

Why good management is so important to employee development

The world of work is transforming faster than ever. To manage the change, employers must adopt a flexible approach that encourages staff to develop new skills



To create a learning culture, leaders need to encourage experimentation and embolden others to learn from failure. This accelerates the process of innovation and development

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is upon us. While companies are always quick to assume substantial change is just over the horizon, the reality is that it's already here. Technological developments have already begun to reshape the world and the way we work. **According to Gartner**, many businesses are striving to digitalise their procedures without first ensuring their workforce is able to maintain pace with the latest innovations.

Many industries require candidates to pass increasingly demanding competency tests and many employers now demand that workers continually learn and grow to keep up with fast-paced technological change. However, it is up to each business to build an environment where its staff can blossom.

Retain and retrain

Automation is set to have an impact on jobs across all sectors. A recent **McKinsey survey** revealed that approximately 60 percent of global CEOs expect that up to half of their organisation's workforce will need retraining or replacing within five years. An additional 28 percent of executives anticipate this to be the case for over half of their workforce. Meanwhile, more than one third of survey respondents said their organisations were unprepared to address the skill gaps they anticipate.

Firms cannot merely hire their way out of their problems; filling the skill gap also demands better employee retention

The reality is, though, existing workforces are a goldmine for hidden talent. Businesses may be surprised to learn that many of the skills they need already exist within their organisation. Firms cannot merely hire their way out of their problems; filling the skill gap also demands better employee retention.

“Replacing is a difficult term. Replacing with what?” said Dmitry Bagrov, Managing Director at DataArt UK. “If you keep replacing people with people that have the specific aptitudes for a particular moment in time, you will always be replacing people. Why not just teach him or her to use new tools to do new things?”

If leaders aren’t careful, training can swiftly consume significant chunks of an employee’s time and a company’s budget. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that upskilling and internal promotion eliminates the cost and stress of bringing an external candidate on board. Current members of staff have a unique understanding of an organisation from day one, and may already have some knowledge of how to carry out a new role. Furthermore, an effective business doesn’t consider the main goal of recruitment simply minimising costs.

“In my experience, companies spend a good amount of time identifying what the skills gap is and what the content of a programme should be, but don’t spend enough time engaging their employees,” said Kate Turner, Director of Motivational Leadership. “Employees, therefore, turn up to the training programme because they’ve been told to come, not because they want to be there. When people are engaged in the learning process, know why they are there and know what they will get out of it, everyone will reap the benefits.”

Helping employees accumulate skills that will make them productive in the workplace will also present organisations with a competitive advantage. It will prepare employees for the roles of tomorrow while driving transformation within the business. Employers should gain a detailed understanding of employee aptitude and plan methods to promote internal upward mobility within their firm. Composing more flexible career paths allows companies to efficiently deploy people to various roles where their skills are required.

Identifying a purpose

Various companies still believe that employees only view career development opportunities through the prism of potential promotions and pay rises, neglecting the fact that, while employees still value these opportunities, there are other forms of advancement they desire.

Workers enjoy responsibility, problem-solving and knowing they are providing value. Most critical functions frequently fall within two categories: value producers and enablers, with the latter directly generating revenue while increasing efficiency. Value enablers, such as leaders of support functions, perform indispensable work that value producers rely on.

It is up to managers to identify when each member of staff is ready to contribute as a value creator. Employees want to be heard and have a seat at the table. They want to do challenging work, try new things, work on special projects and learn new things. They also yearn for businesses to exhibit balance so that it is not just the ‘favourites’ who are presented with the best opportunities. When firms broaden their vision of professional development to incorporate these fundamental factors, they will begin to see employees flourish and the skills gap close.

Although teaching opportunities will help employees become more skilled and engaged, this alone is not the answer. As well as the quality of leadership on offer, each company must have a purpose, provide opportunities for growth beyond promotions and pay rises, demonstrate and champion its successes, have a culture of appreciation and prioritise employee wellbeing. A 2016 **Gallup poll** of Millennials found that almost 90 percent of them valued “career growth and development opportunities”, but less than 40 percent strongly felt that they had “learned something new on the job in the past 30 days”.

Offering education is non-negotiable because the workforce won't stick around if they feel they have been left to fend for themselves. Leaders at all levels of the company play a part in whether employees excel or become disengaged and move on. “A company's leadership needs to communicate the vision, mission, strategy and goals of the business so that every single person feels that they matter,” said Steve Wainwright, Managing Director of Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Skillsoft.

Ultimately, knowing the capabilities that your workforce needs for tomorrow is the easy part. The best firms understand that helping their employees to achieve proficiency in these new skills will be crucial to long-term success. The most successful companies treat training not as a chore but rather as a culture of embodiment, from the CEO down, commencing from day one.

