

Report on the Benefits of Internal Secondment

This report produced by Organisational Development will provide data to improve procedures, validate the benefits of the Secondment Guidelines and inform a Career Development Policy

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INTRODUCTION

The Division of Human Resources (Staff Development) put in place in April 2004 new guidelines for internal staff secondments. These guidelines outline the process and conditions that apply to establishing and managing internal secondments for academic and general staff. Secondment opportunities may be identified by Supervisors, Managers, Heads of School, staff members or the Division of Human Resources.

Staff Development thought it timely to validate the benefits of secondment by conducting a survey.

APPROACH

Thirty general staff who experienced secondment in the period 2003-2004 were surveyed. This survey was conducted on-line using the program 'Survey Monkey'.

Twenty four staff members replied and follow-up interviews were conducted via telephone with some respondents. This was a response rate of 80%. NOTE: According to Alford (1994), organisations can usually expect a 60-70% response if the logistics are feasible..

The majority of secondees were permanent members of CSU staff and their secondment involved a transfer for a period of time to another Division or Faculty. The exception was one respondent who was seconded from another organisation to CSU.

The respondents are listed by campus and gender in Table 1 and by length of service in Table 2.

Table 1: Respondents by Campus and Gender

Bathurst	Wagga	Thurgoona	External Organisation	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL
7	15	1	1	24	8	16	24

Table 2: Length of Service

9 had served < 5 years
15 had served >5 years

Comments from some participants extracted from "free responses" have been included throughout this report and are marked in italics. "These comments give deeper insight into this survey where issues were not covered". (Alford, G. 1994).

FINDINGS

Benefits of the secondment experience to the individual

All secondees reported professional and personal development during the secondment. About half were seconded to a higher level position and the others to a position at their substantive level. The majority of respondents applied for a particular position to increase their skills level and to maximise the opportunities to work in an area they were interested in. Some (3) secondees had identified secondment as a possible professional development strategy in their performance management plan. A few (3) participants applied for a secondment for other reasons eg increased hours of work, return to work after maternity leave or work injury redeployment.

“I feel that secondments are great for gaining new skills and meeting new people. But hopefully a secondment for me will or could turn into a full time job. This is what I am looking for in the near future.”

“Because I have always worked in the Schools etc, I now have a better understanding of how (a Division) works..... I love working in (this new area) and would like to further my education in this field.”

“The opportunity to undertake a secondment within the same School and Faculty has been an ideal way for me to increase my skill base, gain further professional experience and receive monetary remuneration for doing so. The main boundary I can foresee post accepting a secondment will be the transition of returning to my substantive position Secondment has definitely been a positive experience.”

Potential benefits to the University

The potential benefits of the secondment experience to the University are:

- Cost effectiveness (no external advertising);
- Minimal training/induction;
- Staff with a broader knowledge of the University; and
- Transfer of knowledge to the new position and back to the substantive position, encouraging “horizontal integration”.

Secondment process

Thirty five percent of secondees had initiated the secondment themselves and sixty four percent were approached indirectly or directly by managers.

Sixty one percent of substantive positions were filled during the secondees’ absence and thirty nine percent were not. In the latter situations, a casual may have been employed for one or two days per week and/or the work was absorbed by others.

Nearly all respondents were happy with the transition from their substantive to seconded position.

“Staff in the secondment area were very supportive and helpful.....this made the learning process much more effective. You experience a very steep learning curve when you go into a new position and try to be operational from day one.”

Two secondees have returned to their substantive positions. The job description of their substantive position had changed somewhat during their absence and changes had not been conveyed prior to their return.

One substantive position had been made redundant due to review and recommendation to relocate the position to another campus. The secondment was part of a redeployment process.

Issues in the transition to the secondment position

Although the majority of secondees were happy with the transition into their new role, the following issues were raised by five respondents which are worth noting:

- Too much time was spent training people who took over the substantive position;
- The reporting structure was not clear to the secondee taking on his or her new role;
- There was no formal orientation to the new workplace;
- The substantive appointment needed to be maintained to minimise pressure on fulfilling the tasks of two roles, whilst the appointment was not filled; and
- Leave arrangements were cumbersome.

“To be forced to take the leave, then to come back and have to work twice as hard to catch up on the backlog was counter-productive. I appreciate the spirit of intent but in all honesty - Secondment isn't THAT difficult. If selection processes are effective, it should be a seamless transfer, a matter of "sliding" easily into the other position and then "slipping" straight back into your job once the Secondment is completed. As it turned out, I had two lots of 2 weeks' leave within a 12 week period - not something I would have chosen to do in a very busy organisation.”

Issues in returning to the substantive position

Overall, the majority of respondents felt that their secondments had been of benefit in gaining new skills in the short term but were concerned that when they return to their substantive position the knowledge and experience gained will be wasted. They expressed a “feeling of going backwards” that may create negative effects at a professional and personal level.

“.....with the skills that I have gained in my secondment, I feel that I will possibly be overqualified when my secondment ends, with 2-3 years experience in this position, I'm wondering if it will be possible to upgrade my substantive when I return to it?”

“I'm not convinced that secondments do actually help one to progress within the university, because so few higher positions become available, and the experience one gains may lose currency in the intervening period. I dislike going back to the substantive position because it feels like going backwards if one has been acting at a higher level. It can therefore have negative elements at the personal level.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the secondment issues raised by the respondents, better guidance and planning, ideally within the performance management scheme context, needs to occur at two points of the secondment process: (1) at the point of departure from the substantive position; and (2) at the point of return.

At the point of departure, it is recommended that:

1. Counselling/discussion with the manager occur before embarking on the secondment; and
2. Induction be carried out prior to the transition into the seconded position.

At the point of return, it is recommended that:

3. Better communication occur between managers to convey changes made in the substantive position before the secondee's return.

Follow-up actions are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Follow-Up Actions

FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS	RESPONSIBILITY AND TIMEFRAME
Circulate the report to Division of Human Resources staff and publish the survey report on the Division of Human Resources Organisational Development web site.	Dolores Dawson – Nov 2004
Present initial findings at 'Stepping Out' conference	Hedy Bryant – Oct 2004
Promote secondment guidelines to managers. Put on discussion agenda for Middle Management Forums.	Jenny Bell – 2005
Review Secondment Guidelines in light of survey information.	Narelle Marr – March 2005
A follow-up survey to be carried out once secondees have returned to their substantive positions.	Dolores Dawson – November 2005

Reference:

Alford, Geoff 1994, Sicore International, <http://www.sicore.com.au>, August.