

Strategic Staffing/ Workforce Planning at 30,000 Feet

Striking a Balance Between Consistency and Flexibility

In Chapter 3 I clearly defined two approaches to workforce planning: a traditional approach that is typically applied in a consistent way across an organization, and a more tailored approach that is applied only as needed to address critical staffing issues.

When I first developed the targeted approach, I saw it as a complete alternative to the organization-wide approach. I saw little commonality between the two, and I tried to build a case that the more focused, targeted approach was the only methodology that would yield effective results.

Some of the organizations I worked with struggled to define an appropriate level of consistency when developing and implementing a focused approach to workforce planning. They realized that a common process that was implemented identically throughout the organization just would not work, especially when it was driven to the level of detail needed to define specific staffing plans and actions. Further, they realized that managers often resist these one-size-fits-all processes because they are not all that helpful—especially since with these approaches, planning parameters cannot be tailored to what those managers perceive to be their own unique situations. On the other hand, the focused, issue-oriented approach does not necessarily provide the desired consistency in process. While focusing on critical staffing issues is indeed a very effective approach, it is selective in nature and might leave large components of the organization untouched by workforce planning. Furthermore, allowing managers to develop and implement their own approaches to workforce planning would make it nearly impossible to create the consistent, organization-wide workforce plans that many HR professionals desire.

The answer to this apparent dilemma is what I call “workforce plan-

ning at 30,000 feet.” With this approach, companies mandate common workforce planning processes and parameters up to a point (i.e., that 30,000-foot level), but allow managers flexibility in how they develop, implement, and apply workforce planning below that level. This hybrid approach ensures that workforce plans are developed in a consistent way across the organization, yet allows managers to tailor the process so that the workforce plans they create address what they perceive to be their most critical staffing needs.

The “Common” Part

With workforce planning at 30,000 feet, some, but not all, of the components of the workforce planning process should be common among all units and applied consistently across the organization. Here are some examples of what should be consistent above that 30,000-foot level:

- **Develop a consistent definition and set of objectives for workforce planning.** Define from an overall perspective what the workforce planning process is and what it should accomplish, but don’t define the process to the *n*th level of detail or specify exactly how it must be implemented. As described in Chapter 2, I define workforce planning as the process an organization uses to both identify and address the staffing implications of its business strategies and plans. The objectives or “deliverables” of the process should be both long-term staffing strategies (that span planning periods) and short-term staffing plans (for each planning period).

- **Clearly define and communicate that workforce planning is a management accountability.** Make sure all managers understand that as part of the normal business planning process (however it has been defined by the organization), they are expected to identify and address the staffing implications of their business strategies and plans. This should be done from both strategic and short-term perspectives. Of course, HR staff will need to make sure that managers have the skills needed to do this type of staffing analysis in addition to understanding that they need to do it in the first place.

- **Mandate output and results, not process.** Hold managers accountable for identifying and addressing their most critical staffing issues, but don’t force them to use a particular one-size-fits-all process to do that. Instead, make sure that they develop the staffing strategies and plans that best address their most critical staffing issues, using whatever process they find most effective. If managers can create (or are already using) processes that result in effective staffing strategies and plans (processes that are different from the one developed corporately), let them continue to use those processes.

- **Clearly show what you think the workforce planning process should look like.** While you should not force managers to use a particular approach to workforce planning, it is usually a good idea to provide them with a realistic, well-defined option that they can implement if they choose (e.g., if no other process is available). This suggested process should include alternatives for each step of the workforce planning process, enabling managers to identify critical staffing issues and develop the staffing strategies and plans that best address those issues. This will give managers a prototype or model to follow and will allow them to see at least one example of what an effective workforce planning process “looks like.”

- **Provide tools and support that are consistent with the approach you are suggesting.** Develop and distribute a wide variety of tools, templates, forms, and other resources that managers may use to support their workforce planning efforts—provided, of course, that they are doing it “your way.” Provide process outlines and diagrams, “helps” for identifying the critical staffing issues that are inherent in their business plans and strategies, examples of staffing strategies, spreadsheets that can be used to define staffing gaps and surpluses, completed examples of staffing plans, workbooks and resource guides, and easy access to workforce planning web sites. However, don’t require managers to use these resources. Instead, allow them to use whatever resources they find to be necessary or most helpful. Remember that the objective of the process is to develop the proper outputs (i.e., staffing strategies and plans), not simply to use the tools and complete the forms. Provide ongoing, tailored internal consulting help that directly supports the development and implementation of the workforce planning process.

