

Four Ways Skills Inventory Management Tactics Help Organizations Replenish Lost Skills

According to the 2002 President's Management Agenda the federal government reduced its workforce by 324,580 full-time employees between 1993 and 2001. But while the government had shrunk, it had done so through highly inefficient means: hiring freezes and across-the-board staff cuts (frequently at the service-delivery level of employment).

Government has since grown, but the legacy of ineffective downsizing remains. Agencies frequently find themselves with more management-level employees and fewer people actually providing service. The average age of a government employee is 46, up from 42 in 1990. According to the report, "Approximately 71 percent of the government's permanent employees will be eligible for regular or early retirement by 2010." The result: an older workforce, more layers of management, and less service-delivery accountability. How can decision-makers increase their organizations' abilities to deliver improved service? Skills inventory management provides a key strategic foundation for achieving results.

Skills inventory management involves the use of objective metrics to measure employee skills and apply them to meet specific organizational goals. Organizations are increasingly relying on online assessment systems to arrive at those metrics. Below are four skills inventory management tactics that are helping companies and agencies develop new skills, or replenish lost skills needed to enable better service delivery.

1. Identify the Skills Needed for Success

For the agency that faces a new project or initiative, the ability to identify necessary skills is crucial. An online skills measurement system gives each participating employee and manager access to a defined set of skills assessments. This way, everyone is "on the same page" regarding skills being managed, and everyone has the resources to track their abilities in those skills. A recent advancement in skills measurement involves identifying skill sets needed for particular job roles. Employees then assess skills with an eye toward verifying job role readiness. The result is a skills system that relates individual skills directly to a larger picture of job requirements.

2. Ensure that New Recruits Have Specific Required Skills

Skills measurement can have dramatic impact on the recruiting process. First by requiring specific skills assessments, agencies can provide candidates with clearly defined skills requirements relating to the job being filled. Particularly when recruiting candidates with little government experience (for example, reaching out to private-sector IT workers), the ability to clearly define skills requirements enables agencies to attract professionals who might otherwise not apply.

In addition to helping define job roles, a skills measurement system provides a highly effective tool for prescreening applicants. In effect, assessments enable applicants to "self-screen" through online skills assessment, dramatically reducing the filtering burden that traditionally lengthens the federal hiring cycle. Using online skills measurement in a pilot program, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) achieved dramatic results, in some cases shortening the cycle from months to weeks in filling selected openings.

3. Give Employees the Ability to Develop and Improve Skills for Changing Needs

Adaptability is essential to organizational function in the face of constantly changing human capital needs. Do employees know how their skills stack up in a particular new technology, process or job role? Peer or supervisor reviews have become a traditional barometer of skill levels for government employees, however the timing of these reviews doesn't always coincide with organizational needs.

An online skills measurement program does more than give employees the tools to track vital skill levels. It also gives them the tools to build a path for improvement. Assessment scores can serve as concrete milestones for improving existing skills or acquiring new skills. Employees can set milestones for themselves, and take assessments to improve skills at their own pace—usually faster than the pace set through corporate training and review programs.

To be effective, however, a measurement system must provide detailed objective scores. In addition, tests must be repeatable, so that employees can track improvement over time. Finally, the system must support continuous learning—referring users to high-scoring mentors, recommended reading, training, or other learning resources.

4. Speed Up the Process of Skills Assessment, Feedback, and Deployment

For government and private sector businesses alike, speed is essential to efficient operation. One of the most significant challenges to effective skills management is in the pace of internal processes and communication.

A federal job candidate may take a skills test for a particular opening, for example, but the agency may take months to respond. By that time, the candidate has often found employment elsewhere. This is part of the reason OPM began looking into online job fairs to speed up the hiring process and to be more responsive to citizens. The results have been positive, and following up on the OPM fair, the Department of State is now applying online skills measurement to make its recruiting efforts faster and more competitive.

In addition to recruiting advantages, fast reporting also provides benefits to current employees. For example, rather than waiting for results from a formal training-related skills assessment, an employee can receive instant feedback through an online system. The result: immediate feedback maintains learning momentum and facilitates self-improvement for employees across the organization.