



**ROSS GROUP  
TRAINING**



## Cross Training



**GLOBAL  
TRAINING &  
DEVELOPMENT**



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The better everyone knows everyone else's job, the better the company runs.

During a company's frenzied start-up days, staffers often have so many different duties that some entrepreneurial companies forego job descriptions entirely. Later, as companies grow, employees tend to specialize. But some CEOs argue that it's important for employees to remain flexible. The better **everyone knows everyone else's job**, the thinking goes, the better the company runs.

To foster that kind of flexibility, more companies are cross-training -- instructing employees in the essential elements of a number of different jobs within the organization, regardless of whether they are likely ever to perform those jobs. Despite the costs of such training, proponents say the benefits are numerous.

One obvious benefit is higher employee morale. Green Pages, a computer reseller in Kittery, Maine, which had 1998 sales of \$88 million, puts each new employee through two months of intensive training in all job functions. Customer support people get sales training, salespeople learn about purchasing and credit services, and so on. That, according to CEO Kurt Bleicken, promotes mutual understanding. "When people are familiar with what the rest of the company is doing," he says, "it breaks down the typical 'us versus them' attitude."





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Cross-training also helps companies ensure that:

**Every employee can help a customer.** At The Chip, a Valencia, Calif., computer technical support and repair company with 1998 revenues of \$4 million, everyone is trained in computer repair -- including the receptionist. That way, whoever answers the phone is able to address technical problems. According to president Chip Meyer, the company phones can act as a defacto help desk for clients.

**Every employee knows how to sell.** For Nick Nicholson, CEO of a recycling and waste management company in Columbus, Ohio, with 1998 revenues of \$40 million, it was important that each of his employees understand the sales process. All Ecology Group staff members received sales training, including classes on good questioning and listening skills. Once, a member of the accounting staff was on the phone with a client who had a huge overbilling problem. In the process of clarifying the problem, the employee identified an opportunity to extend the Ecology Group's agreement with the client, involving more locations and more business. "I don't think he could have done that if he hadn't had sales training," says Nicholson.

**No employee is indispensable.** Kurt Bleicken of Green Pages, which is a two-time *Inc.* 500 company, also uses cross-training to counteract short- and long-term leaves of absence, such as maternity leaves, among his 125 employees. He has two highly cross-trained individuals whom he calls "Green Page runners." These employees can fill many positions in the company -- purchasing, sales, credit, services, or accounting. And they can sub for almost any length of time, covering everything from sick days or vacations to extended sabbaticals. Of course, since the runners are generalists by definition, they're not always as effective as regular employees. But when you're anxious to keep the sales flow even, for instance, "it's better than starting over from square one," Bleicken says.

