The Application of Job Rotation in End User Computing: Toward a Model for Research and Practice

Jo Ellen Moore
Indiana University

This paper applies the management literature on job rotation to current issues in end user computing (EUC). Perceived benefits of job rotation include: transfer of knowledge across organizational functions; reduced conflict across departments; organizational integration; creation of a climate conducive to innovation; and, challenging and maturing opportunities for employees. Job rotation between end user areas and EUC support staff is therefore proposed to yield the following benefits: increased knowledge and skill sets for end users and end user computing support; reduced communication gap between IS and users; improved organizational integration of end user computing; effective utilization of end user computing; and, more flexible staffing and career paths for end user computing support personnel. The resulting model for the implementation of job rotation between end user areas and EUC support staff includes five critical success factors. In addition to providing a foundation for research in this area, the model provides guidance for organizations seeking to implement such rotations.

End user computing refers to the development of computer applications by the people who have direct need for them (Brancheau & Brown, 1993). Such development of applications by end users is common in most organizations and can generate a number of management issues. Indeed, the major problems in end user computing (EUC) today tend to be of a managerial nature (e.g., ensuring the appropriate application of technology to business needs, and the training of end user support personnel) rather than of a technical nature. An examination of the management literature reveals a human resource practice that has been shown to successfully address issues similar to those currently being faced in the EUC environment. Job rotation, a human resource mechanism that facilitates continuous learning in the workplace, is a method that can help to address major issues in end user computing and, as a result, help to increase the value of end user computing in an organization.

This paper begins with an overview of job rotation and its benefits, then relates those benefits to major issues that currently exist in end user computing. Job rotation between EUC support staffs and end user areas is proposed as a way to achieve several EUC benefits. Problems associated with the implementation of job rotations are used to identify critical success factors for this type of rotation. The resulting model provides a basis for future research and guidance for organizations seeking to implement such rotations.

Job Rotation and Its Benefits

Job rotation is the lateral movement of employees from job to job within an organization (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994). In contrast to job promotion, job rotation refers to a temporary change in job assignment, usually indicated by a change in department or title, and does not include an upward movement within an organizational hierarchy or an increase in compensation grade level or status.
Job rotation has been used as an antidote to boredom and fatigue in repetitive production jobs (e.g., Miller, Dhaliwal, & Magas, 1973); as an orientation and/or placement mechanism for new professional employees (e.g., Wexley & Latham, 1981); and, as a training and development tool for employees throughout their careers (Campion et al., 1994). It is this latter role of job rotation that is considered in regard to end user computing issues.

As an employee development technique, job rotation provides many benefits to the organization and to the rotating employee. In a recent study of the outcomes associated with job rotation, Campion and his colleagues (1994) collected perceptual data from questionnaires completed by 255 employees of a large pharmaceutical company. From this data, they generated the following categories of job rotation benefits: organizational benefits related to increasing networks of contacts and transferring company culture; employee career benefits; stimulating work benefits; and, awareness benefits related to gaining insight into strengths, personal values, and management styles. Specifically, employees who had participated in rotation in this organization perceived a personal improvement in: business skills related to knowledge of other functions, business issues, and how the company operated; technical skills related to the functional area and its procedures; and, administrative skills related to planning, communication, and leadership.

Two other benefits of job rotation are often cited, though empirical evidence has not been provided. Job rotation is believed to reduce conflict across departments by facilitating an exchange of members. Neilsen (1972) identified the “exchange of members” as a method of resolving conflict between groups. Neilsen contends that exchanging members for a sufficient length of time allows them to become familiar with how the other group operates and the kinds of problems it faces on a day-to-day basis. When the exchanged individuals return to their own groups they are in a position to communicate the other group’s viewpoints to their cohorts. Neilsen notes that this tactic has been used by firms to prevent or reduce conflict between members of different functional departments, and that this sort of exchange can clear up important misconceptions and ultimately result in permanent attitude change so that the sources of conflict cease to exist.

Another benefit cited, but not yet empirically supported, is increased innovation. McCaffrey (1981) suggests that the use of lateral transfers such as job rotations can create a climate conducive to innovation, because the rotation participants can bring fresh ideas and new perspectives into work areas.

These supported and suggested benefits of job rotation can be summarized as: (1) transfer of knowledge across organizational functions; (2) reduced conflict across departments; (3) organizational integration; (4) creation of climate conducive to innovation; and (5) challenging and maturing opportunities for employees.

Figure 1: Application of Job Rotation Benefits to EUC Issues