

IS WORKPLACE HIERARCHY BECOMING OBSOLETE?

BY DORIE CLARK

VIEW/REVIEW



Juniper Networks, the networking giant, doesn't have it easy. Located in the heart of Silicon Valley, they're locked in a ferocious battle for talent against big-brand neighbors like Google, Facebook and Apple. That's why, says Juniper executive vice president of human resources Steven Rice, they have to offer something different. But it's not an arms race over who has the best free cafeteria food or pet-sitting services. Instead, it comes down to one question Juniper asks at the beginning of the recruitment process: "Where will you do your best work?"

Says Rice, "We're able to attract and retain talent because of our belief in how work should be done, and how we interact and collaborate. While there's a shortage of talent, we can still find the right people for Juniper, even though we're competing with companies that are in the press a lot, because talent selects itself based on how companies organize and structure work."

So what's Juniper's secret sauce? Rice says it's a willingness to radically re-examine assumptions about the workplace. "I feel we're on the cusp of what I call the next generation of work design," he says. Working with professor Robert Cross of the University of Virginia, Juniper has created "network maps" of its relationship with two major customers, and has plans in the works for several more. The process is intricate—and revealing. "We've mapped 900 individuals that surround a particular customer and then we evaluate who the connectors are in terms of how information flows, why people go to them, and if the organizational structure is an inhibitor or an enhancer in getting the work done," says Rice. "What is the structure and hierarchy we need in place for the next generation of work? What are the implications for how many layers of management you need, and do you organize around your products, or around a customer, or maybe a combination?"

Adopting a "network" outlook—appropriate, given Juniper's business—can lead to new efficiencies and better ways of serving customers. "A network looks for the easiest path to move information and context at a very fast rate," says Rice.

"You're not concerned with hierarchy, and there's an assumption that information should flow freely and frequently, and go to the source of who needs that information in order to solve customer problems. What differentiates us in terms of where you can do your best work is looking at how to organize around the free flow of information that allows you to do your best, unencumbered by hierarchy."

Juniper is also embracing other cutting-edge research, including insights into the neuroscience of leadership by David Rock, which has informed their perspective on employee professional development. "A lot of leadership development training prescribes that you need to behave in a certain way," says Rice, "and we want to break that paradigm. There are thought patterns all of us have that are entrenched, and forcing people to comply with a set of principles is an unnatural way to think about it."

Just as two people will configure their laptops differently—one preferring a million files on their desktop, and the other organizing them within folders—we all have natural habits of thought we fall back on, says Rice. "We're trying to understand how that translates to how they coach, mentor and define work for the people who report to them, or how people like to work together in teams. Neuroscience and leadership helps us appreciate those differences and how to use them as a positive, rather than getting people to perform in a certain way."

As Rice sees it, the future of work is flexible and customized—responsive both to individual learning styles and the unique needs of customers. A factory-era, hierarchical mentality is rapidly becoming obsolete. "Organizations that are able to be very clear and deliberate about how culture, talent and structure come together are the ones that will continue to thrive and out-innovate their competitors," he says. "My own mission is to figure that out better than our competitors—and that's how Juniper's going to win."

Is your company breaking down traditional hierarchy? How are you organizing now, and what results are you seeing? *

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