



EMPLOYEE CROSS-TRAINING



How small governments
can improve efficiency
and reduce their risk

BY MARK MACK

Finance offices in small governments face a unique challenge that isn't shared by many of their peers in mid-sized and large governments: limited personnel. Although most finance departments—large and small—wouldn't mind having an extra set of hands, few manage to cover as many functional areas with as few people as small governments do. And having a limited number of employees—sometimes only two or three—can mean that only one person in the entire organization knows how to complete a given task. So, what happens if that person becomes ill or wants to take a vacation? Often it means bringing a laptop to the beach to make sure payroll is run properly or coming back early from an illness. But what if there were another option that didn't involve hiring another person or adding FTEs?

Employee-cross training can provide a solution. Several small jurisdictions have managed to reduce the risk that comes from having only a single person in the organization capable of completing critical tasks by creating redundancies via cross-training, done informally in organizations of all types and sizes. Training employees to complete a task outside of their job descriptions may sound like simply adding extra work, but it's typically done to cover for emergencies and doesn't include the planning or forethought found in a formalized cross-training program.

The following case studies explore how two small governments used employee cross-training to strengthen overall organizational capacity, motivate their employees, and reduce risk.



Vallejo Flood and Wastewater District

Though the Vallejo Flood and Wastewater District does not have a formal cross-training program, Finance Supervisor Chas Fadriago has spent her time at the organization making sure that every employee in the Finance Department is cross-trained. When she was hired in her position, she came to find that employees were very task-focused: they focused on the “how” but not the “why” of their jobs. This created a disconnect among individual tasks and the mission of the organization as a whole. By holding weekly meetings with each employee, Fadriago was able to have in-depth conversations about job descriptions, expectations, and desires.

As Fadriago continued to learn more about her employees, their skills, and their responsibilities, she came to realize that there were holes in their knowledge and training. For example, the finance staff was never involved in the budget process. The cross-training had to begin at the most basic level, so employees were first exposed to audit and budget processes. Fadriago would have an employee perform a full function for a month or more with a trainer overseeing their progress. This approach eliminated much of the pressure on her small staff by making sure that no one person was solely responsible for the outcome of a new task. Little by little, the Finance Department was exposed to new skills, and staff learned how to function adequately in multiple positions. In the past three years, employees have experienced cross-training on some level every day.

Vallejo Flood and Wastewater District

POPULATION:

115,000

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

Total **90**

Finance **7**

Fadrigo did not stop with lower-level staff, either. She also created the Budget Education Accountability and Monitoring Program, a 12-month program to increase accountability for department managers and supervisors. As the employees who make some of the organization's most important decisions on a day-to-day basis, managers need to know the ins and outs of the budget process. Fadrigo holds quarterly meetings to walk through important updates and aspects of the budget. Her next step will be to train department heads in the financial system.

OUTCOMES

The cross-training initiative has been successful within the Finance Department and within the organization in general. Once employees have a better understanding of every position in the department, they are able to appreciate the bigger picture. Fadrigo was able to shift the “how” thinking to “why” thinking, in which employees ask themselves questions like, “Why is my individual task important to greater organizational success?” and “Why does what I do matter to my coworkers?” This shift in thinking brought forth greater appreciation within the department and contributed to improved communication and collaboration. The ability to switch tasks has also had unforeseen benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the department was only working in the office a few days out of the week, deadlines were still met and obligations were fulfilled.

CHALLENGES

Despite the overwhelming success of the cross-training program, Fadrigo did experience some pushback during the beginning stages of her initiative. To assess training gaps in the organization, she had to have detailed conversations with every employee about their job responsibilities and day-to-day tasks. These conversations could feel threatening to staff members who might think that they're being asked to take on more responsibilities without fair pay, or who may suspect that their job is in jeopardy. Regardless of how cross-training is perceived, Fadrigo believes it is important to make these conversations more about the position than about the individual. Always point back to the job description and emphasize that you want your employees to succeed, she said, as this may also help to alleviate some of the stress associated with taking on new responsibilities.

