

Taking a

Fresh Look

at an
OLD PRACTICE



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In this edition of FocusED, we discuss the topic of cross-training and cross-utilizing staff. This is not a new topic and is done to greater or lesser degrees in a variety of hospitality / service operations. It's probably used most in small, owner-operated businesses (think family pizzerias, as an example) as everyone did everything to make larger profits.

As businesses became more sophisticated and had more moving parts, work started to become specialized and, in many environments, supported by union contracts that added structure and specific job classes. Dishwasher, steward, line cook, cashier, host, house person, and shampooer, to name a few. And, not surprisingly, jobs became more boring and, to some degree, monotonous.

Just think about a child in school. Can you imagine how boring studying math for six hours would be? *Really!* But instead, our children are taught various subjects throughout the same day, not just because there are different topics to learn, but because it is simply more interesting. This becomes



a key reason to look to cross-utilization: it makes the day more interesting. Or, as some would say, it provides job enrichment.

Obviously the smaller the overall staff, the more important cross-utilization becomes. In the simplest of senses, there aren't eight hours' worth of dish-washing to do on a shift at a Garden Inn. So, the employee is asked to do other tasks, which may even include food preparation. Thirty-five years ago at a hotel in Atlanta, after breakfast, the server staff would work in the kitchen doing salad and vegetable prep. It made their jobs more inter-

esting, they were paid a higher rate per hour when working in the kitchen, and they increased their knowledge of the luncheon menu. A win-win all around.

In this Atlanta hotel example, employees that worked in another job were paid a higher rate to compensate them for that work or, in essence, were paid for the additional skill they had developed. This took training and commitment on the part of the staff and the employer, but it paid off in the long run with lower overall costs (less cooks) and lower turnover due to more interesting work and higher pay. Commonly called "pay for skill," this practice has been around for longer than I have been in the business world. It has even been incorporated in some union agreements; when a person works another job for more than two hours, he/she is paid at the higher rate. Sadly though, pay for skill is very underutilized in the hospitality industry. But, I think that will change soon.

One of the advantages of cross-utilization, is that it improves productivity and, therefore, decreases operating costs. Not much different from that family pizzeria I mentioned above, but it gets more difficult as the business gets more complex. For example, what if a front desk agent became the host in the restaurant at 11 a.m.? What if the steward was a bus person at low volumes or did food preparation at times? What if there were no banquet-specific housemen, and housemen did set up, tear down, and housekeeping activities, such as vacuuming and other cleaning tasks? One hotel chain has the bell staff deliver room service orders. The list can go on and on, only limited by one's imagination and the technology available to the organization.

One of the reasons cross-utilization is going to be incorporated and formally made part of many companies' standard operating procedures is that operating costs are increasing due to minimum wage increases as well as benefit costs. Operations will have to find a means of offsetting some of the increases, and

cross-utilization is a great starting point. As noted, it can reduce operating costs as well as enrich jobs and reduce monotony if properly applied. In some cases, millennials will also have an impact on this as they look to get more involved in organizations, understand more of the business, and be more stimulated throughout the day. And before I forget, an organization that embraces the practice of cross-utilization will also see a marked jump in teamwork, which also positively impacts customer satisfaction.

Cross-utilization is nothing new as the banquet captain has been using restaurant staff for years, but the practice can be expanded to all aspects of the business with measurably positive effects. We hope you enjoy our latest offering and take a hard look at your operations to see where this practice can help you improve your bottom line

Best regards,



Mark

