



Effective Learning and Development Programs Are Crucial

Future-proof your workforce with an effective learning and development strategy.

You've invested heavily in your workforce, ensuring that you have the right people in the right positions and are prepared to meet today's challenges. But how can you protect yourself against emerging challenges in order to stay viable well into the future? The key is in building an effective learning and development program.

The Value of Learning and Development

When constructed correctly, learning and development programs can do so much more than teach employees basic skills. They can boost retention and engagement, reduce risks, inspire consumer confidence, drive profitability, and, ultimately, future-proof your company.

In a recent white paper titled "The Strategic Value of Workplace Training and Development," eLeap™, a learning management system company, explored the benefits of a robust learning and development program in depth. They uncovered nine key benefits:

Productivity. Learning and development can help individual employees perform their daily responsibilities in a more efficient

and effective manner, which yields better results enterprise-wide. Plus, with employees able to produce more, you may be able to reduce overall labor costs and increase profits.

Quality. Whether you're in a goods or service business, providing the proper learning and development opportunities for your staff will enhance the end product for your customers. This will reduce operating costs and, once again, spur profits.

Empowerment. Learning and development opportunities that expose your workforce to new methodologies and new skills can inspire confidence in your employees and encourage them to be more self-sufficient.

Alignment. An effective learning and development program can educate individuals about the overall goals of your company. By letting employees know where you are headed and how they can contribute, they will feel inspired and motivated to align with your mission. Lack of alignment is often a stumbling block between an organization's objectives and its workforce's productivity because employees too often are left in the dark when it comes to where they fit in the big picture.

Teamwork. An ability to work together is essential for all employees at all levels of your company. Learning and development programs can encourage teamwork and build skills that facilitate trust among colleagues.

Liability. Perhaps the most basic, but essential, form of learning and development is safety training. To reduce workplace accidents, you must effectively communicate proper procedures and the importance of following safety guidelines. By increasing and promoting safety awareness through training, you can reduce your liabilities as well as your workers' compensation costs. You'll also benefit from improved productivity because employees will be less likely to miss work.

Risk. In addition to avoiding physical accidents, learning and development can help your organization avoid the pitfalls of process mistakes. Employees should be empowered to recognize situations with potential risks of all types—procedural, regulatory, profitability, legal, etc.—and know how to take corrective action to effectively overcome them.

Professional development. At the core of any successful learning and development strategy is the

benefit derived by your employees. Learning and development helps your employees gain a greater perspective in their jobs and often in their personal lives. By continually bringing your professionals up to date on current best practices and promoting new skills, your workforce will be well prepared to keep you compliant, cost effective, and productive at all times.

Business conduct and social responsibility. Building a company that has a strong reputation as a good corporate citizen is extremely important in today's economy. Corporate citizenship and social responsibility can position you as an employer of choice and help you attract top talent. It can also help separate you in the mind of customers and investors—many people prefer to do business with organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to their communities. By investing in your people, you'll be demonstrating your commitment, and this will give you a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Another Advantage

In addition to the important benefits noted by eLeap, there's another significant advantage for companies that invest in learning and

development—optimization of an aging workforce. Even as young professionals and Millennials enter the workforce in record numbers, older workers on the other end of the spectrum are staying with their companies longer than ever before.

Peter Cappelli is a noted economic and business expert and the George W. Taylor Professor of Management at The Wharton School and Director of Wharton's Center for Human Resources. In an article for *TLNT*, "The Great Workplace Challenge: How to Make Better Use of Older Workers," he and Bill Novelli, former CEO of AARP, point out that attracting, retaining, and motivating older workers holds tremendous value for businesses.

"Older workers are a tremendous asset for almost any organization. In terms of work ethic, absenteeism, and turnover, they score better than their younger peers," they said. "Learning and development can help older employees extend their careers while augmenting the already considerable value they offer. It's also a great way to build your reputation as a great corporate citizen."

"Overall, efforts to make better use of older individuals in the workplace represent one of the

greatest opportunities available for improving society," Cappelli added. "It is about the only way to provide the resources necessary to pay for longer lives; it helps address exactly the needs employers say they have for a skilled, just-in-time workforce; and it provides some of the best opportunities for older individuals to stay active and engaged."

Characteristics of an Effective Learning and Development Program

The benefits of an effective learning and development program are clear, but going about implementing one can be a little bit murky. In a 2009 research survey and white paper, "The Future of Learning and Development," Future Think LLC, a leading training and development company, offered practical advice you can use to develop an effective program for your business.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

Stop offering boring courses. Learning and development programs need participation to be effective. Unfortunately, the quickest and most common way to discourage people from participating is to offer dull, bland courses that do nothing but put attendees to

sleep and keep them from coming back.

Take a proactive role in assessing your training programs to determine how well they're delivered. Would you be excited by the content, the speaker, the format, and the overall presentation? If not, chances are your workforce won't either. If you want to get more out of your training investment, you should align the training with attendee expectations and attitudes.

Start focusing on timely topics. To ensure that learning and development makes a true business impact on your organization, the program must address topics that will help drive success, not just build skills.

Focus on practical, contemporary topics that are of value to your organization. Survey respondents cited topics such as social networking, collaboration, and competitive trends as examples of subjects that can help build skills and business performance simultaneously.

Embrace flexible, blended learning. There are many different approaches to learning and development: in-house classroom courses, outsourced solutions, tuition reimbursement, team-building exercises, and Internet-based learning (or e-Learning). It's important to offer a variety of learning and development outlets for your employees while still adhering to organizational realities and budgets.

For example, if you have a very decentralized workforce, then face-to-face learning may not be practical, and Internet courses would be more cost effective. Likewise, if you have a mix of generations in your

workforce, you need to develop training methods that resonate with people of different ages. Flexibility, as is the case with most aspects of business, is essential.

Learning and development needs to involve participants and encourage them to actually participate.

Get to the point. Lengthy courses and speakers prone to diatribes are a big barrier to learning, according to survey participants. It's important to deliver your message quickly and efficiently and not waste your employees' time. Assess whether your courses are too long and/or too verbose. If so, can they be reorganized?

Good course design needs to be pushed to the next level to better respect participants' time—and better leverage their brainpower. Gone are the days when people could sit in a classroom without multiple interruptions or the fear of political backlash. Stress levels and attention spans being what they are today (short), “micro-courses” are seen as the wave of the future.

Collaborative and experiential approaches are a must. Learning and development needs to do more than simply *speak* to people in a classroom or at a desk. Instead, it must *involve* participants and encourage them to actually participate.

Focus on promoting inter-

action, and stay away from presentation-heavy courses with wordy, seemingly endless PowerPoint slides. Strong courses should be engaging, experiential, balanced and team-exercise-driven. Technology isn't a requirement for collaboration. Instructor-led courses done in an interesting way can be very engaging without the use of software, hardware, or gadgets.

Inspiration is necessary. Passion is contagious. If your goal as a learning and development champion is to help people reach their potential, you must demonstrate your commitment and enthusiasm for that goal. Make sure your instructors, your courses, and your tools reflect your passion and don't come off as cookie-cutter solutions. Authenticity and genuine excitement will resonate with your workforce and make your efforts truly influential.

Tapping into the potential of your workforce will make your company stronger today and tomorrow. This is especially important in the wake of the recession that saw many organizations slash their training budgets or eliminate programs altogether in order to meet budgetary demands. Now, businesses looking to distance themselves from the competition on the road to recovery can find a distinct advantage by being at the forefront of learning and development. After all, investing in talent is one of the best ways to ensure a high return, both in the short term and the long term. **SF**

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