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## Who's the boss? It's getting harder to tell

**E**mployers' and employees' tasks are overlapping more than ever, and that's causing problems for both.

Research commissioned by Randstad USA, a global human resources consulting firm, recently identified the trend — a blurring of roles — and showed the problems it causes for employers.

Randstad attributed the phenomenon to excessive time at the office — a median of 42 hours per week for employees and 50 for employers. As a result, its 2007 World of Work report said, roughly two-thirds of both groups said that roles are blurring, with employers taking on tasks that employees can't or won't do, and winding up "rubbing shoulders with employees around the copy machine."

Although that situation might seem like something for employees to cheer about, it's not.

Jim Stroup, management consultant at San Diego's Bosphorus Business Consulting, maintains that "inadvertent cross-training in a team environment is usually a problem. In fact, in such cases it actually isn't being 'done.' It is just 'happening' as a result of a systemic shortcoming." These stopgap measures offer only a short-term solution.

Executive consultant Stefanie Smith of Stratex Corp. in New York City says that the increased "speed with which leaders are delegating tasks" also contributes to the blurring.

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"Ten years ago," she says, "a president has an idea, calls two to three direct reports, discusses the task and decides time frames. This is done formally or not. Today, the same guy at the airport, waiting for the plane to board, uses a BlackBerry to fire to off someone, 'Look into this.' The person responds immediately by working on the task or delegating it.

Mr. Stroup says this manager is "abrogating duties," not truly delegating. It's "firefighting ... a potential morale-buster."

If long hours and high productivity demands fuel role-blurring, another contributor is the democratization of the workplace. At least four factors are driving democratization: employee attitude, technology, insufficient grasp of the nature of lifelong learning and organizational inattention.

Many employees think that they can do just about anything, and many employers believe the same (or at least act as if they do). Democratization breaks down

## JOBS = & Education =

the walls that defined roles represent.

Willing employees may be undercutting themselves — losing focus — by adding new, unfamiliar "accomplishments" to their list of tasks. "People want their boss and their colleagues to know what they do, and they want to succeed in their responsibilities, and be recognized for these achievements," Ms. Smith says. Their zeal in promoting the new tasks muddies the water.

### Technology and learning

Technology, the great leveler, has contributed to the feeling that anyone can write, design, sell, document, whatever. We need to return technology to its rightful spot, as a tool.

The emphasis on lifelong learning, much acquired on the job, also contributes to the problem. Employees know that to protect their careers and to keep work rewarding, they may have to stretch themselves. Experience gained on the job through training, while necessary, becomes a substitute for true education. It may devolve into learning by the seat of your pants.

### Get organized

Organizational inattention also contributes to declining formality "in job and task identity, which is essential for job fulfillment and pride," Ms. Smith says.

"This decline is evident when job descriptions aren't updated to reflect current realities, compensation and title."

She believes that high performers are at greatest risk here, because they're turned to most frequently to get something done. She recommends that "diffused job identities" be addressed in quarterly conversations.

So do you jump in to save the day or your job? Do you hang back and risk all?

Don't let "It's not in my job description" become your mantra. Get formal cross-training and formal education. If your employer won't help you, show him the door.

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