

Make money in new areas with workforce transformation

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BY RORY MOORE

In today's tech sector we are seeing a workforce transformation trend – professionals with knowledge in one domain transfer their skills to a new domain in order to produce new products and services.

I know of electrical engineers who specialize in semiconductor physics and design who are now building next generation solar panels. Through a workforce transformation process, these engineers are able to transfer their knowledge of physics to an entirely different domain – photo voltaics.

Workforce transformation does not require employees to go back to school and earn a different degree or an advanced degree. The process is more like domain experts shifting their knowledge and skills 30 or 40 degrees into a new field of work.

A local company, Knight and Carver, was founded in 1971 as a yacht construction firm. Specializing in luxury yachts, commercial catamarans and large-vessel repair, Knight and Carver has developed a reputation as the premier yacht service company on the West Coast. But it didn't stop there. In 1997, the company was presented with a new opportunity—production and repair of blades for wind energy generators (windmills).

How do you go from mega yachts to wind generators? Two words: workforce transformation.

"We found the core competencies of boat building and repair – specifically working with composites – to be readily transferable to wind energy," said Sam Brown, president and CEO of Knight & Carver Wind Group.

When choosing the people who would help expand Knight & Carver's business to wind blade repair, Brown said they chose those employees who "want to expand their horizons, who are motivated, enthusiastic and interested in bettering themselves. That combination – along with a good work ethic and reasonable intelligence – usually works for us."

Brown admitted that in the process of training employees to flex their knowledge for a new area of expertise, there was "an initial steep learning curve." However, overcoming the challenge just takes "good people and hard work," he said.

Having undergone a successful workforce transformation, Knight & Carver cannot only spiff up a mega yacht, but can also repair a lightning-struck wind turbine blade. What a way to expand business!

Knight & Carver is an excellent example of a local company that found a way to extend its knowledge into a new industry. In our current economy, workforce transformation can be a smart, strategic move for companies experiencing losses due to less consumer spending. Workforce transformation offers the opportunity to expand employee and executive skills for new business endeavors.

Chris Lord, vice president of Hitachi Consulting, pointed out that workforce transformation is a trend seen in the aerospace and defense industries as well.

"Most major aerospace and defense organizations are undergoing massive efforts to transform and retain their highly technical workforce through innovative cross-training, mentoring, and knowledge-sharing programs," Lord said. "The goal is to increase 'portability' and flexibility with their workforce to meet the constantly changing customer demands. To be able to increase engineer utilization and productivity, companies are implementing better governance and processes around the development cycle and the tools that engineers utilize to build products."

Lord highlights some of the key ideas in workforce transformation: increasing productivity, building new products, and flexibility with the ever-changing needs of the marketplace.

Instead of making layoffs and losing income, adopting a workforce transformation plan could be an alternate approach during tough economic times. Look at new markets that are not in the consumer space. Make a plan to go after new business based on the knowledge and skills already in place at your company.



Rory Moore was the seed round investor and co-founder of Peregrine Semiconductor Corp. Rory was also the seed round investor and founding CEO of Silicon Wave, Inc., now owned by Qualcomm.

He was co-founder of e-Fire.com and Optical River. In addition, he is co-chair of the Military Special Interest Group and a member of the NextStage committee. A University of Michigan alum, Rory's other interests include angel investing, aerobatic flying, scuba diving and surfing.

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