

THE SHADOWER KNOWS

The City of Tucson program helps employees walk in others' shoes and learn skills that can open the way to career advancement

By Ken Wysocky

After seven years as a desk-bound secretary in the planning and engineering division of the water department in Tucson, Ariz., Rebecca Carpenter yearned for an outdoor job with a little more mobility. An innovative employee program got her rolling in the right direction.

These days, Carpenter's "desk" is the dashboard of a Dodge van. As one of four backflow inspectors, she travels around Tucson with a laptop computer and assorted tools of the trade, grateful for her office on wheels. "I went from being a secretary to two or three steps farther up the ladder," Carpenter says. "I'm an outdoors person, so this job beats the heck out of sitting behind a desk."

New perspectives

Carpenter's promotion exemplifies the benefits of a job-shadowing program the water department implemented about seven years ago. It lets employees follow department employees through the workday to learn new skills and get an unvarnished, real-life perspective on what other jobs are like.

The idea for job shadowing emerged from a re-engineering committee established by a new department director who was seeking ways to work more efficiently, says Janet Garcia, a management coordinator for the water depart-

ment and one of the program's early proponents. The intent was to increase employees' knowledge of departmental operations and help them advance within a division or in a different discipline.

"We wanted employees to gain the confidence and ability to apply for jobs that previously may have been beyond their interest or capability," Garcia says. Other benefits include improved morale, cross-training, increased internal

about how to better deal with our customers."

At square one

The program's development was a collaborative process. "We pretty much started from scratch with a subcommittee made up of one person from each of the department's six divisions," Garcia says. "We met about twice a month for around six months until we felt comfortable presenting a document

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recruitment, reduced recruitment costs and improved succession planning.

"When employees job shadow, they bring a fresh perspective that may generate ideas about how to improve operations in a particular area," Garcia notes. In addition, employees who shadow can pass along to colleagues what they've learned. In one instance, employees who shadowed public information workers took back to their colleagues advice about how to handle public relations more effectively.

"Employees in all our divisions have contact with the public in one form or another," Garcia says. "It's a plus any time an employee learns

to the re-engineering committee."

A key concern was defining who would coordinate the shadowing. Management wanted assurance that on one end, supervisors would have time to plan for an employee's temporary absence, and that on the other end, a supervisor could ensure there would be someone for the employee to shadow.

In the end, the committee decided that the employee interested in shadowing would submit a registration form to a coordinator, who would then notify the supervisors involved and set up a schedule. Employees can shadow up to three positions for a total of one to five days per year. Each shadowing

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experience is limited to eight hours, with a four-hour minimum, although extensions may be granted.


"It didn't seem like anyone would gain much with less than four hours of shadowing," Garcia says. To ensure accountability, the supervisors and the shadowing employee must fill out an evaluation form when the session concludes. "We wanted to justify how the program was working, as well as hear from employees how the program could be improved," Garcia says.

Start out slow

Employees in the department's water quality division gave the program a test run for six months. "It went real well," Garcia says. "We had 15 people participate out of 40 in the division. We had water treatment operators going to the chemistry lab and chemists heading out with water plant operators and maintenance mechanics. A lot of people who tried it encouraged other employees to give it a go."

After managers deemed the pilot program a success, it expanded department-wide. Coordinators publicized it through fliers and bulletin board postings, e-mails and employee meetings. New-employee orientations include information about the program.

Garcia emphasizes that the key to a successful shadowing program is support and publicity. "You must



have a committed group of people to develop it and promote it; you need a champion," she says. "Without that, the program will diminish. For us, it was a grassroots effort, which is what the re-engineering committee was all about."

Taking initiative

For Carpenter, job shadowing was the last in a series of steps she took to position herself for a promotion. She heard the backflow prevention section was undermanned and volunteered to help. Next, she took a weeklong class to become a certified backflow tester. Shadowing served as the last link.

"I found it was a really interesting job," recalls Carpenter, who had taken a few engineering courses in college. "You have your own vehicle and a laptop computer. I

thought to myself, 'Wow, this would be a really great job.'"

A backflow inspector position soon opened up, and Carpenter applied. "I didn't think I had a prayer of getting it," she says. "But because I spent time with a backflow inspector, I was able to answer questions that other candidates couldn't, and I ended up getting the job."

Carpenter wholeheartedly endorses job shadowing. "How else are you going to know what a job is really like?" she asks. "Job shadowing could convince you to either apply for an opening or pass it up."

The program also boosts morale because employees feel like the city supports career advancement and promoting from within. In Carpenter's case, it was literally a ticket to ride. ♦