MAINTAINING COHESIVENESS IN A DISTRIBUTED GOVERNMENT WORKFORCE

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Government agency budgets are shrinking, and the demographics of the public workforce are undergoing a tectonic shift. Agencies face a mass exodus of experienced talent as older generations of workers retire and are replaced by Millennials (born between the early 1980s and early 2000s). The drain of experience, combined with the conversion to and rapid rise of the knowledge worker, is forcing agencies across the public sector to fundamentally change the way they operate.

At the core of this transformation lies a new reality: The replacement workforce learns, works, and communicates very differently from traditional government workers. To overcome the challenges inherent in an enormous changeover such as this, agencies will have to find a way to accomplish two essential goals:

1. Preserve the knowledge base of the experienced workforce.
2. Pass that knowledge on to younger workers in new ways.

Achieving those goals will require overcoming two significant barriers:

1. Train and educate a workforce that is increasingly widely distributed.
2. Provide effective training even though today’s government training is highly decentralized.

The real challenge is to maintain cohesiveness in such a distributed environment.

This TD at Work will answer several critical questions, including:

- What is a distributed workforce?
- What are the challenges in a distributed workforce?
- How can agencies develop a strategic training plan for the future?
- Which format of training is best for a distributed workforce?
- How do you effectively design training?
- How might the training needs of a distributed workforce continue to evolve?

While this TD at Work is primarily focused on issues relevant to government training coordinators and department heads, it will also have relevance for their counterparts in the private sector.

THE DISTRIBUTED ENVIRONMENT DEFINED

As recently as the mid-2000s, the overwhelming majority of workers, both public and private, worked within a very similar business model. Employees reported to a central location where face-to-face communication was the norm. During the past 10 years, however, major advances in technology have led to the advancement of a workforce that creates value beyond the borders of a central location. Today’s workforce is widely dispersed geographically, highly connected technologically, and intensely reliant on working collaboratively. Customers of a distributed workforce share similar characteristics, where the relationships are based on accessing information anywhere, anytime.

TRAINING CHALLENGES IN A DISTRIBUTED ENVIRONMENT

For the bulk of government agencies, the migration to a distributed environment has been painstakingly slow. Agency leaders, the majority of whom belong to the Baby Boomer and Silent generations, instinctively know they have to begin the journey, but have delayed the trek out of fear and a tradition of resisting change. This creates several training challenges for agencies that have a distributed worker base.

The first challenge is a lack of knowledge management. Extracting the knowledge for success in a task or job and ensuring that information is documented is a major issue. Most government jobs are not well documented because there has been little motivation or accountability for workers and agencies to do so. People traditionally worked in government for their entire career; therefore, turnover was minimal.
The second challenge is inconsistent policies, procedures, and processes. It is not uncommon for government employees doing the same tasks and jobs in different locations to be inconsistent in the way they complete them. Trying to train an employee on the correct and most efficient way of completing a task becomes a frustrating exercise in futility.

The third challenge is a gap in infrastructure. Time and time again we’ve experienced government systems that don’t work properly, outdated equipment and software, and data housed in systems that are not linked together. The greater the number of geographically dispersed employees, the greater the gap in infrastructure becomes, often on an exponential scale. Training staff in such an environment is a hugely difficult undertaking and often leads to trainer burnout and a mammoth reduction in training quality.

However, there are several steps agencies can take to overcome these challenges. Let’s explore each in detail.

Lack of Knowledge Management

The first step in addressing a gap in knowledge management is to establish a process for capturing information. The proliferation of inexpensive, cloud-based storage systems has made it easier to develop an online shared repository of information that has an easy-to-use data management and retrieval structure.

Once a system that works within an agency’s resource constraints is identified, the next step is to implement a simple method for compiling knowledge from agency staff. Trying to identify what to capture and where to start can be daunting, but there is an effective way to both define and prioritize what to capture. Start by identifying a critical role or task. Then apply “the rule of five” to capture the most important information for completing the role or task. The rule of five can be applied with a question. Ask the employee, “What are the five things that everyone in this role everywhere must do every day to complete this role or task successfully?” This will yield the most crucial steps involved, the ones that should be documented.

The litmus test for an effective knowledge management process is if employees with limited knowledge can quickly find what they need and efficiently apply it with minimal assistance. This requires that information be documented in easy-to-follow and easy-to-apply formats. Checklists, templates, and how-to guides are the most powerful types of job aids for enabling the transfer of learning.

Inconsistent Policies, Procedures, and Processes

Inconsistency is a dilemma for many government agencies due to the traditional control and command structure many have adopted.

WHAT IS A DISTRIBUTED WORKFORCE?

You have a distributed workforce if:

- Groups of your employees are connected across physical boundaries to ensure seamless business processes and initiatives.
- Your organization is geographically dispersed.
- Your organization utilizes modern technology to create virtual work environments.
- Collaboration at your organization is supported by technology, processes, and management.
- Your organization depends on a shared central repository or knowledge management system for employees.
In almost all cases, there is a lack of awareness of the negative impact inconsistency has on employee productivity, time management, and cost containment. Therefore, the first place to start when addressing this barrier is to assess the impact. This is easily done by using a simple model called the urgent, shared, and expensive (USE) model created by Infinity Consulting and Training Solutions.

Ask employees to identify policies, procedures, or processes that lead to problems that are urgent, widely shared, and expensive when left unresolved. Once a list of USE problems is created, determine the root cause. A great technique for assessing root cause analysis is the “five ‘whys’” method—drilling down by asking “why” in an iterative fashion. Inevitably, inconsistent application of policies, procedures, or processes will be diagnosed as the true root of the problem.

From there, agency leaders can take steps to make the changes necessary to eliminate inconsistencies and increase efficiency. In many cases, these changes will result in a need for some degree of training. In a distributed work environment, it is vital that all angles be considered to minimize the negative impact of unintended consequences potentially causing new challenges.