

Staff mobility can break down walls



The scheme was trialled so successfully at the Portsmouth office that it is now being rolled out across the UK

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The grass, as they say, is always greener on the other side. Of course, most people never get to find out whether somebody else is enjoying a more bucolic existence. But what if they could? That's the thinking behind a new initiative at Colas Group, the international transport-infrastructure contractor. So what's the big idea?

Earlier this month, Colas UK launched what it calls its Job Enrichment Career Mobility Scheme, which breaks down into three parts.

Firstly, members of staff are able to apply to undertake a 'job taster' whereby they work in another part of the business, whether that's in terms of geography or department, for two weeks.

The second option is a 'job swap', which involves applying to switch jobs with somebody in a different part of the company for up to a month.

Thirdly, employees can apply to undertake a secondment for up to one year, potentially located in one of Colas Group's British Isles, Middle East and Southern and East African (BIMEA) offices.

The launch of the programme follows a successful two-month pilot, according to Shelley McDowell, head of human resources at Colas UK. "We ran the pilot in our southern region in the UK," she says.

"It was quite a small part of the business and the idea was just to make sure that it worked. We had nine people transfer."

Ms McDowell says that while the scope of the pilot was limited, it provided sufficiently impressive results to instil confidence about launching the full programme.

"Because the scope of the pilot was fairly limited, we didn't see the full impact of somebody going to another country or a different part of this one,

but people got a real understanding of how other teams work," she says.

"In particular, in our Portsmouth division we have two very different divisions and there was a lack of understanding about what each other did. We had quite a few transfers between those and the feedback showed that it was really useful because it made them understand the pressures the other team was under and exactly what they had to do. The result of that is that the relationship and collaboration between the teams has significantly improved."

National roll-out

Now, the Job Enrichment Career Mobility Scheme has launched nationwide. "The idea is that, ultimately, we will roll it out internationally. But we're starting off nationally in all of our locations across the UK and opening it up to everybody," says Ms McDowell.

"Any employee can apply to transfer to any part of the business." Applying to take part does not

COMPANY PROFILE
A new programme of job tasters, role swaps and secondments is aiming to tap the potential of Colas Group's workforce

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guarantee success – employees must establish the value that would be generated from a placement. "As part of the application process, they need to demonstrate what the benefits would be, both for them and for the business," she says. "But there are no restrictions – it's open to operational staff and support staff. The possibilities are endless."

The initiative is currently open to applications, and a second opportunity to apply will follow in April next year. When the current round closes, a dedicated committee, put together by the HR team, will sift through the entries.

"What we will do at that point is assess where people want to go and what they hope to get out of it," says Ms McDowell.

"We will assess the benefits, look at the practicalities. We will see what works and talk to the operations managers to work through the logistics and the timing, and then put it in place. It will be fascinating to learn what people want to do and why. That's why we haven't put any limitations on it – [if we did] we could be missing a trick in terms of knowledge sharing."

Board support

Securing buy-in from Colas UK executives was an important part of getting to this stage and that has taken time. "We have been developing the programme for the best part of a year now," she says. "We've provided updates to the board and the CEO, who are fully supportive of this and have given their approval to launch



Employees are encouraged to develop managerial skills

the programme. We have communicated it to our managers and have been cascading it to all staff for the past two-to-three months. That's been through workshops and focus-group sessions. The operational managers have been really receptive to it, which has been a big plus."

Securing that level of support involved selling them the benefits, which Ms McDowell believes are multiple. Other people in the business, she adds, feel the same way. "In part, it's about operations: where we have such diverse activities happening in different locations and departments, it can create frustration where there is a lack of understanding, so this is an opportunity to collaborate and build that understanding," she says.

She also believes that the initiative

should help staff to improve their skills, which is obviously something that would benefit both individual participants and the company. "The benefit that we are pushing, and that people can see, is around knowledge sharing and gaining skills," Ms McDowell says.

"Where we have somebody who wants to progress into a management role or into another part of the business, for instance, this allows them to get some experience and widen their skill set."

Requiring commitment

The initiative also taps into Colas Group's commitment to diversity and inclusion by providing opportunities that people might not have thought were available to them. "It also opens

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up opportunities for employees who might not have considered a particular career path," she says.

Ms McDowell also recognises the potential challenges. "While we expect to see the benefits, what we're looking at is having an experienced person coming out of part of the business and an inexperienced one coming in," she says. "It's going to take a lot of time and commitment from a manager's point of view because they are going to have to train people up. But the operations teams are committed to giving people these development opportunities because they see the overall benefits."

Leveraging scale

Clearly, it is not yet possible to assess how successful the Job Enrichment Career Mobility Scheme will be, but it is already apparent that it is just one part of Colas Group's strategy to encourage greater mobility within the business.

Last year, for instance, the company launched a global mobility policy to ensure vacancies are advertised across the group so that everyone is aware of the opportunities available. Ms McDowell says the impact of promoting vacancies in 50 countries is already being felt.

Then, in September this year, Colas UK launched an international graduate initiative that involves two graduates from UK universities joining the company for a three-year programme, during which they spend two out of their three years working in another country.

"In the same vein, all the other countries in the BIMEA region will be recruiting international graduates as well," says Ms McDowell. "So, we will be getting people coming here to gain experience, too."

The overarching purpose of the mobility initiatives is to leverage the scale of the company to improve people's working lives and share knowledge.

"We do such a broad range of activities, both in the UK and across the group, so it's really good for people to gain experience and to learn more about the company," she says.

"If we've got people going out and seeing how other people work, it is a real opportunity to enhance innovation."



Workers need to establish the value that would be gained from a job switch

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