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# Inc.

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## A Simple Spreadsheet for Motivation & Versatility

When an absent employee nearly brought operations to a halt, our company embarked on a mission to teach workers more skills. Here's how we did it.



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An emergency order had to go out of our plant right away, but it was stymied: The person who normally handled our shipping was out of town. No one else knew how to process a shipping order. It was ridiculous.

As soon as the person returned, we trained a backup. We realized that we never wanted to be hamstrung like that again. We wanted our employees to be more versatile--not just to handle the shipping order procedure but to be able to run multiple machines. After all, some days the laser cutter is crazy busy; another day, it's the press brake. That nimbleness would translate to greater productivity and greater ability to manage the peaks and valleys of our business producing wire baskets and sheet-metal fabrications.

It's understandable that many of us just like doing what we do. Learning a new skill can be scary, and it's hard work. That's why we realized early on that simply decreeing that everyone should learn everyone else's job wasn't going to cut it.

So, we decided to make a bit of a competition out of it. We posted a big spreadsheet in the lunchroom. We listed everyone in the plant on the top axis and every machine or specific duty we could think of along the side. We set out to train people on tasks and machines they hadn't operated before. Bending, brushing, resistance welding, oxygen acetylene torch, ring roller, band saw, you name it.

Then we put our money where our mouth is. We paid bonuses for the additional skills employees acquired. The new abilities enhanced their value and made them more versatile, more committed, and, yes, tougher to replace. The wage increase per new skill, which could add 5% to 10% to an employee's paycheck, helped send a message about the seriousness that we placed on the training. Turning the exercise into an internal, good-natured competition also had its benefits, rather than if we had just noted the additional skills in someone's personnel file. If someone saw a colleague adding skills--and money--it prodded them to want to improve as well. Over time, more of the boxes on that skills spreadsheet got filled in.

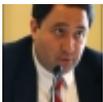
It also helped us hone our competitive mind-set as an organization. You want to get better as a company so you can be more responsive than your competitors. In recent years, we've expanded the spreadsheet to cover transferable skills for our sales force and administrative staff. After all, it was a shipping-order bottleneck that spurred our fixation with the matrix in the first place.

It's an investment on our part, to be sure. Training costs money and time. When one of our employees is taking classes on- or off-site, that's time they're not helping produce wire baskets for material handling or sheet-metal fabrications or whatever it is that serves customers and brings in revenue. But in the long run, their broadened skill set pays off for the employee and employer.

Devotion to cross-training has also made the job of human resources more boring for us. Not so long ago, if, say, the robotic wire-basket welder was quiet, the guy who operated it might get laid off while his colleague who ran the sheet-metal laser might have been paid plenty of overtime because his cell was crazy busy. Cross-training has helped even that out. And the employee who got shifted from Machine A to B or Task A to B to help cover where he's needed is happy, because now he's getting his paycheck. Because we're able to adjust more quickly to the market, we're not jerking around employees with the specter of layoffs. Without the antiquated rules that restricted certain workers to certain pieces of equipment to "protect them," our workers have had greater job security specifically because they're so useful in so many zones.

Our plant in Baltimore has plenty of sophisticated high technology that has bolstered our productivity in numerous ways: robots that measure tolerances finer than the width of a human hair and bend steel in an instant with the force of 66 automobiles pressing on them. But the decidedly low-tech color-coded spreadsheet tacked to the lunchroom wall has been a pretty good sentinel in itself for improving productivity.

<http://www.inc.com/drew-greenblatt/simple-spreadsheet-for-motivation-and-versatility.html>



***Drew Greenblatt** is the president of **Marlin Steel**, a U.S.-based manufacturer of wire baskets and sheet-metal fabrications. Marlin has grown 25% over the past three years and has a record of 1,422 days without a safety problem.*

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