

Moving front-line staff between company locations might be key to boosting innovation

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Temporary moves boost creativity according to new research from Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM).

According to the study, when front-line employees are exchanged between company sites, they contribute more valuable ideas.

In the age of automation, those with creativity and aptitude for problem-solving have proved particularly valuable. Front-line perspectives often generate promising process improvements and business opportunities that would not have been apparent to managers. As a result, front-line innovation has become one of the largest sources of sustained competitive advantage.

According to Philipp Cornelius, Assistant Professor of Technology and Operations Management, at the Rotterdam School of Management:

“Workers increasingly create value not only by performing their core duties but by contributing to broader organisational objectives such as competitiveness and innovation as well.

“While front-line innovation is common, the ways in which managers can most effectively support it are not well understood. In our research, we have shown for the first time how strategic front-line mobility — the short, focused, and purposeful exchange of staff members between different company sites — can substantially boost these employees’ contributions to innovation and organisational learning in manufacturing companies.”

In order to conduct the research, they engaged in a large-scale study of a multinational, multibillion-euro car parts manufacturer. They collected data on front-line ideas and their economic impact over four years and examined their relationship with individual worker mobility. To arrive at robust managerial insights on the causal effects of worker mobility, they analysed more than 21,000 ideas submitted by almost 2,500 workers, using advanced econometric methods.

The research shows that moving front-line employees between places of work helps spread ideas. It recognises that it’s usually the workers on the ground who learn first-hand how to iron out well-intentioned but occasionally impractical processes and product designs.

They often possess a wealth of tacit production knowledge at a level of detail that far exceeds what is covered in manuals or is known to engineers. When employees are strategically deployed to different sites, they carry this knowledge with them and help circulate it within the company, the findings confirm. This applies to many different types of worker in our economy including shop floor employees.

While the current pandemic has put an end to all but the most urgent business travel, the study supports a careful and measured return to physical meetings. Serendipity and the free exchange of ideas are key to creativity and difficult to replicate online.

For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with the researchers, contact Kate Mowbray at BlueSky PR on Kate@bluesky-pr.com or call +44 710022871
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