

Competency-Based Initiatives at Abbott Diagnostic Division, Dallas, TX

Engaging talented employees for greater competitive strength.

Steve Broermann

Thanks to a two-phase strategy that continues to evolve, Irving, TX-based Abbott Diagnostic Division (ADD) is more effectively meeting its long-term commitment to finding, keeping, developing, and aligning talented employees. The 1500+ employees at the Irving facility develop, manufacture, and support highly complex products. Major product lines at Irving are diagnostics instruments used in hospital laboratories. Among our brand names are AxSYM (instruments) and Architect (used to run tests on blood samples in hospitals, medical laboratories, and doctors' offices). Our competitive challenges continue to change, so it takes time to bring employees up to speed on our technical and organizational environment.

We need to attract and engage employees for our long-term success. We integrate hardware, software, and chemistry, which all have to come together through the collaboration of cross-functional teams. Having the right technical competencies as well as the ability to work well with others are essentials at ADD.

High-Tech, High-Touch Approach

The management team at Irving implemented a high-tech, high-touch approach to attracting, retaining, developing, and aligning employees several years ago. Our unique emphasis is on developing and maintaining open and productive relationships between employees and their supervisors or managers. Resources and pro-

grams now available provide employees with the means to keep current in their field and to develop competencies needed for both job and career changes. This enhances employee morale and productivity. It also provides Abbott with a more flexible, better-trained, and more diverse workforce.

Our related programs can be divided into two phases. The first phase includes two programs — an Engineering Professional Development Program and our Inroads Program — aimed at high-potential students and recent graduates, and the opening of a Learning Resource Center. The center contains books, periodicals, audio and visual tapes, and computers used to link employees with information and training resources.

Engineering Professional Development Program

Our Engineering Professional Development Program, focused on high-potential graduating students, has been in existence more than 20 years. Similar programs now exist for accounting, manufacturing, and human resources.

These programs hire recent graduates as full-time Abbott employees and allow them to work in several (usually four) assignments for different managers over a two-year period. They are given as much freedom, flexibility, and experience in different areas as possible. This experience provides them with on-the-job experience in the "Abbott way" (company procedures, language, and

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acronyms, and how to connect more effectively to get things done within the company) and knowledge about some of the varied opportunities available within a large corporation. At the end of their training, they are ready to take on a "full time" job and have a chance to match their competencies and needs with positions/careers available in Abbott.

Inroads Program

The Dallas site also has participated in the local Inroads Program since 1989. This program is focused on minority students who are hired to work in the summer or part-time while they are still in school. Many of these college and university students are engineering majors.

The intent is that a mutually beneficial relationship will develop and when the student completes his/her degree, they will have a desire to continue working with Abbott Laboratories. The students benefit from the experience they gain, while managers get highly-qualified help and an opportunity to make a difference.

Learning Resource Center

Another aspect of the first phase was the opening of the Learning Resource Center in 1992. It is basically a library located in a corner of our central cafeteria. The center contains books, tapes, periodicals, computers, and software. We also have a full-time employee who manages the day-to-day operation of the center and administers our tuition reimbursement program.

We also provide courses from a satellite learning system. These programs cover a wide range of topics. We participate in the "Green Network" offering courses from various universities, local and non-local technical schools, etc. Some are for-credit courses and others are not. We have had employees taking the courses when they are working towards a masters degree, while other courses meet specific short-term needs (such as software programming). The company pays for courses and they can be taken on company time with management approval. A big factor is convenience; employees can take a course during lunch or after work.

Competency-Based Development Initiative

In Phase II, which began about seven years ago, the Diagnostic Division decided to implement a competency-based development initiative. We developed the program in response to employee survey data saying, "I don't know what I need to know to get to the next level or the next job in the company. What competencies are needed to be

a higher-level engineer or a manager?"

We developed competencies for various job families, from engineering to quality (see Figure 1). We worked with consultants and talked with employees from all levels of the organization as we defined competency assessments and modified performance review documentation to include examples of the competencies demonstrated during the year. We attempted to define competencies employees will need five years out — to try to get a picture from multi-level contributors about what they needed to be successful in their jobs and what competencies they thought would be needed in the future.

All competencies have three major areas of focus: technical, human, and strategic. We have them in grids that were published and are now available to employees on our own internal database. They are updated periodically.

