

Taking the helicopter view

When the time comes for serious career planning you will need to know about the area of employment you want to work in. PHILIP SCHOFIELD introduces a new way of understanding how organisations function

When you enter a career, whatever it might be, you are likely to specialise in a particular type of work. This may be anything from marketing, graphic design, engineering, research and development, finance and sales to manufacturing. And you will probably work in a self-contained department with people doing similar kind of work.

Functional silos

At first you are not likely to be concerned with what happens in other departments. But today employers increasingly recognise that keeping their people in "functional silos" is inefficient and can lead to problems. Imagine, for example, a sales function in a manufacturing company that increases sales on its own initiative, not knowing that production is already at full capacity; or a retail fashion buyer ordering extra stock when the warehouse is already full; or an IT manager aiming to computerise the firm's accounts without consulting the managers in the affected departments. The result would be chaos.

The reality is that all departments are interdependent, and any action taken in one can affect the others. Just as the people in a department should work together as a team, so the departments similarly need to work as a team.

Departmental managers

In the past managers would co-ordinate the work of the different functions. Each department would



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have its own manager. And each departmental manager would report to a more senior manager who could see what was going in the organisation as a whole and so could co-ordinate all the different activities. That senior manager could also introduce any changes that needed to be made and resolve any conflicts that arose. The level of seniority that can take this overall view is known as "general management".

The helicopter view

Today this ability to see an organisation as a whole, and to understand how the various functions

'All departments are interdependent'

interact, is often referred to as taking the helicopter view. However this is no longer restricted to "general management".

In recent years organisations have reduced the number of layers of

management in their structures. Firstly this increased efficiency. The more levels of management there are, the longer it takes for information and decisions to get from the top to the bottom. Cutting out layers of management made for faster internal communication. But in a time of growing global competition it also saved a lot of money in management wages and the cost of their offices.

The result has been that there are fewer managers to co-ordinate all the activities of each function. So the people working in their specialist departments are now expected to be much better aware of how their activities affect everybody else. Nor is this just a matter of increased efficiency. People doing a specific job, particularly if it is relatively routine and mundane, can easily forget that if they make a simple mistake the consequences may be disastrous. Think of the space mission that failed catastrophically just because someone keyed a minus sign into its

on-board computer programme instead of a plus.

At one time organisations would accept that a small proportion of errors was acceptable and employed a team of people in "quality control" who looked for these and made sure that they didn't get passed on to the buyer. Of course not even quality control was infallible and some faulty products did reach customers. And faulty products or services damage the reputation of those who supply them. Japanese car makers were among the first major employers to see this, and refused to accept that any errors should be acceptable. The result was that Japanese cars quickly earned an excellent reputation for reliability.

Space programme

The US space programme – in which a launcher and satellite could have more than one million individual parts – also meant that there had to be a zero tolerance of errors.

It was recognised that rigorous quality control alone could never achieve this huge improvement in quality. It had to be the workers who took responsibility for the quality of their own work. This led to another benefit. Having been given the responsibility to check their own work, and understanding how their work fitted into the overall operation, employees felt more trusted by their employers and so were better motivated.

Clearly anyone who has management ambitions today, even at supervisory level, should be able to see the job they do in the context of their employer's overall business and so develop this helicopter view. How do you do this?

Widening your viewpoint

When you apply for a job do some research. Job advertisements rarely give you enough information to see the context of what you will be doing. Explore the advertiser's website; almost all employers now have one. If they have a recruitment brochure, read it thoroughly. If the employer is a fairly large one you may well find that they have taken an entry in one of the careers directories that you should find in your careers library. This research will have the added benefit



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of making it easier for you to target your application more precisely.

Many employers advertising a job send a job description with the application form. This is very useful. If the employer does not offer a job description then ask for one. This will not only tell you more about the job, and so improve your chances at interview, but also demonstrates your level of interest in the vacancy.

Soon after you join an employer you are likely to undertake "induction training". This should introduce you to the business and what it does, but also tell you about your job, introduce

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you to your colleagues (including your immediate managers), let you know what is expected of you in your work, and so on. During induction you will normally have plenty of opportunity to ask questions. Do not waste this opportunity.

As you settle into your job keep your

ears and eyes open. If you hear or see things you don't understand, ask about them. When you meet colleagues from other departments, ask them about their work. And if you are given the chance to help out in another department - learn as much as you can about it while you work there.

Critical factors

What you are doing is assembling a jig-saw of information. Remember though, it is not just understanding what people do that is important – it is also why. Why are jobs done in one particular way rather than in another? Why are some factors critical so that one type of mistake is of relatively trivial importance while another could lose your employer a major customer and cost millions of pounds?

Never forget that there are very few jobs that are an end in themselves. Whatever you do, it will be part of a team effort. Only if the individual parts that make up that team work together, and effectively, will your personal contribution have any real value.