

Flexible workers vital to success

By Abe Feinberg

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Operations management is critical for any business. The objectives of operations management are quality, efficiency, speed and innovation.

Simultaneous pursuit of these objectives is challenging, but is necessary for success. There are tangible methods to gauge the progress made toward fulfillment of these goals.

Consider customer satisfaction as a measure for quality; cost per unit produced or per customer served as a measure for efficiency; response time as a measure for speed; and percent of revenue from new products or services as a measure for innovation.

To pursue all of these, one must look at performing operations smarter. One way of doing this is by building and maintaining a flexible work force.

This flexibility can be accomplished by cross-training so each worker can perform several tasks and each task can be performed by any one of several workers.

A fringe benefit of cross training is that it allows

new eyes to look at existing processes so that innovation is stimulated.

In an extreme case I observed, a company operating 24/7 had only one employee who could find maintenance parts in a large warehouse. If equipment failed at night, this individual had to be called in with a resulting delay in obtaining the needed parts and resuming operations.

Southwest Airlines is a successful organization in a difficult business.

Southwest has flexible workers committed to rapid turnaround at the gate. They accomplish this by performing necessary tasks. The rapid turnaround yields satisfied customers, low costs, and on-time performance. A fringe benefit of having cross-trained workers is improved job satisfaction so Southwest enjoys low employee turnover.

A new way of looking at cross-training and a flexible work force is that it uses knowledge sharing to improve operations. Encouraging knowledge sharing brings great benefits to a business and its management.

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