An example of this three-way focus is in engineering. In the technical area, key performance criteria include design, analysis, planning and implementation, and verifying and validating. Human factors range from communications to interpersonal relations, teamwork, personal leadership, and personal development. In the strategic area, criteria for engineers include risk management, business/operational strategy, visionary strategy, and technical innovation.

There is a shift that occurs when an organization goes to a competency-based employee development system. It alters the emphasis from results (only) to how the

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Job Families Covered in the Competency-Based Development Initiative

- Engineering
- Engineering management
- Finance management
- Information systems
- Information systems management
- Life sciences
- Manufacturing management
- Purchasing/planning
- Distribution and logistics
- Customer service
- Quality
- Corporate engineering
- Corporate human resources.

Figure 1.

...employees who have good working relationships with their managers are more productive.

results were achieved and what competencies were demonstrated in the process. The employee and the manager must view performance in a different context.

The "how" encompasses the demonstration of various competencies. The introduction of human competencies causes managers to look at the methods used to achieve goals. Human competencies focus on teamwork, communication, and personal development. To many of the technical types, this was a new concept. They are now assessed on their demonstration of human competencies as well as their technical strengths. This shift to competency-based development is a difficult cultural change. We are implementing changes, but it is a work in process in the early stages of development. We are continuing to look at emphasizing additional human competencies that have not been emphasized before in our employee development programs.

Professional Career Counseling

In the fourth quarter of 1998, the Dallas site contracted with a vendor to provide a professional career counselor who would be on site one day a week to provide assessment, planning, and follow-up for employees interested in their own development. The counselor has an office in the Learning Resource Center.

This program was launched with an hourly rate to be charged back to the users' departments. Under this structure, the number of employees using the service was disappointingly low despite positive reports of participants' experiences.

In late 1999 we changed the cost model so that there would be no direct cost to the employee's department. This meant that the employer did not need to get money or permission from their manager to use the career development services. We also increased our marketing efforts at the same time to ensure people were aware of the program.

About Change Agents

Change Agent:

Pairs are charged to be "on at all times." As change agents, we are always observing interpersonal dynamics and if there seems to be an issue around diversity in any form, we will make people aware in a professional manner. Our job as a change agent is to lead by example and educate in a one-on-one fashion when appropriate opportunities arise.

Use of these services skyrocketed. Within a couple of weeks, the appointments were booked into February 2000. The level of activity starting in late 1999 doubled the activity of the entire first year of operation!

Consulting Pairs® Program

Our Consulting Pairs® Program¹ was launched in 1997 and is designed to jump-start relationships between managers and employees and to simultaneously seed the organization with cultural change agents (see Figure 2). The benefit to Abbott from this program is that employees who have good working relationships with their managers are more productive. The introduction of change agents into the culture also has a very real effect on creating an environment that honors and capitalizes on diversity.

The program uses highly-trained individuals (called "pairs") selected from all levels of the organization. The selection process includes a wide cross-section of employees reflecting diversity across many dimensions including gender, race, age, ethnicity, etc. The "pairs" have three major functions including:

1. Facilitating join-up meetings whenever there is a new manager-employee relationship. These sessions are designed to encourage strong relationships and enhance productivity.
2. Facilitate relationship consultations when individuals request an intervention in a troubled relationship.
3. Being a cultural change agent at all times.

This program has proved to be a good investment in both time and money. The results are not easy to measure in the traditional sense. The core activity of the program involves "join-ups" – a four-hour meeting between a new manager and an employee. It is facilitated by two "pairs." Issues covered in these sessions are expectations of the employee and the manager, the work group mission, similarities and differences across various dimensions (such as work style, personality, competencies, race, age, gender, marital status, religion, ethnicity, etc.), trust, and feedback. Time is also spent on departmental norms, written and unwritten. These join-ups clarify faulty assumptions about the manager and employee, explore personal diversity issues, clarify expectations, and build effective relationships. Feedback from clients is overwhelmingly positive. Although it would be difficult to prove a one-to-one correlation, the Dallas site is now managed by a diverse staff made up of two white females,

Figure 2.

two Asian females, one African-American male, one Hispanic male, and two white males.

All of these initiatives contribute to a work environment that welcomes and encourages the best and the brightest minds in achieving our organizational goals. As we build productivity and employee morale, we are strengthening our competitiveness.

1. "Consulting Pairs" is registered by Pope and Associates, (Cincinnati, OH). The concept was created by Merlin Pope Jr. in 1977.

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