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WHAT DOES YOUR RESEARCH FOCUS ON?

Project teams. A project is temporary – it's supposed to end eventually – however, it takes a long time. It's not short in duration, but it's temporary in nature as opposed to an ongoing team which is, from the perspective of an organization, always going to be there.

A project team has to learn of the project as the project is unfolding, what to do and how to do it, as opposed to regular work, which is usually people's training that is already figured out. It's a different form of complexity.

Because they're temporary in nature, they might pool different kinds of people. In health care situations, the project might include administrative assistants or receptionists, but those people would typically not be involved in delivering health care per se. Also, people will often have to perform that work over and above their regular work.

HOW DO PROJECT TEAMS VARY ACROSS INDUSTRIES?

There are different kinds of temporariness. A plane crew, for example, is a temporary project team. They have a pilot and co-pilot, assemble flight attendants and they become a team for the duration of the flight.

In industry, where service work is the main bread and butter, the roles people play fit more naturally with how they were trained. A programmer will most likely work on different projects at the same time, creating code. The project manager manages the project. These people have a better understanding of the temporary nature of the projects. In these situations, the roles are most likely predefined.

WHAT DRIVES TEAM PERFORMANCE?

Industries all work in different contexts and they require different types of tasks. Somebody in (car sales) might need to be able to explain that cars are more technology-driven. They need to explain the impact of the technology on the cars to the potential buyer. Somebody in tech might require a lot of focus on very small details, like coding, for example, (and is) constantly focusing on small details that have a big impact to the team.

In programming, there's a lot about agile program management. One of the tools they use is to have frequent and short routings that focus on what did you do since the last meeting, what are you going to do in terms of the next meeting, and how does this fit in with the others. This comes back to talking about new processes. They have those meetings frequently, once a week, maybe once a day. They call those scrums. They're short, so people don't linger in meetings that never end. The technique helps a lot in terms of troubleshooting issues with the work they're doing as a team.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE TEAM PERFORMANCE?

There are instruments; I have developed one and there are many others that measure team processes. People can develop their own key collaborative behaviours questionnaire or interview and benchmark the data that they use.

You can't fix something you don't measure. You have to measure activities and behaviours. People focus on personalities and feelings. You can measure those, but usually people don't measure them very well. I'm trained in psychology, I have a PhD in psychology and I don't read minds. So I don't see how other people could.

(You need to ask), "Do people exchange information at the right time? Do people explicitly say what they're going to do? Do we tend to anticipate what other people are doing? And are they doing it in time and on time?" These are not feelings; they are events, they are behaviour.

HOW DO YOU IMPROVE TEAM PERFORMANCE?

You have to start from people's training. If it happens naturally in a project kind of way, like engineers or construction workers, that's what they bring to their teamwork. The problem occurs when the kind of work shifts. For example, people who used to work in projects who have to do staffing, staffing occurs regularly on an ongoing basis. But if they treat it as a project, it doesn't go as well.

One of the key things we know from research is that teams that discuss how they work do better.

Another way (to improve) is to make it clear to everybody that everybody should know what everybody else is doing and why. And if you happen to not be able to do what you're supposed to, how do you inform others proactively as opposed to not discussing it and have it be a problem.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

FOR MANAGERS AND HR PROFESSIONALS

HENRY AKANKO

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Managing a Diverse Workforce

Q: What are the challenges of managing a culturally diverse workplace?

Ottawa's population and labour force is becoming increasingly diverse, with 23% of the population born in a country other than Canada. This presents an opportunity to local businesses and organizations to leverage the talents of a culturally diverse workforce as a competitive edge for innovation and service excellence.

For most organizations, the challenges of managing diversity fall into two broad areas. The first is in recruitment and hiring. Organizations need to develop and maintain HR policies and practices that don't unintentionally and unnecessarily exclude culturally diverse job seekers. The second broad challenge is with integration into the workplace, and by this I mean being able to create an inclusive workplace that can really leverage the tremendous advantages diverse talent has to offer. In both of these areas, developing cross-cultural competencies is the key.

Q: Why is Cross Cultural Competency important in the workplace?

Workplace cultural competency is the key to managing diverse and inclusive workplaces. The ability to effectively communicate, understand, interact and lead people across cultures is an essential skill in any workplace today. To get the best out of diverse teams and beat the competition, employers, HR professionals, people managers and small business owners should enhance their cultural competency skills. The benefits are varied, including enhanced decision making, innovation, increased productivity, improved interactions and communications with staff, vendors, partners and customers, and improved access to a wide and diverse talent pool.

Q: Where can businesses and organizations get help?

Hire Immigrants Ottawa provides free employment supports to businesses and organizations who want to create inclusive workplaces. These include cross cultural competency training workshops, HR tools and resources, labour market factsheets to build your "business case" and plan diversity initiatives, and events that connect employers to global talent.

Visit www.hireimmigrantsottawa.ca to register for an event or access resources.

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