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Career Development: A Proposal for Job Rotation in the Houston Police Department.

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Abstract

The idea of a career development program using structured job rotation is not new, but is seldom used in police work. The questions were, what are the benefits to job rotation? How is job rotation best used and what elements are more important than others? Finally, is job rotation appropriate for the Houston Police Department? It was hypothesized that job rotation would lead to more productive officers and prepare a police department for the challenges of the 21st century. This research explored the concept of job rotation with an aim to determine if the idea is suited for the Houston Police Department. The research also sought to suggest implementation strategies, if job rotation is found to have merit.

Literature was reviewed to discover how and why job rotation was used in private industry, the military and law enforcement. Information that job rotation is a positive tool to use against police corruption was included. Job rotation was also relevant to improving the productivity and health of the employee, while offering many benefits to the organization. Current policy and information for the Houston Police Department was compared to the findings. Cautions regarding job rotation and when not to use the concept were included.

The conclusion was job rotation has many benefits to the employee. Rotation led to better-trained employees, with higher levels of motivation and commitment to their organization. Those cross-trained to handle other job functions with hands on training, such as provided with job rotation, were able to handle higher workloads while maintaining the quality and accuracy of their work. They also needed less overt communication due to a better understanding of what was expected, or another words a better view of the big picture. Job rotation was found to be a strategy the Houston Police Department should explore and implement.

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Introduction

This research project addresses career development in large police departments, and specifically in the Houston Police Department. The results of not having a well thought out approach to career development will also be examined. Retention of employees and keeping officers productive and motivated throughout their careers depends on a systematic and progressive approach to career development.

A study conducted in a Canadian municipal police department found that the critical need for career development through job rotation occurs between an officers' fifth and eleventh years of service (McGinnis, 1985). Officers enter into law enforcement with hopes and expectations for promotion and opportunities to work assignments other than uniformed patrol. The study shows that these officers typically desire assignments in criminal investigations. When this does not occur, the unrealized expectations often lead to job burn out, seeking employment elsewhere, drinking, family problems, and a lack of commitment to their department. After eleven years, most officers settle into a routine, often because of their vested interest in staying with their department, and they come to believe their only hope of change is through promotion.

This research will explore a proposal to enable officers to experience different types of assignments within the Houston Police Department. Career development will be viewed from the idea of using a structured job rotation program. A problem in the Houston Police Department is a lack of opportunity for officers to move to new assignments and grow in their careers. Often the result of officers staying in one assignment long term is stagnation. Innovation and passion is stymied in most individuals when they work the same job, with the same people, for many years.

The idea of using a career development program is not new to police work. Fosdick called for higher education and better standards in 1920 (Sheppard & Glickmen, 1973). The Wickersham Commission Report on Police in 1931 and the 1967 Report of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice read similarly (Sheppard & Glickmen, 1973). Both reports suggest higher education, better standards, and career development of police officers (Sheppard & Glickmen, 1973). The career path of the average police officer has not significantly changed over the last century. After officers enter law enforcement, most stay in uniformed patrol throughout their career.

The hypothesis is that career development through a structured rotation program will result in more productive employees and a better trained police department. The final result sought is to change the way employees are currently assigned in the Houston Police Department and the implementation of a formal career development program.

The methods used to examine the issue of career development and discovering which are the best elements for implementation will be done by a review of literature, journals, and periodicals on police administration, psychology, business and general studies. Interviews with police department officials will be conducted, and data from the Houston Police Department will also be included. The research is anticipated to show job rotation leading to more productive employees, and greater job satisfaction, thus preparing the department to better handle policing in the 21st century. The goal is to keep the Houston Police Department in the forefront of policing through courageous innovation.

Review of Literature

If the question is, will career development through a structured rotation program result in more productive employees and a better trained police department, it behooves us to start with a definition of job rotation and establish a framework for its use. The Human Resource Development Council (2001) describes job rotation as "a career development strategy where an individual temporarily moves laterally into an established or 'shadow' position." Campion et al (1994) defines job rotation as a lateral transfer between jobs in an organization. They also believe the employee should not return to their former job, and this process can serve as a staffing function. Job rotation should be seen as a tool to develop employees and to staff vacant positions. After mastery of a position is achieved or a specified term elapses, the employee should be moved to a new position.