- **Develop corporate staffing strategies only where absolutely necessary.** Strategic approaches to staffing are absolutely required for some staffing issues—but not all staffing issues. Create coordinated staffing strategies where needed, but don’t assume that there needs to be one coordinated, integrated “plan” that addresses all the staffing issues a company is facing. Think about how staffing resources will actually be managed, and create strategies that span units only when staff will actually be managed that way. As an example, create a corporatwide staffing strategy for project management talent only if that talent will actually be moved across business units on a regular basis. No corporate strategy is needed if project managers will most likely be managed within business units.

The “Tailored” Part

You should indeed mandate definitions, objectives, and outcomes, but at the detailed level, don’t try to implement a single approach to workforce

planning. Don't force consistency for consistency's sake. Instead, allow managers the flexibility that they need in order to develop and implement the staffing strategies and plans that they think address their most critical staffing issues most effectively, while following the mandates described earlier. Here are some examples of the flexibility that managers should be afforded below that 30,000-foot level:

- **Develop separate strategies where necessary.** As described so often throughout this text, develop staffing strategies on an issue-by-issue basis, focusing on those staffing issues that are most critical. Do not mandate that any detailed workforce planning process be created or implemented for an organization unit as a whole.

- **Allow managers to define what staffing issues are most critical.** Let managers identify the staffing issues that are most critical, and thus warrant the time and effort required to apply the workforce planning process. Don't force them to apply the process everywhere or to address staffing issues that can be addressed effectively through the normal course of business.

- **Let managers select the jobs to be included in the process.** Even when focusing on staffing issues, not all jobs are so critical that they should be included in a truly strategic workforce planning process. When done correctly, workforce planning usually requires a lot of time and effort. Allow managers to select those positions that require this high level of scrutiny and for which comprehensive workforce planning is warranted.

- **Allow managers to define critical planning parameters.** Different units will be facing staffing issues that have different rates of change and varying levels of detail. While mandating that a long-term view is required, don't define what the length of that view must be. For some units that are facing rapidly changing conditions (e.g., IT or any area where new technologies are constantly being implemented), "long term" might be 18 months; in other areas that are facing less change (e.g., issues related to executive succession and development), "long term" might be three to five years. Allow for this flexibility—don't force a common time frame across all units. Similarly, don't try to set one level of detail to be used by all units. In that IT area, for example, a small number of specific technical skills may adequately define staffing requirements, while a longer list of more generic management competencies might be appropriate at senior levels in another part of the organization. Note that the planning horizon is dictated by the nature of the issue being addressed. At no time should the planning horizon be defined to match that of the organization's strategic plan "just because" (unless, of course, that time frame is indeed appropriate for the staffing issue being addressed).

- **Engage managers in staffing strategy development.** Don't expect HR to be solely accountable for developing staffing strategies and plans across the organization. Instead, engage and involve managers in the process when staffing strategies and plans are developed. This allows for the development of solutions that are appropriate for each unit and increases the chances that managers will support and implement those solutions. When managers are allowed to determine where and how strategic staffing should be applied, they are more likely to be engaged; when they are provided with an array of tools and resources, they are more likely to become involved. This topic is discussed in more detail in Chapter 14.

- **Provide customized support.** Where feasible, work with individual managers to give them the specific support they need in order to implement workforce planning. Some may require help in identifying critical staffing issues, but no help at all in developing staffing strategies and plans for addressing those issues. Others will be able to identify the issues, but may need help in implementing workforce planning to address those issues. Still others might need assistance in the more quantitative aspects of workforce planning, such as calculating staffing gaps and surpluses. Whatever assistance is needed, keep the focus on addressing critical staffing issues, not on simply following a given process by rote.

An Example, Part 1

A health insurance company was implementing new IT platforms to support customer service efforts. In fact, the organization was moving from having five separate platforms to having two common ones. Clearly, this change would have a major impact on the numbers and types of IT staff that would be needed, and the company decided to use workforce planning as the tool to identify and address these staffing implications.

This health insurance company chose to implement the issue-oriented approach described in Chapter 4, but added an interesting twist. A specific workforce planning process was indeed developed and implemented to address the staffing issues raised by the platform change. Clearly, as a part of this effort, it was necessary for the company to develop workforce planning processes, tools, and other supporting materials. However, instead of developing these things to support only the initial IT project, the company made a conscious effort to develop all the things that would be necessary to implement the workforce planning process anywhere in the company at any time, on a repeatable basis. Each process and tool was developed to support the first IT application, but each was then generalized so that it could be used again, at different times and under different circumstances. In effect, the health insurance company was creating a ge-

neric workforce planning at 30,000 feet approach at the same time it was developing a targeted solution to a critical, specific set of staffing implications raised by the IT platform changes. Its version of workforce planning at 30,000 feet included:

- **Detailed process descriptions and documentation.** The workforce planning process that the company developed was “translated” into traditional process documentation that described each step, each decision, and each alternative outcome. In fact, several levels of documentation, with greater and greater levels of detail, were created. As described earlier, the process that was documented applied specifically to the IT project, but it was also applicable to any workforce planning opportunity that might arise anywhere in the organization at any point in the future.

