

3 Keys to Closing Workforce Planning Gaps

BY ELISSA TUCKER

To be successful in closing skills gaps, workforce planners need to close the gap between plan creation and results realization. Many workforce plans are implemented haphazardly or are simply left sitting on the shelf. Thus, workforce planners are in need of a systematic approach to ensure their plans come to fruition.

APQC has researched how to successfully execute workforce plans and found that there are three keys to success: people, process, and technology.

People

The first essential to successful workforce plan implementation is having the right people involved. This starts with having leaders who authorize the time necessary for workforce planning and ensure accountability for results. APQC's research of top performers shows

that implementation truly begins when leaders demonstrate the importance of workforce planning and follow through to results. Executive support sends a powerful message that workforce planning is a core business activity worthy of time and effort.

For example, at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency, management initiated a shift to a more strategic, long-term workforce planning approach. Like many federal agencies, the Farm Service Agency traditionally had focused on retirement rates and succession planning, but management wanted a new approach to assess a broader array of workforce risks and inform a wider range of human capital decisions. To reinforce this directive, the management team tracks each division's performance on the human capital initiatives that arise out of strategic workforce planning.



podcast

To execute plans and realize results,
you must get from start to finish.



Similarly, it was the CEO of MITRE Corporation who initiated an effort to improve workforce planning. The CEO prompted the company's seven research and development centers to share expertise and create a standardized, strategic approach. As a result, the chief HR officer had the support and funding to create a chief workforce economist position, supported by analysts, and task them with centralizing workforce planning.

In addition to leadership support, having a core workforce planning team also is important. Plan implementation is facilitated by ensuring workforce planning teams have qualified members, time dedicated to execute the process, and performance goals and incentives for closing skills gaps. Top performers have small teams with the optimum combination of workforce planning training, implementation experience, and skills (such as analytical capabilities). This qualified and dedicated support means the process does not get dropped when challenges or distractions arise.

For example, Phillips 66 has a workforce planning and analytics center of excellence with a director and two analytics advisers. Similarly, the U.S. Geological Survey has a workforce planning team that includes a workforce planning program manager, a workforce data and analysis program manager, and a program analyst.

Business unit leader involvement also is critical to plan implementation. Giving business unit leaders significant responsibility in plan creation and implementation ensures a vested interest in seeing plans carried to fruition. Among top performers, business units are heavily involved in workforce planning. Consequently, they understand how workforce plans will benefit their units' performance and thus have a strong incentive—as well as the connections, expertise, and authority—to follow through until results are achieved.

For example, plan creation at Kaiser Permanente's Northern California region is a collaborative activity where executives provide strategic direction, frontline managers explain how work occurs, and HR leaders offer feedback on forecast assumptions and facilitate discussions with HR subject matter experts. The business units are primarily responsible

for implementing the workforce plan, with the workforce planning team providing support such as preparing cost benefits analyses and assessing potential investments.

At Phillips 66, HR business partners collaborate with business unit leaders to implement the workforce plan. Although the workforce planning team provides tools and coaching, the HR business partners have the relationships with their business units' leaders, which they use to facilitate implementation.

Process

Process standardization enables implementation by streamlining approaches and ensuring sufficient effectiveness to secure—and keep—stakeholder buy-in. Top performers have centrally managed and standardized workforce planning processes informed by best practices.

For example, the Farm Service Agency's workforce planning team facilitates a central process for setting immediate, short-term, and long-term workforce goals. After consulting with its business partners, the team looks for common issues among the divisions and then determines economies of scale and when to bring together dispersed human capital services providers to collaboratively address those needs.

MITRE also has a centralized workforce planning process. Within three operating centers, the company has 72 groups that conduct workforce planning. The planning process involves collecting data for each group, aggregating the data by operating center, and ultimately consolidating that data for the organization.

In establishing this process, MITRE's workforce planning team collected information on 80 pockets of isolated activities and identified the most effective practices. It also benchmarked effective planning models and best practices for research-backed standardization.

Standardized workforce planning processes can be codified and communicated through models and frameworks. This bolsters accountability by pinpointing exactly what steps workforce planning participants are expected to carry out. Top performers codify their workforce planning processes into formal frameworks that outline implementation and

measurement as essential steps—creating end-to-end accountability for plan execution.