Benefits of job rotation are numerous. The Human Resource Development Council (2001) suggests rotation should be used to broaden an individual's knowledge, to motivate and challenge an individual who has been on a job for a long time, and to cross-train members of a team. May (1997), writing for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, comments on the dual focus of career development. She argues that career development serves the individual by providing support and learning opportunities and that through skill development, they may improve their self-esteem. The organization is well served by developing internal talent, supporting succession planning and it also works as a counter to low morale.

Job rotation is possibly the best tool to use for a plateaued employee, which is usually associated with negative outcomes such as lowered commitment (Campion et al, 1994). A study cited by Campion et al (1994) lists the skills gained by employees through job rotation as seen by

the executives in the company. The answers given included a broader perspective, adaptability and flexibility, leadership skills, exposure to various management styles, network contacts, and interpersonal skills. Other outcomes cited were better employee satisfaction, motivation, involvement, and commitment, while transferring the company culture across the organization. Bandics (1997) points out that when crime is rising, resources are dwindling, and budgets are being cut, it becomes more important than ever to cross train officers to provide the agency with the flexibility and efficiency necessary to complete the mission. This list of circumstances aptly describes the current situation of the Houston Police Department.

The costs of job rotation include the loss of time and productivity while training the employee at the new assignment, increased errors during the learning curve, workload increases, and disruptions of the workflow or process (Campion et al, 1994). Career World (1993) not only lists the time it takes the rotated employee to learn the new job and produce as a pitfall of job rotation, but states there are sometimes morale problems with participants, thereby necessitating a strong support system such as mentors. However, while there are costs to job rotation, Whisenand (1973) states, "Although career planning is recognized as an integral part of the management process, it has not been visible in any measurable degree within our police organizations. . . .Such calls can only reflect a management approach that people are bodies filling position" (Whisenand, 1973, 16).

Having pointed out the benefits and costs of job rotation, examples of where job rotation has been used and when it should not be used is appropriate. Graham & Cameron (1985) looked at the Redondo Beach Police Department in California and their approach to career development, which included a recommended specific tenure for assignments. A graduated approach to job rotation was suggested by the committee to prevent a deleterious effect on the effectiveness of

the work units. The Lakeville Police Department in Minnesota has a program called ASPJRES, which is a career development program that specifically targets midcareer patrol officers and is touted as a solution to the midcareer plateau (Johnson, 1994). The program rotates officers with 10 to 15 years of experience through all of the various assignments within the agency. The University of Wollongong, in Australia, uses job rotation to enhance and develop the skills of their employees through a voluntary program (University of Wollongong homepage, 1998). Employees are notified of opportunities for job rotation through circulars, and those that express an interest and are declared ready are rotated into new assignments. The Eli Lilly Company believes their job rotation policy to be a success. The average rotation was 2.3 years and the findings by Campion et al (1994) state, "early career employees may be more interested in rotation because they see it as having higher value to their careers than do older employees." Employees performing well also seemed to be more interested in rotations (Campion et al, 1994).

Harris (1990) suggested a job rotation policy for the Abilene, Texas Police Department, and his survey found the greatest detractors were the incumbents of specialized units, such as criminal investigations. The reasons cited for their opposition to job rotation included officer resistance, damage to effectiveness, loss of expertise, and the perception that a rotation out of a specialized function may seem like a demotion to some, possibly damaging morale. Fealy (1999) did an excellent job demonstrating why the Austin, Texas Police Department's SWAT team should not rotate personnel every five or ten years, as was the current policy in 1999. The investment into a fully trained SWAT officer is substantial due to the high cost of training. The effect of transferring out the experience in a unit with exceptional requirements to master would be detrimental to the organization. The same reasoning can be given for other units such as K-9, helicopters, homicide, bomb squad, etc.