- **Process instructions.** Specific instructions for developing and implementing the workforce planning process were developed. These instructions described what was necessary to complete each and every step of the process. Specific examples and “helps” were developed to support each process step.

- **Spreadsheet templates.** The core of any workforce planning process includes a methodology for calculating staffing gaps and surpluses. For this implementation, this capability was delivered through a series of spreadsheet templates that could be customized to support a wide variety of staffing issues and organization units. As an example, for the IT project, specific row and column headings were chosen; for the generic version, reusable row and column headings were used (e.g., Row 1, Row 2, Col 1, Col 2). In addition to the templates themselves, the organization created a set of instructions that detailed what needed to be done to customize and use the spreadsheet templates to address any staffing issue.

- **Suggested roles and responsibilities.** Suggested roles to be played by line managers, HR staff, and workforce planning professionals were defined for each step of the process. The skills needed to play those roles were also defined. Where possible, direct links were drawn between these skills and the training and development that was already being offered.

- **Frequently asked questions.** As the workforce planning process was being developed, the project team kept track of the questions that users asked most frequently. Answers to these questions were formulated and made available to all users.

- **Examples and supporting materials.** The project team provided examples of staffing issues, sample staffing plans, examples of completed spreadsheets, suggestions regarding how required skills and staffing levels might be determined, interview guides that HR staff could use to

gather data from managers, and a host of other tools to help users to better understand and implement the workforce planning process.

- **A workforce planning web site.** Creating all the necessary workforce planning tools and resources is the first challenge; making all that material available to large numbers of managers in a huge organization is the second. As the various tools and resources just described were created, they were posted to an internal web site that could be accessed by any manager or HR professional. The site was designed in layers. Users could access the various materials (such as process documentation) at an appropriate level. If additional understanding or information (e.g., more detailed descriptions of various process steps) was required, users needed only to click on the item to access the detail that was required. A more detailed description of this type of web site is included in Chapter 15.

Clearly, this HMO defined what it thought belonged above the 30,000-foot level and provided a wide array of assistance to managers to help them develop and implement workforce planning processes. Yet it also allowed managers the latitude to apply those processes to address those staffing issues that they thought were most critical—a true example of workforce planning at 30,000 feet.

An Example: Part 2

As the generic, focused approach to workforce planning was being rolled out, several senior managers still thought that some form of the process should be implemented for all positions, not just critical staffing issues. These managers felt that this type of process was needed, if only to help managers plan for and justify budgeted staff headcounts. Some approach to doing this had to be developed that would not have a negative impact on the issue-focused approach to workforce planning that had already been developed.

A good compromise approach was created and implemented. A form of workforce planning would be implemented for all positions, but the focus and objectives of that process would differ significantly from those of a more traditional approach to workforce planning. Instead of being used to define specific staffing actions, this more general process would simply require managers to identify planned staffing requirements and headcount changes at a “macro” (e.g., organization unit) level and come to one of two conclusions:

- Those headcount changes could be implemented fully by relying solely on “normal,” readily available HR processes (e.g., the recruit-

ing and development practices that were available on an ongoing basis).

- The changes were more significant, and so the focused approach to workforce planning (described earlier) should be applied to create tailored, more strategic solutions (e.g., staffing strategies and staffing plans). These solutions might involve normal HR practices, specifically developed staffing strategies and plans, or some combination of the two.

Once each manager had defined the required headcount changes and determined whether normal HR practices or the more focused workforce planning methodology was required, the results were “rolled up” to the next level. The manager at that next level would review the work of the subordinate, approve headcount changes, and verify which approach to workforce planning would be required. If the manager had questions (or did not agree with the subordinate’s conclusions), then the work was passed back to the originator and a consensus reached.

Again, this approach proved to be another good application of workforce planning at 30,000 feet. An organization-wide approach was in fact created, but this approach did not call for performing gap analyses and defining specific, required staffing actions; instead, it was used only to verify headcount changes (i.e., approve headcount requirements) and determine “next steps” regarding the need for a more detailed approach to workforce planning.

Conclusion: Strike the Right Balance

When implementing workforce planning, you need to strike the right balance between “common” and “tailored.” By following these guidelines, an organization will develop workforce plans that are adequately consistent across units. Yet by allowing for tailoring—and thus ensuring that the value of managers’ time and effort is maximized—companies will produce workforce plans that are effective and realistic. They will also engage managers directly in the process, instead of dragging them along kicking and screaming!

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