can operate under pressure. Regardless of the level of the person, it’s helpful to the organization.”

Adaptive Marketing LLC, a Norwalk, Connecticut-based firm that creates online consumer membership programs and partners with businesses to reach their