A study was done with naval recruits assigned to coordinate activities in a Combat Information Center (Bowers-Cannon et al, 1998). The thought was that positional rotation would prove to be more effective than verbal or classroom cross training. The study proved that when workloads are high and tasks are interdependent, those cross trained through positional rotation had the experience and knowledge necessary to enable better coordination without overt communication. The more crucial tasks and higher workloads made the importance of these traits more important. The authors of this study point out that "team decision making processes in the Combat Information Center include gathering, integrating, and interpreting large amounts of information; these processes are similar to those required in other high performance tasks (e.g. air traffic control, fire fighting, law enforcement. . .)" (Bowers-Cannon et al, 1998). The cross trained teams' responded to high workloads and improved their performance, while the non cross-trained teams performance remained the same. Some important findings relevant to police work show that the teams cross-trained through positional rotation volunteer more information while the quality of work remains high. The study's conclusion was that positional rotation gives team members the hands-on practice resulting in better team work and a positive impact on the teams accuracy, speed, interpositional knowledge and the volunteering of information. These are the very traits desired in police officers, as their job becomes more demanding.

The fact is that as many as 80% of officers do not imagine staying in uniformed patrol for their whole career when hired and many of them desire to work investigative divisions (McGinnis, 1985). Many assigned to investigations desire an opportunity to work other investigative assignments. Since opportunities to work other assignments do not happen often and the numbers of positions are limited, many officers seek to further their career through promotions. However, the number of positions available for promotion are also limited, thereby,

leaving most officers in uniformed divisions. When career opportunities are not realized during the 5th to 11th years, many officers settle into a routine of doing what is necessary to get by and thereby display little enthusiasm.

When McGinnis (1985) looked at career development in municipal policing he noted 40% of officers found job rotation desirable and another 24% wanted a better opportunity for choice assignments. This means two out of three officers want new experiences, especially in working assignments commonly believed to have high job prestige. As officers current assignments fail to provide a challenge or opportunities for growth and development, low self esteem and pessimism leave officers with ill feelings towards management. Attempts to deal with the negative attitudes and declining performance with traditional methods, such as discipline, training and symbolic rewards, are met with little success. Lateral transfer is an approach that remotivates and develops the employee, and is also the most common desire expressed from officers that have reached a plateau in their career.

Methodology

The question is, will career development through a structured rotation program result in more productive employees and a better trained police department. It is hypothesized that job rotation is a positive way to accomplish the goal of a trained and more productive officer, preparing the police department for the challenges in the 21st century. Police departments today are asked to provide high quality service, with an increasing workload, and diminishing resources.

The current literature and research was reviewed. The review focused on what job rotation is and ways it is used. Examples of job rotation programs at other police departments and in industry were examined. Variations of the different job rotation programs were considered, with a view towards the strengths and weaknesses in job rotation as a career development program. The goal was to identify what elements would best suit the Houston Police Department and how a job rotation program could be implemented to benefit both the employees and organization.

Interviews with police personnel that have insight or knowledge pertinent to the question were done. Finally, current practices in the Houston Police Department were looked at in light of the findings. It is expected that the analysis will leave interested parties with the conclusion that job rotation is not only beneficial to the employee and organization, but also necessary to carry law enforcement into the 21st century of policing.

Findings

The purpose of the research was to examine the concept of a structured job rotation program and if found to have potential benefits, determine how to implement a program in the Houston Police Department. There are many positive aspects to career development by using job rotation revealed through the review of the literature. First, the work done by McGinnis (1985) found that police officers reach a plateau between their fifth and eleventh years of service, and if intervention does not occur, the officers ultimately become cynical, bored, and unproductive. The report determined that officers start their career with high expectations and desires to work not only uniformed patrol, but to experience other assignments such as criminal investigations as well (McGinnis, 1985).

