
HIGH ROAD TO WORK ORGANISATION

CASE STUDY

Project Job Swap



Lizzie Mærsk Nielsen and Thomas Hermann

Danish Technological Institute

April 2002

Abstract

This case has been included, because it shows how three major Danish enterprises - all with production groups - can share knowledge and experiences in practice.

The case shows how the employee groups benefit, and it offers practical ideas for carrying out of a job swap.

Table of Contents

Abstract	1
Table of Contents	i
Key Words	i
1. Background Information	1
2. Drivers for Change	1
3. Characteristics and Process of Change	2
4. Obstacles to Change	3
5. Risk Analysis	3
6. Benefits of Change	4
Conclusions	4

Key Words

Production groups, manufacturing enterprises, job swap, production employees, and middle managers

1. Background Information

The concept of 'Project Job Swap' has been developed by three enterprises in co-operation with Danish Technological Institute, Human Resources Development.

The three enterprises that participated in the project were Carlsberg A/S, Bang & Olufsen A/S, and Grundfos A/S. At all three enterprises, the production tasks are solved in production groups, development of the production groups is a part of the day-to-day routine, and the enterprises are interested in seeking new roads in connection with development of the production groups.

2. Drivers for Change

From the beginning, the fundamental idea of the project was that knowledge on production groups, their day-to-day function, and the development of them with advantage could be strengthened between supervisors and production workers in different enterprises that already work with this type of organisation. Usually, cross-functional development groups established between enterprises, research institutions and others are often aimed at project employees, personnel employees, and managers on the strategic levels.

As opposed to this, the ambition with this project on development of production groups through job swap has been to establish development co-operation through which the employees closest to the production groups, i.e. the production workers and their supervisors, could seek new knowledge and inspiration.

The working group

The idea for Project Job Swap was developed in a more traditional working group with participation of the supervisor of Carlsberg's bottlery in Copenhagen, a production manager from Grundfos, and a project employee/production manager from B&O. Furthermore, a consultant from Danish Technological Institute, Human Resources Development participated in the working group in a role as co-operation partner and practical project manager. The working group had for example the following themes on the agenda at their all-day meetings:

- Education and training of employees in connection with introduction of production groups
- New management roles and education and training of managers
- Do production groups never find a permanent form?
- Management of change processes
- The history of the organisation and its impact on new measures

During the entire project period, the work of the working group was focused on the specific obstacles and levers to the development of production groups. Since the three enterprises were different in relation to products, production technology, size, geographical location, and history and management culture, their way of working with production groups was very different, and there were good possibilities of learning from each other.

After about one year of co-operation, the working group decided to offer other employees the possibility of learning across the enterprises. In the beginning, the intention was to offer the possibility to the supervisors, who worked as support for the production groups on a day-to-day basis, and a number of production employees. The activities were described as 'Project Job Swap'.

3. Characteristics and Process of Change

The idea was that production employees and supervisors were to visit each other's enterprises in order to learn from each other. The visiting employees were to function as 'spies' for their own production group, while they were to act as 'ambassadors' when they received visits themselves.

Production employees as well as middle managers were charged with the task of looking into a number of specific questions and problems at the enterprises visited. The working group, which consisted of three managers from the enterprises, had formulated five questions for the production employees and six other questions for the middle managers that they would like the 'spies' to look into and answer at the enterprises visited.

The answering of the questions was to contribute to the clarification of how the individual enterprises had organised work in production groups. The questions were for example: "Describe the group's job tasks", "Where is the limit for participation?", and "How do you experience the group's co-operation with other employee groups?". Subsequently, the individual production groups and middle managers were to agree on the formulation of five questions, which they each wanted their 'spies' to find the answers for during the visit.

Since it was only a small group of employees who were to participate in the enterprise visits, the production employees' questions were formulated at planning meetings in the individual enterprises with participation by all production employees from the involved groups and the consultant from Danish Technological Institute, Human Resources Development. The employees formulated questions such as: "How are conflicts solved in the group?", "How do the employees experience information from management?", and "How are new employees received and trained?".

At the meetings, information was given on the exchange idea, and the role of the production employees as 'spies' was discussed. Moreover, another important purpose of the meetings was to prepare the groups for receiving guests from the other enterprises themselves.

Like the production employees, the middle managers, who, on a day-to-day basis, worked as support for the production groups, received a number of questions formulated by the working group. The middle managers were also to formulate questions that they wanted answered during their visit to the other enterprises.

Carrying out of Project Job Swap

A total of 13 production employees and 8 middle managers participated in the project.

The middle managers paid one-day visits to each of the two other enterprises, which meant that they subsequently had an impression of both enterprises. The production employees spent an entire week visiting each of the two other enterprises. The first four days were spent on the visit itself, while the fifth was spent reporting the experienced events in written and oral form. In order for as many production employees as possible to share the impressions from the other enterprises, the individual production employees only visited one enterprise.

