

GETTING STARTED WITH ASSIGNMENTOLOGY

By George Hallenbeck, Ph.D., Pushp Deep Gupta, J. Evelyn Orr, M.A.

A CASE STUDY

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Assignmentology is the art and science of matching people to jobs. The objective is to provide them with specific on-the-job experiences that will develop mission-critical competencies. When best practices are followed, assignmentology can achieve the dual purpose of moving the business forward in the near term (by putting the right people in the right jobs at the right time) while developing the skills that individuals will need for even bigger assignments in the future. Many clients are interested in implementing the principles of assignmentology but some have difficulty moving from concept to application.

Developing a robust assignmentology process requires a keen understanding of the organization's talent, key jobs, and the skills needed to drive the business forward. Given the complexities involved, it can take several years of designing, building, experimenting and refining to get sustainable results. It helps to know where to get started along this path.

We sat down with a client, a privately-held 1,000-employee medical device manufacturer, who has made significant strides in building an assignmentology-based system of development. The client shared the steps they took to get the system up and running and reflected on some of the lessons learned thus far in their journey.



The Business Need

In the company's efforts to identify and grow high-potential employees it became apparent that the perception of them as well-rounded, versatile employees didn't always hold true. They did not consistently perform as expected when they were placed into challenging new assignments. The conclusion was often that they were "not quite there yet." The company needed to find timely and efficient ways to provide high potentials with the skills and experiences they needed before they got the call to the big promotion. Assignmentology held the promise of providing a short-term, targeted development experience that would prepare high potentials for critical next steps in their career.

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A secondary concern driving the company towards an assignmentology solution was that communication and collaboration across functions was not being optimized. Like many organizations, relationships between functions had become siloed and stagnant. Assignmentology offered an opportunity to move employees across functions and stimulate more cross-functional coordination and partnering.

The Process

The process began with an extended pilot phase. One high potential employee from manufacturing was placed into an 18-month assignment designed to provide broad exposure to the HR function.

The pilot was a clear success. The employee thrived in the role and enhanced many of her skills, especially in the area of people management. She brought a strong systems perspective to her HR role that influenced the approach of many of her colleagues. Her connections back to manufacturing helped stimulate more communication and relationship building between the functions. Upon her return to manufacturing she was much better equipped to deal with people issues and had grown as a manager. She was also inspired to provide her employees with exposure to new skill-building experiences in the hope that they might benefit in the same way she had. Finally, the HR exposure assignment has since become a permanent developmental role within the organization.

Following the success of the pilot, the CEO was encouraged to clear the way for more up-and-coming employees to participate in similar assignments. After considering the various types of developmental job opportunities available, the organization chose to focus on project-based assignments as the means to give high potentials needed on-the-job exposure to development. On occasion, elements of other developmental jobs such as international exposure or managing a turn-around effort are also present in the assignment. Most projects are designed to last 3-6 months. The position of the person transferring to the new assignment is usually backfilled by a temporary employee.

While the process does not yet consider a granular point-to-point match of person to job, strong efforts are made to consider the fit between the person, the type of job and the skills that might be developed as a result. An emphasis is placed on learning in action. While coaching and mentoring are available, individuals are primarily turned loose to experiment, explore, and learn.

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Outcomes

The assignmentology process has allowed the organization to give multiple employees exposure to powerful on-the-job experiences that have left them with stronger skills and greater readiness to tackle new challenges. Many have successfully gone on to more significant roles in the organization. For example, the individual involved in the pilot assignment in HR has completed a number of subsequent development assignments and is now being called upon to lead a strategically important international start-up operation. Competencies that are frequently developed through the assignmentology process include Business Acumen, Sizing Up People, Motivating Others, Dealing with Ambiguity, and Process Management.

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Some challenges have also arisen. Initially, the organization often sought out the same small pool of talent for development assignments. While things were working well with the assignments themselves, bench strength for critical roles remained weak because the talent pipeline wasn't being filled up quickly enough. As a result, the organization has executed a broader and deeper search for talent that is qualified and will benefit from such assignments. On occasion, individuals are incorrectly placed into an assignment. This is often the result of pressure by that person's manager for them to receive an opportunity. The organization has been successful at rescue and recovery in these circumstances but it can take a while for negative perceptions to be overcome. Finally, the organization has sometimes struggled with how to keep individuals' stimulated and challenged upon returning to their original roles.

Lessons Learned

A key to the program's success has been its organic, grassroots approach aimed at creating awareness and interest amongst key stakeholders. Rather than push for a solution with senior management, the HR staff sought to first establish a common language around leadership and performance throughout the organization that was rooted in the language of competencies. Once senior managers began to actively think about talent management in common, relatable terms the momentum began to build and permission was granted to try out new solutions such as assignmentology. Once those solutions proved successful, it wasn't long before management began to take the initiative to generate ideas and encourage more new solutions.

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The program has also been run with progress, not perfection, in mind. Managing the scope, trying things out, and learning from both successes and mistakes have been the guiding principles of the program. The desire of the HR group to experiment and learn as they go has even inspired other departments to break the mold with their processes and initiatives. In fact, HR has gotten the reputation as the hub of innovative practices within the organization. As a result, demand for HR services has grown.

For other clients wishing to follow a similar path, the VP of HR for the company had the following advice: "First, get the executive team on board. Educate them and make them aware. Start slow with implementation and manage the scope. Constantly strive towards building a common language around leadership and talent. Once you've laid the groundwork, you can take it anywhere."



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George Hallenbeck, Ph.D., is Director, Intellectual Property Development with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting.



Pushp Deep Gupta is a Managing Principal for Korn/Ferry International's Leadership and Talent Consulting business. Based in Singapore.



J. Evelyn Orr, M.A. is an Intellectual Property Development Consultant with Korn/Ferry Leadership and Talent Consulting.

Mis-Assignmentology – Learning from Others' Mistakes

Matching people to challenging assignments for the purpose of accelerating development can be a strategic way of growing talent, but it needs to be implemented with care. In this case, a large retailer with multiple brands had informally practiced assignmentology by identifying high potential talent and providing challenging placements, but did not plan how the talent would be re-deployed when the project was either completed or abandoned by the company.

In one example, the company initiated a start-up—a new brand reaching a new market. Top talent was tapped from all over the company. These high potential employees were relocated and worked diligently on the start-up brand. However, after just a couple of years, the start-up was deemed a failure. The company took a loss on its balance sheet and also took a loss in terms of talent. With all of the high potential employees' previous positions back-filled there was no where for them to be placed when the start-up was shut down and their jobs were eliminated.

In another example, the company organized a special task force—a strategic initiative that took 3 years to complete. A few dozen high caliber employees were identified for the roles on the project. The project was successfully implemented, one department at a time until the entire company adopted the new system. At the successful close of the project, the high potential employees were responsible for finding a new home. A few employees found open recs that matched their skills and interests. Many employees did not. Again, when the positions were eliminated, many highly gifted people were exited from the company.

One unintended consequence of this approach to assignmentology is that when employees are tapped on the shoulder, they no longer view a full-time stretch assignment as an opportunity to develop their skills and advance their career. They view the assignment as a dead end where there are no guarantees of their being reabsorbed back into the business when the project is complete. In this case, assignmentology was practiced without an eye on the end game—to grow and retain top talent for key positions.

About Korn/Ferry International

Korn/Ferry International, with more than 90 offices in 39 countries, is a premier global provider of talent management solutions. Based in Los Angeles, the firm delivers an array of solutions that help clients to identify, deploy, develop, retain and reward their talent.

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