For example, the U.S. Geological Survey's strategic workforce planning process begins with strategic goals and follows through to evaluation and review. The five steps are:

1. Set strategic direction.
2. Identify current supply, future demand, and discrepancies.
3. Develop an action plan.
4. Implement that plan.
5. Monitor, evaluate, and review.

The Farm Service Agency uses a framework to ensure its workforce planning involves strategic alignment, workforce analysis, risk mitigation and gap closure strategies, workforce plan development, and plan implementation (with monitoring, evaluating, and revising).

Standardized workforce planning processes can be integrated with other HR processes as well as strategic, business, and financial planning processes. Integration supports implementation by ensuring relevancy

and accountability. Top performers carry out workforce planning in tandem with other HR and business processes to engage stakeholders focused on these areas of the business and HR.

Phillips 66 provides an example of integrating workforce planning with the business planning process. Its strategic workforce plan is updated during the organization's annual business and financial planning processes to ensure it supports strategic and operational goals.

Kaiser Permanente Northern California provides an example of integrating with other HR processes. To ensure implementation, it involves an array of HR process groups (for example, recruiting, compensation, and training) from the planning stage onward. Rather than learning of the workforce plan at the time of implementation, these HR groups have helped craft the plan. They understand

WORKFORCE PLAN EXECUTION IS ALL ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY AND COORDINATION.



About the Research

In late 2016, with sponsorship from IBM, APQC (a member-based nonprofit specializing in benchmarking and best practices research) launched a study to better understand how organizations develop and implement strategic workforce plans. The research included:

- a survey of 101 global organizations with relatively mature workforce planning processes
- an analysis of the practices of the top 25 survey participants based on program outcomes
- interviews with five organizations that exemplify best practices (MITRE Corporation, Kaiser Permanente Northern California, Phillips 66, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency, and the U.S. Geological Survey).

Strategic Workforce Planning: Best and Next Practices details 17 best practices for conducting strategic workforce planning today.

the plan's strategic importance and are thus prepared to dedicate resources toward successful implementation.

Technology

Technology can help centralize, standardize, and streamline the planning process. Top performers use technologies such as HR information, talent management, and learning management systems to simplify and direct planning, which in turn promotes process completion.

For example, the U.S. Geological Survey provides its divisions with online planning tools (a workforce planning desk guide, guided inquiry questions, a workforce plan template, a data planning guide, and standardized data queries) as well as workforce planning training delivered via the learning management system.

In addition to easing the process, technology also enables analytics that support plan implementation by:

- engaging stakeholders with actionable data
- generating better data to inform planning
- enabling workforce planning teams to track and measure progress.

Top performers leverage analytics to inform plans with relevant, reliable data that can help

catalyze business partners to act. For top performers, analytics also yield more relevant and effective workforce plans.

For instance, Phillips 66 uses an automated planning and analytics tool to aggregate business unit-level demand inputs, factor in demographics, and then provide a rolling, three-year projection of resignations and hiring, in addition to a retirement forecast. This information is then available for HR business partners and business unit leaders to use to create relevant workforce plans.

MITRE provides an example of how analytics enable better workforce plans. In meetings with the business, the company's workforce planning team helps put workforce data into context by talking about what the numbers mean. Using qualitative insights generated by these discussions, the workforce planning team builds scenarios that lead to more specific and actionable directives than data-based forecasts.

Executing your workforce plan

Workforce plan execution is all about accountability and coordination. Among the top performers APQC researched, a centralized team of workforce planning experts is accountable for process development and oversight. The team coordinates with its business partners to create the plan. When the plan is ready to implement, primary accountability lies with the business, and the team is typically in an advisory role. These parties then leverage standard processes and technology to implement the plan.

To fully and successfully execute your organization's workforce plan, APQC advises fully tapping these people, process, and technology approaches. That is, garner leader support for a specialized team that partners with the business. Standardize a framework, and integrate workforce planning with other core business processes. And finally, develop a technology-enabled toolkit and analytical capabilities to establish credibility and yield better plans. This is how workforce planning top performers ensure their organization's strategic workforce goals are fully realized.

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