The idea was that the production employees who functioned as 'spies' as far as possible were to participate in the daily work at the enterprise they visited, and that they, through the continuous dialogue with their 'colleagues' in the other enterprise, were to seek the answers to the questions formulated by the working group as well as by their own colleagues. Moreover, the 'spies' were subsequently to write an article to be published in their own enterprise's internal magazine in order to disseminate the experiences to as many colleagues as possible. This writing day took place at the employees' own enterprise.

Since there is a great geographical distance between the enterprises, it meant that the visiting employees in several cases stayed at hotels, and that the employees, to a high degree, had the opportunity of using the evenings to follow up and discuss the day's events. When returning home to their own enterprise, the visiting employees had the

task of informing the rest of their production group of the experiences they had obtained during the visit.

4. Obstacles to Change

For the three enterprises participating in Project Job Swap, the problem was that they wanted the development of the group organisation to proceed quicker. There was a clear recognition that it could neither happen through development of the employees' technical qualifications, nor could it happen through development of the more general qualifications. The employees needed to be inspired to come up with suggestions to improve the group organisation, but it was also necessary to involve the employees' personal qualifications in a way, which could contribute to development of the group-organised production.

The enterprise managers could have decided that the employees were to participate in a form of school-based learning, where the employees would be presented to different ideas as to how their group organisation could be improved. Instead, the managers chose that the employees were to learn through more informal learning processes at their own as well as at the other workplaces.

In other words, a job swap focuses especially on the more informal and workplace-based learning and on development of the employees' personal qualifications. There is a great learning potential in the carrying out of a job swap, since the informal learning opens up the prospect of learning processes that are not thought through, prepared, and structured. Thereby, completely new and unexpected ideas for development of group organisation can arise. Inspiration from another enterprise will perhaps, at first, 'merely' have the result that something seen at the other enterprise is copied. But inspiration can also lead to new thinking and development of new concepts for the group-organised production.

The use of the concept 'learning potential' in connection with Project Job Swap shows that the concept contains a wealth of learning possibilities, but inherent is also an understanding that ideas can come up for development of group organisation that will not be used in the enterprise. Production employees and supervisors who have not become inspired themselves by participating directly in the swap project can have a guarded attitude towards the new ideas, and the risk exists that the learning acquired by individual employees will not be transformed into learning in the enterprise as a whole. The more employees and supervisors who participate in visits to - or receive visits from - the other enterprises, the greater chance there is that the enterprises can benefit from the external inspiration.

Project Job Swap is a part of the NOVA project where focus was development of work organisation. Projects were partly financed by the European Social Fund, the European Union.

5. Risk Analysis

We assess that the only risk in connection with Project Job Swap is if the enterprises do not continue the co-operation and thereby do not make use of a learning asset.

During the project, the enterprises were enthusiastic at the thought of participating in something new, and, therefore, energy and time were spent on the swap project.

However, in spite of the great satisfaction with project and results, it has turned out that the enterprises have not continued the co-operation. Since the termination of the project, there has not been a group of consultants to keep the process proceeding and to see to a great deal of the practical work.

6. Benefits of Change

After all enterprise visits had been carried out, a conference was held with participation by the working group, middle managers, and production employees, who had participated in the visits, and consultants from Danish Technological Institute, Human Resources Development.

The conference had two purposes. Firstly, follow-up was needed in relation to the experiences from the visits, and, secondly, the whole concept of Project Job Swap was to be evaluated.

The reactions from both production employees and middle managers were very positive, and experience shows that, even though enterprises' production methods are very different, employees can learn a good deal from each other. In outline, the participants agreed that they were well prepared to be spies, and that they also had been well prepared for receiving employees from the other enterprises.

In their evaluation, the production employees focused on for example how the experiences of both the physical and the psychological working environment at the enterprises visited could inspire to changes in their own production groups. Their opinion was that they had acquired a good insight into the job tasks at the enterprises, and that they had had enough time to look into the questions posed by the working group and by their own production group.

It was also the middle managers' opinion that they had had great results of the enterprise visits. But in their evaluation, they emphasised that the one-day visits had been too short. From the beginning, the middle managers had specifically wanted that the visits did not last several days, because they thought that it was difficult to spare the time for it. Looking back, they believed that it was a mistake. While the production employees had had an experience of becoming integrated in the production groups - even though they only to a less extent had participated directly in the working processes - the middle managers had, to a far higher degree, 'merely' visited an enterprise.

At the conference, many ideas were exchange as to how Project Job Swap could be developed. From some of the participants, there was a wish to repeat the exchange of employees after a year, while others put more emphasis on a meeting between the employee groups of the enterprises so that the entire forum could follow up the development of the production groups.

Conclusions

The overall conclusion of the project is that the enterprises and their employees, in spite of great differences, experienced great results of the job swap.

The production employees were very inspired by seeing and experiencing both the physical and the psychological working environment.

The middle managers also benefited greatly, but focused on their opinion that the one-day enterprise visits had been too short.

However, the project has also shown that a job swap needs to be well organised and that it requires resources. Therefore, there is a risk that this learning possibility is not used.

Publication Details

Published by: Danish Technological Institute

Publication date: 2002

Journal:

URL:

Revised:

Notes:

© 2002 Danish Technological Institute All Rights Reserved