ADVICE FOR OTHER JURISDICTIONS

To other jurisdictions that hope to begin cross-training, Fadrigo recommends investing in your staff above all else. This includes meeting with them and developing a better understanding of what they contribute to the organization. If you are able to better understand their background, you can discover their strengths and weaknesses and use those to the benefit of the organization. Fadrigo believes that cross-training can show employees that you are committed to investing in your human assets. The returns, she said, are amazing.



The City of Cody, Wyoming

Cross-training is a common practice across the City of Cody, partly as a solution to limited revenue. The city is located in one of two counties in Wyoming that doesn't have a fifth penny sales tax (an optional one-cent sales tax on top of the state's four percent). Consequently, Cody has less revenue than most cities in the state. “We have had to be rather creative,” said Finance Officer Leslie Brumage. “We have cross-training in most departments and city-wide, so some people work in one department but are trained to assist in another one.”

Brumage offered a number of examples of cross-training across the city:

- The Parks Department eliminated one full-time vacancy and reduced seasonal temporary positions. Consequently, there was no one emptying trash cans in the parks. The city's utility meter reader filled in to collect trash at the parks as part of their normal rounds.
- The Department of Streets and Sanitation reduced temporary positions, so an engineer now runs

City of Cody, Wyoming

POPULATION:

9,828

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:

Total **110**

Finance **8**



“Some people say, ‘Do more with less.’ Our police chief says, **‘Do different with less.’**”

– LESLIE BRUMAGE, CITY OF CODY, WYOMING FINANCE OFFICER

the roller on site. “She didn’t have previous construction experience,” said Brumage. “It was just something she was willing to help with.”

- A customer service technician is now trained in how to read meters.
- The Court Clerk doubles as the Records Clerk.
- One facility maintenance worker has become a certified pool technician to help with the Parks Department.
- The city’s recycling center fills in on garbage routes when needed.
- The city’s water supervisor now also supervises garbage and recycling.
- Recreation billing employees assist with utility billing.

Cross-training began in the Administrative Services Department approximately 20 years ago to make sure that customers did not have to wait for someone to come back from lunch. The culture of volunteering and helping out has been a part of the city for decades and has resulted in cross-training spreading across the city. “Some people say, ‘Do more with less.’ Our police chief says, ‘Do different with less,’” she said.

According to Brumage, a good candidate for cross-training is someone with a willingness to learn something new and the willingness to do some learning on their own. It also usually requires some basic skillsets, and the area of cross-training should share some skill that relates to the core position.

OUTCOMES

The program has been a big success. To measure this at the individual employee level, Brumage looks at

job performance, meeting of deadlines, and employee satisfaction; these markers indicate whether a cross-training endeavor is a good fit.

In the short-term, Brumage pointed to continuity of service as a major benefit. “With COVID, we had a few employees who were at a high risk or otherwise needed to stay home,” she said. “We were able to keep things going.” And in the long-term, cross-training helps employees understand what other departments do and how their work connects to the rest of the organization. It also prepares the organization for retirements.

CHALLENGES

Brumage pointed to staff interest, skillsets, and personalities as areas that can sometimes prove challenging. “We do sometimes have to assign tasks to people who aren’t so fond of them,” she said.

ADVICE FOR OTHER JURISDICTIONS

Brumage called the initiative highly replicable. She recommended that organizations look at the positions where there is a need for cross-training and then develop a short list of staff who fit the qualifications. Look at what tasks the employee will keep doing as part of their primary job and work to address schedule conflicts before they happen.

Above all, she said, it is important to have employee buy-in. “There are always going to be some people who want to come to work and do just their own job. But sometimes there isn’t a choice. It helps if the employees want to do it and every department is onboard and accepting.”

Mark Mack is a manager in GFOA’s Research and Consulting Center.