The problem of boredom was mentioned in the findings of other research. Campion et al (1994) found lower commitment and boredom as an issue with employees at Eli Lilly Company, and that their job rotation program revitalized the employees, while benefiting the organization. The Human Resource Development Council (2001) cites one of the reasons to use job rotation is to motivate and challenge an individual who has been on a job for a long time. Job rotation is supported by May (1997) as a way to counter low morale and achieve many other benefits. Harrison (1999) discusses the problems of boredom and job burn out, and he lists many of the symptoms and problems associated with job burnout, which include feelings of dissatisfaction, irritability, rigidity, emotional exhaustion, boredom and cynicism (Olinny, 1994, as cited by Harrison, 1999). In the article Is something lacking? Whisenand states, "Although every job includes an element of boredom, the Career Development System (CDS) is designed to reduce the degree to the barest minimum. . . .the police officer will be able to experience career enrichment by remaining in a police officer status. . . .Moreover, high standards of training and

education combined with job rotation and career paths tend to develop just such personnel capable of performing well in a variety of roles. Consequently, the need for specialization with its limitations is reduced, while coordination and a sense of accomplishment are enhanced" (Whisenand, 1973,22).

There are many examples of why job rotation is a fitting approach to enhance the skills of the employee, benefit the organization, and counter many of the negative effects of working the same position too long. The findings also include some of the costs of job rotation and examples where this program may be inappropriate. Careful consideration should be given to those positions where expertise is crucial to the job function and that expertise comes at a high cost in training and time. Examples of where the cost of job rotation may be too high to justify rotating an experienced employee out of the position are helicopter pilots, K-9 handlers, bomb squad technicians, SWAT personnel, and homicide investigators. There may be other positions unsuitable for job rotation upon closer examination. However, job shadowing or mentoring can be a viable alternative to job rotation for some of these positions. A shadowing or mentoring process would still allow an employee the opportunity to learn new skills, enhance their career, and counter the negative aspects of plateauing and boredom, while providing the department with additional trained officers for future staffing of specialized functions.

Other costs to consider regarding job rotation are the short-term loss to efficiency and effectiveness while the newly rotated employee is learning. Even though most training is on the job, the additional cost of formal training must be factored into some positions. During the transition the workload may increase and disruption to the workflow may occur. While these costs are serious, the long-term benefits and health of both the employees and the organization surpass the short-term costs and problems.

There are other factors that make job rotation an important process to consider. The St. Louis County Police Department's job rotation program sets limits on the number of years an officer could work an investigation division, usually five years (Kleinknecht & Dougherty, 1986). Upon completion of an officer's term, he rotates back to patrol because the department believes patrol is the backbone of their operations. However, the St. Louis County Police Department understands that not all officers want to work in investigations, so the option to rotate to investigations was voluntary (Kleinknecht & Dougherty, 1986). St. Louis County concluded that their program increased morale, reduced turnover and upgraded job satisfaction (Kleinknecht & Dougherty, 1986). The authors finish their report with, "St. Louis County's Career Development Program has proven itself to be an invaluable management tool that keeps the organization in a dynamic, progressive and fluid state, instead of permitting job stagnation. Departments that condone or encourage extended assignments of personnel to specific duties are inviting the perils of complacency, job dissatisfaction and possible 'burnout.' These problem areas will ultimately surface in the form of poor morale, lack of productivity or other personnel problems that could eventually reflect unfavorably on the reputation of the entire department" (Kleinknecht & Dougherty, 1986,67).

Perry (2001) wrote an article about preventing corruption in police departments and suggests law enforcement agencies must understand and confront the goal-gradient phenomenon, which he calls a facet of human behavior most relevant to law enforcement work and culture. "The goal-gradient phenomenon suggests that the midpoint in an officer's career can present a danger zone for malaise, resentment, cynicism or just plain boredom. Such attitudes fuel precursory corruption or police deviance, if not actual corruption (Perry, 2001)." The answer to

preventing corruption is frequent assignment moves, both geographically and divisional (Perry, 2001).

Groupthink is another dynamic that may be applicable to specialized functions within a police department, though it is not directly related to job rotation. Symptoms of the groupthink syndrome are overestimation of the groups power and morality, closed-mindedness, and pressures toward uniformity (Janis, 1983). Groups with high cohesiveness take unnecessary risk and exert pressures on the group members to conform to its norms (Janis, 1983). The group can direct its energy towards successful completion of their tasks, or can deliberately thwart the accomplishment of the organizations goals by lowering productivity (Janis, 1983). Even though the well intentioned groups do not make bad decisions on purpose, they can fall victim to the groupthink syndrome and see outsiders as the enemy. Police specialized functions often consist of tight knit groups that stay together for long periods of time, which can unknowingly or deliberately behave in detrimental ways. Though Janis does not mention job rotation as a way to prevent groupthink, this writer believes it will regularly infuse new personnel and ideas to the specialized functions and possibly alleviate the possibility of groupthink.

