

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Out of Scope: When Your Job Description Takes an Unexpected Turn

As companies downsize or restructure in response to the current economic climate, workers are obviously worried about the security of their jobs. But even if you're among those not directly affected, a changing work environment can still present some difficult challenges. Despite the fact that budgets for staff are shrinking, employers still need people to get the job done. This means many workers are finding their job descriptions expanding to take on work previously done by others.

While more responsibility can give you the chance to shine at work, it may also become a major source of workplace stress and anxiety. This is especially true if you're asked to:

- Add more projects to an already overwhelming workload
- Take on tasks outside the scope of your education, training or experience
- Do work normally done by someone more junior or senior than your current role
- Perform new duties that you don't feel comfortable with or enjoy doing

In these situations, you may find yourself having to maintain the difficult balance between being a willing team player while setting reasonable boundaries and expectations. Fortunately, there are many strategies that you can use to successfully adapt to changing job requirements:

Assess the situation. Start by objectively figuring out what a new job requirement actually involves. How much time will the tasks need? Will you have to learn new skills? If yes, what will it take to get them? A realistic assessment of the situation can help you better prepare a strategy to adapt.

Remember that attitude is everything. Companies value employees who demonstrate a willingness to learn, challenge themselves and help out their co-workers. Even if you're unhappy with how your role has evolved, keeping an open mind and positive attitude can help you make the best of the situation.

Set realistic expectations. If you don't currently have the skills to complete a new assignment, have an honest, upfront discussion about this with your manager. Explain how much time and effort is needed before you're able to properly complete the new tasks. Setting realistic expectations at the beginning can help to avoid conflict later in the project.

Communicate your career goals. Keep your supervisor aware of your career goals and preferred tasks. Accept unrelated assignments with a positive attitude, while at the same time conveying that the new tasks aren't what you'd like to be doing long-term. Continue to look for opportunities to gain experience doing the type of work you enjoy.

Track your time. Keep track of the amount of time, effort and responsibility your new duties actually take up. This information can help you have informed discussions with your manager and possibly help in re-negotiating your job description if necessary.

Think long term. Despite the short-term difficulty of adapting to an expanded role, the increased responsibility can have a very positive long-term benefit on your career. Gaining new skills and experience with a positive attitude can pave the way for a promotion, pay increase or opportunities to work on preferred assignments.

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Consider training. There are many affordable (even free) options out there that can help you acquire the new skills you need to do a better job on the new tasks at hand. These include the Internet, self-help books, adult education courses and your company's own training programs. Where realistic, look for ways to adapt to change by expanding your skill set. Who knows, you might even discover that you love the new task assigned to you.

Connect with counterparts. Your peers can be a wealth of information! Talk to others who have done similar tasks, both within and outside your organization. They may be able to offer advice, resources and possibly even help teach you some new skills.

Learn to set limits. If you have a legitimate reason for not being able to take on a new assignment, don't be afraid to express it. Valid reasons to refuse work might include:

- Taking on the new assignment will cause the quality of your other work to suffer
- There aren't enough hours in the day to complete all of your duties
- You lack necessary skills for the new project and won't be able to acquire them before the deadline

If you're forced to refuse work, be sure to offer alternative suggestions wherever possible.

As with any change, it takes time, effort and a positive attitude to successfully adapt to new job requirements. But in the long run, taking on new tasks and developing new skills and experience—while maintaining healthy boundaries—will ensure you remain a valued member of your team and organization, regardless of the economy.