

Workplace trends: How will they affect you?

Your success or failure as a manager depends on these five important factors

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Five major workplace trends are affecting the hydrocarbon processing industry (HPI). Successful managers will recognize these trends, understand how they affect their businesses and take the necessary steps to meet the challenges presented. Major trends that consultants have observed in the past three to five years are shown in the table. These trends will affect how well managers and businesses perform in the last half of the '90s and well into the 21st century.

Because costs and competition are the two driving forces of change in industry, they are also the driving forces behind these five major trends. As managers analyze these trends and assess their impact on how they do business, it is important to keep in mind that costs and competition are driving these trends.

FIVE MAJOR WORKPLACE TRENDS

Longer work hours. The average work week has lengthened since the mid-1970s. Two decades ago the question was, "What will workers do with all their leisure time?" Now, the question is, "What leisure time?" *The Wall Street Journal* reported in May 1994 that the average work week had reached a post-World War II high of 41.7 hours per week. Also, with technology and the "virtual office" concept,

it is almost impossible to get away from work. However, on the positive side, this trend is leading to productivity improvements in many industries. Recently, the American Productivity Institute has reported

possible with work schedules.

"Flex-time" is a positive way of dealing with longer work hours for professionals in the HPI. By allowing engineers or other professionals to exercise control over their work schedules, employees feel more ownership and are usually willing to continue putting in longer hours. Another positive step is to monitor productivity, safety, quality and attendance, and tie rewards to success in these critical areas.

Major workplace trends in the '90s

1. Longer working hours
2. More complex work
3. Increased intensity
4. Rapid change
5. Less loyalty

significant increases in manufacturing productivity in America.¹ With productivity results improving, why should managers be concerned with a trend of longer work hours?

In August 1995, *USA Today* reported an increase of 14% in worker absenteeism as compared to the previous three years. Longer work hours can also lead to increased employee stress levels and increased family pressures. Longer work hours, if not managed properly, can also lead to quality and safety concerns. What should the manager consider? First, take the time to listen to employees and work with them to reduce external pressures caused by work schedules. Second, be aware of potential problem areas and be as flexible as

More complex work. None of us in the HPI will deny that technology has changed the way we work. From sophisticated process control systems to online process management to personal digital devices, it is obvious that work processes are more complex than ever before. This trend has also had a "stress increasing" effect on workers. Think about how much more product one employee can "mess

up" today, as compared to a few years ago. Also, with the "just-in-time" manufacturing strategies being used, any system breakdowns can have far-reaching effects on customers and ultimately on success. So, what is the answer?

Effective, "just-in-time" needs-based training is critical to beating competition and to helping employees adjust to a more complex work world. How can we accomplish this? Determine the training requirements for each position in your business and provide this needs-based and relevant training as employees need it. With the other trends in the workplace today, the concepts of "mass training" and "train the trainer" are out. These approaches worked well in the '80s,

but not as well for today's leaner organizations and complex processes.

Usually, effective training for complex work is provided in a short-term, customized program that is presented by professionals. Another step is for the manager to take an active role in reviewing each employee and working with him or her to identify how work processes could be simplified. Remember, complexity is not necessarily a given. Certain jobs can be simplified by using the tools of continuous improvement (See "A common sense approach to quality management," April 1993). A byproduct of such an effort may be to pin point specific training an employee needs and to schedule him or her to attend the training. Be sure to document these reviews as a part of your ISO efforts.

Do not forget the basics. (See "Become a low-cost, high-quality producer," September 1995). With today's more complex work processes, it is sometimes easy to overlook fundamentals. Take care of the basics: provide credible and effective leadership, focus on people, serve customers, define the work to be done, establish a

quality system that works, practice continuous improvement, eliminate waste, develop resources, measure results and use technology effectively.

Increased intensity. Organizations have become "lean and mean," causing a higher level of intensity and even fear in the workplace. One of quality expert, Dr. W. Edwards Deming's "fourteen points" is to drive out fear. Many employees feel the intense demands of schedules, customers and other employees, while fearing for long-term security. This increased intensity is fueled by frustration and confusion. Often employees do not have a clear understanding of expectations or of how to deal with the other four major workplace trends. The speed of communications combined with managers' and customers' higher expectations have helped to create the feeling of an "intense workplace."

In conversations with managers in different industries, few mid-level managers feel that work is as much fun or as meaningful as it was a few years ago. Another concern is that if they do not "keep-up" or become more aggressive they will be left out. The "lean and mean" terminology has been confused with how people are treated as opposed to organizational structure. The president of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers has commented, "They have become mean and we have become lean."² That may be a little extreme, but it is too important to be overlooked.

What should the successful manager do? First, be sure that all expectations for employees have been identified and communicated to each. Next, take the time to let employees know they are important by listening to their concerns. Finally, make every effort to provide positive feedback to employees. Sure, speed is important and work continues to be intense, but some of the fears and stress can be alleviated with this simple approach.

Rapid change. History shows that with the approach of a new century or millennium, the rate of change accelerates significantly. Some of us in the HPI can relate to the rapid rate of changes over the past few years. With advancements in technology, we can expect this rate to increase over the next five years. Meeting the cost, speed and competitive pressures of tomorrow requires changes in work processes and methods. Change is "scary," but constant in the lives of employees. How should managers deal with this trend? To effectively manage the change process requires that we prepare for change, implement change and "lock-in" change. This can only be done when there is a high level of trust throughout the organization combined with employee involvement and effective communications. (For more information on managing the change process, see "How to effectively manage change," January 1996). Change can be good or bad for an organization.

Manage it as you would any other process. Be careful that rapid change does not disrupt productivity and morale in your organization.

Less loyalty. "Layoffs affecting 2,800 people, 500 jobs to be lost, etc.," are the headlines of the past few years. While some organizations in the HPI are beginning to grow again, others are still dealing with staffing reductions. Two buzzwords that people are tired of hearing are "downsizing and rightsizing." It is not over yet. These issues have caused less loyalty

between employees and their companies. Remember, loyalty works both ways—employee to company and vice versa. The average worker will have seven or eight jobs in a career as compared to three or less only a decade ago. What should the manager do? Successful managers will work diligently to build trust and loyalty. Even if you have not been involved in a lay-off, employees in your organization may be uneasy. Good communications—especially from the executive suite—is essential for reducing this uneasiness. Be sure that you are honest in daily dealings with every employee. Integrity is the major ingredient in building increased loyalty in the work force.

Dealing with these trends is important to your success as a manager. You can only be as successful as the people in your organization. Any steps you take to help them be more successful serves to make your job easier. These trends are not going away in the next few years, but will continue to affect the HPI. Successful organizations develop strategies to deal with them. One of the most effective strategies is to follow these seven timeless leadership principles:³ 1) lead with integrity; 2) accept responsibility; 3) establish goals/implement plans; 4) respect individuals and families; 5) continue to learn; 6) expect results; and 7) be sincere.

LITERATURE CITED

- ¹ Simon & Schuster, *Making It In America*, 1995.
- ² They have become mean and we have become lean, *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 14, 1995.
- ³ Woodruff, D. M., "Become an effective leader," *HYDRO-CARBON PROCESSING* magazine, January 1995.