Discussion / Conclusions

This paper has sought to determine whether job rotation is an approach the Houston Police Department should pursue. It is hypothesized that career development through a structured rotation program will result in more productive employees and a better trained police department. The research in this study clearly shows that job rotation is not only a program worth implementing, but addresses many problems associated with policing and the current career paths officers experience.

The Houston Police Department clearly understands that there are problems with the way officers get assigned to investigative divisions. The new transfer policy implemented in January 2002 attempts to deal with officers' perceptions that most do not have a chance to get assigned in investigations, unless they have connections. The new policy sets up the procedures for interested applicants to be assessed and interviewed, placing them into one of three categories of most ready, ready, or not ready. Assignments are then given to the "most ready" officers based on seniority, as positions become available. While this policy attempts to give more officers opportunities to work the specialized divisions, it does not solve the root problem; specialized divisions do not get enough openings to deal with the large number of officers that desire to work investigations. A structured job rotation program would create the vacancies, while benefiting both the employees and the organization.

A rotation program tackles many issues, but interviews with some members of the Houston Police Department selection committees reveal the need for skill development training not currently required. Members of the committees commented that many applicants writing skills are deficient. The department should consider additional training to develop officer's writing skills. Other training to prepare officers for specialized divisions should also be offered

as an elective in-service training class, so that officers interested in these assignments will have a shorter learning curve when rotated.

It is interesting to note that not only does job rotation have benefits for developing the employee, increasing motivation and productivity, and making a better police department, but that rotation can even help alleviate the possibility of corruption and deviant behavior. The work by Perry (2001) links the problems of officers staying in one assignment too long and deviant behavior. The solution suggested to police executives is frequent changes in assignments both divisional and geographically. The report detailing the Los Angeles Police Department's Rampart Division's corruption problems points to the causes as the tight knit group, the officers staying in place too long, and the lack of supervision (Parks, 2000). Frequent rotation may have prevented the group cohesiveness necessary to accomplish the deviant behavior, because new members could not be trusted enough to include them in criminal activity. The information on the groupthink syndrome demonstrates the dynamics involved in cohesive groups and the characteristics present that lead to poor decisions. Job rotation can also help prevent this phenomenon.

In conclusion, this research supports the hypothesis that career development through a structured rotation program will result in more productive employees and a better trained police department. Based on all the benefits to be realized for the employees and the department, it is recommended that the Houston Police Department form a committee with members from the Houston Police Officers Union, officers from patrol and specialized divisions, and supervisors of various ranks to analyze job rotation and make a proposal to the Chief. A committee is suggested to gain acceptance by employees and give them a chance for input. Due to anticipated

resistance, a job rotation policy has no chance of succeeding without employees involved in the development of the policy.

The recommendations for a job rotation policy suggested by the research are:

- The program should be voluntary for officers in uniform services but mandatory for officers assigned to specialized divisions.
- The tenure for specialized divisions could vary, but should be between two and five years.
- Rotation should be incremental, with no more than 20% of the staff moving in anyone year.
- Newly assigned officers should be assigned to mentors and demonstrate mastery of required skills during an established training period, or be returned to uniform services.
- Officers should not return to their previous assignment, but should go where the vacancies exist.
- Officers should have the option to rotate geographically, to other uniformed divisions, if they desire this option over assignment to a specialized function.
- A pilot program involving a limited number of divisions may be appropriate to implement the full-scale rotation program over a specified time period.
- Certain divisions should be exempt from the job rotation policy due to the detrimental affects of losing highly trained officers or expertise, such as helicopter pilots, K-9 handlers, SWAT, bomb squad technicians, computer programmers, and possibly homicide investigators.

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