



Everyone do the reshuffle All change - swapping seats at the top

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It's not just cabinets that get reshuffled. These days, any ambitious boss worth his or her executive washroom knows that if you want to deal with the challenges of the modern workplace, you've got to shuffle the pack.

It's the start of a seemingly normal week, you arrive at work with the usual Monday blues and then the bombshell drops.

After being hauled into the boardroom before your 9am coffee, you're told to leave your role as personnel manager and head up operations.

It might seem drastic but that's not too far-removed from what happens to government ministers on the whim of a PM.

According to some management experts, a similar approach to staff rotation could be just the thing your head office needs.

"Organisations can't stand still. They have to restructure staff every time they change their strategies," says Petra Wilton, from the Chartered Management Institute.



Swapping seats and keeping an eye on the empty chair

Of 1,511 institute members surveyed in 2007, 65% had changed roles significantly in the previous two years.

And in the same way that previous posts in defence and as Chief Whip have not stopped Geoff Hoon from becoming Transport Secretary, neither should senior employees be pigeon-holed, says Mrs Wilton.

"If they are professional managers, they will have skills which will transfer across projects and departments."

"It's a good development route which allows many individuals to apply theoretical learning to different situations. In a lot of organisations it's seen as a way of retaining top talent."

Up to speed

But before communication professionals start angling for a switch to sales, they - like John Hutton, perhaps, who has suddenly found himself in charge of 100,000-plus military personnel at the Ministry of Defence - would need to quickly get up to speed with the demands of their new post.

Mrs Wilton says it is vital to learn workers' strengths and to look forward, not getting bogged down in past issues - handy if, like Home Secretary Jacqui Smith, for example, your predecessor branded the workforce "not fit for purpose".

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Professor Rick Delbridge
Advanced Institute of
Management Research

Cardiff Business School's Professor Rick Delbridge, a senior fellow of the Advanced Institute of Management Research, says switching managers can freshen up ideas within teams.

"It gives senior managers a broader understanding of the organisation and the challenges it faces," he says, adding that departmental heads can be too inward-looking.

Many Japanese motor manufacturers deliberately rotate managers to develop their company knowledge, says Mr Delbridge.

But too much change can have its drawbacks.

"The danger with continual rotation is that new people who arrive feel they should stamp their mark but may not fully understand the job," says Mr Delbridge.

"They can set up a stream of initiatives without worrying about the effectiveness of them because they will move on to another area before the results can be seen."

Those charged with implementing the health or education policies of successive governments might draw some similarities.

Boardroom politics

And just as Gordon Brown might like to sideline some of those touted as plotting a leadership challenge, so can politics play a role in the boardroom.

"Senior managers sometimes need to exert power and their decisions might not necessarily be driven by who would be most effective in a role," Mr Delbridge adds.

Neil Young, chief executive of London-based property firm The Young Group, is so keen on reshuffles he takes the whole process a step further.

"We have an open plan office and about once every six months we shift all the people's seats around to let them be near other people as a way of generating new ideas," he says.

But he is also keen for his 20-strong staff to take on new roles. His office manager recently took on a new role in IT, using her knowledge of the company's various sections to work alongside contractors to ensure the computer systems suited all their needs.

Former accountant Mr Young, 37, added: "What's important is that you recognise different people's skills and aptitudes and give them more exposure to those things that bring benefit both to them and your business."

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Manpower

But with the whiff of recession in the air, many people may fear similar treatment to ex-Home Secretary Charles Clarke who Tony Blair summarily sacked in 2006. Experience, says Laurence Kirk, South Coast regional manager for employment agency Manpower, is key. "It's always best to retain good people who have knowledge of an organisation.

"It reduces the need for redundancies, it's cheaper for the company, better for the individual and motivates staff who see the chance of a fresh challenge."

Losing staff with vital company knowledge during the current economic difficulties could have severe consequences for firms when things pick up.

But he says it was up to employees who wanted to change direction to grab the chance by taking on voluntary additional roles or showing an interest in other departments.

So, now could be the time to sign up for that IT scheme you've been avoiding for months...