



Photo: PCI

## Looking Down the Organizational Stovepipe

Could the short-term results be obscuring good long-term vision?

William Nickas, *Editor-in-Chief*

Amazing for me to think that this is my 20th editorial on these pages. One of my themes over the years has been to share stories that challenge bridge professionals to expand their thinking about business and professional needs. These messages included topics such as teamwork, staying engaged with the profession, and encouraging them to look into who or what causes change in the industry and our profession. A recent conversation with a former colleague falls under this same theme: how do we encourage employees to be experts but not stunt their professional growth.

My former colleague was urgently searching for qualified concrete design engineers. We discussed how long it takes before their engineers-in-training and young professional engineers “move forward” to become project managers. It usually happens quickly, and we agreed that the time is much too short. Generally, companies need to nurture their young engineers and reward “technocratic growth.” As used here, “technocracy” is a system of management where decision-makers are selected based on technological knowledge and expertise. However, as I thought about the conversation, I realized that the issue at this company was not unique.

Are companies pursuing management practices and/or organizational structures to encourage cross-training early at the expense of more thoroughly developing future subject-matter experts in their fields? Vertical movement within the organization can be a detriment to highly skilled technicians and designers who might otherwise love the technical work they do if they had other opportunities for recognition and reward beyond a move up the corporate ladder.

### The Corporate Stovepipe

Word Spy defines stovepipe organization as “An organizational model in which departments, managers, and employees have a narrow and rigid set of responsibilities.” A frequent challenge in these types of organizations is to maintain internal communication across departments. However, in working to maintain or develop good internal communications, extreme care must be exercised to not override or even compete with the development of a strong component of subject-matter experts.

Management expert E.J. Muller said, “One of the first things company executives confronted was the failure of the traditional ‘stovepipe organization’ to generate greater responsiveness to customers. . . . That realization led

*There are generally five organizational structures: functional, divisional, matrix, team, and network.*

**Functional**—organized by broad business activities—Executive leadership, Finance, Marketing, HR, and Production. Very organized chain of command so that workers can easily communicate within their unit. Interdepartmental coordination and communication suffers.

**Divisional**—work groups that align according to customers or geography. Some duplicative functions and less efficiency and economy. May cause interdivisional rivalries. Advantage is it serves the customer better.

**Matrix**—combines divisional into functional. Teams benefit from the expertise of the members while the functional hierarchy evaluates the business activities. Disadvantage is everyone has two bosses.

**Team**—company operates without chain of command. Virtually flat organizational chart. Without a hierarchy oversight, the risk is employee control. Staff must be trained for broad challenges.

**Network**—company employs fewer subject-matter experts and relies on a cadre of outside companies to fill business functions.

management to examine ‘pipeline,’ rather than stovepipe, management concepts.” These organizations work to grow leaders through the pipeline and reward employees that identify areas of focused expertise.

The business concept to break down internal stovepipes started as an effort to create better internal communication with the end results focused on customer service. However, it may have, in fact, created a work place environment that diminishes the growth and development of subject-matter experts. We must develop pragmatic, tangible business solutions to avoid the reasons people and organizations drift back to stovepipes, without losing the pipeline to developing our skilled technical experts.

What is your experience with the effective development of technical experts in your company or others you’ve worked for? Are gifted engineers asked to take on too much to enhance their earning potential, to the detriment of the engineering department? Do you agree that we still need the wizards and not everyone needs or wants to be the creative one? I’d appreciate hearing your experiences on this topic.

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