Overcoming the fear factor

Given the increasingly fluid way people like to work, flexibility is a competitive feature in the current employment landscape. However, a fear of failure often stifles the experimentation and risk-taking that should accompany this flexible, fluid approach. This culture of caution can prevent companies from developing the right skills training programmes for their employees.

To create a learning culture, leaders need to encourage experimentation and embolden others to learn from failure. This accelerates the process of innovation and development. If businesses fear making mistakes, the only thing they will learn is how to avoid them.

“Risk aversion, and the culture it creates, stifles people,” said Helen Jamieson, CEO of HR consultancy firm Jaluch. “It doesn't provide opportunities for growth, minimises the tasks that provide challenges and doesn't address people's need to feel like they are being treated as grown-ups.”

Still, the new world of work presents challenges as well as opportunities. As businesses embrace a flexible work schedule to entice Millennial workers, they run the risk of making learning an individual activity. Therefore, it is more important than ever to create support networks that facilitate larger groups and face-to-face interaction. Many firms underestimate the power of group learning, idea sharing, benefitting from the experiences of others and receiving feedback from peers.

Managers are responsible for giving workers what they need to excel. If managers take this obligation seriously, employees will be far more motivated to deliver their best. With hard work and the right managerial oversight, they'll become more skilled, perform better, stick around longer and attract more talent. People are much happier when they know that coming to work every day has a genuine impact on the success of the company.

Building relationships

Plugging the skills gap will rely on retraining existing members of staff, but many businesses are understandably reluctant to invest time and money on development programmes if employees are likely to move on. That's why strengthening the employee-employer relationship goes hand-in-hand with staff development.

A large part of what creates employee loyalty is how a manager nurtures their workers' potential. If they allow flexibility and creativity where appropriate, this can encourage a healthy and happy workforce that is motivated to develop. Keeping an open channel of communication between managers and employees is the best way to achieve this. An employee's productivity will rise if they enjoy going into work each day.

Members of staff require access to resources and tools to solve their problems. From there, they can identify solutions to meet their demands. Workers know what they want and have begun to take the lead regarding their training requirements, as opposed to just accepting what is imposed upon them.

"The key is to co-develop each training programme," said Richard Hilton, Managing Director of Europe, the Middle East and Africa for Miller Heiman Group. "Great leadership takes commitment, time and money, but employee communication is as central to the leader's day-job as meeting customers."

The trick to getting people engaged is to involve them in the process from start to finish. Paint a picture of your joint expectations and get to know each other's direction of travel. Work collectively, be honest about what presently exists in terms of abilities and functions: this can help identify what and where the gap may be. Ask people what motivates them to learn, and then develop a suitable programme. Moreover, acknowledging that education doesn't end in the classroom can empower teams to develop skills, approaches and techniques required to match the latest technology.

"An individual's learning journey isn't marked by a static endpoint," explained Sean Farrington, Senior Vice President for Europe, the Middle East, India and Africa at Pluralsight. "Learning is a lifelong pursuit and businesses today need to adopt cultures of lifelong learning and empower their teams with opportunities to learn the latest technology skills, approaches and techniques."

Besides, it's a two-way street. Managers can also gain a fresh perspective from their employees. The more they interact with their workforce, the broader their outlook becomes – a critical aspect of running a successful company. Holding the attitude that managers always know better than the workforce can trip up even the most successful business. Direct interaction with employees, the chance to discuss challenges and collectively find solutions will actively engage the workforce. This is crucial in the development of expertise, metacognitive skills and the new skills in each member of staff.

Taking the initiative

Most organisations recognise the importance of developing a learning culture, though many find it difficult – or feel like they lack the time – to conceive one. Various companies will observe their people-operations infrastructure and talent-management practices floundering under the strain of fresh challenges. This is where good leadership comes in.

Leaders in any industry play an immense role in an employee's satisfaction at work and can have a tremendous positive impact on the people who work for them. They are the focal points around which the company's culture develops. Exceptional leaders don't leave it to HR to design career progression programmes for their team members.

“As a [leader], you're perfectly placed to distinguish your employees' strengths and weaknesses and use that to help them move forward in their careers and increase employee knowledge. Do that, and you're effectively helping the wider business grow,” said Zoe Morris, President at Frank Recruitment Group.

Those at the top of the corporate hierarchy understand the nuances of how characters develop week-by-week and adjust their actions accordingly. As a result, they maintain engagement and excitement among their teams. In addition, HR will need to hone its skills when it comes to working with management to develop engaging programmes.

“It is very difficult to create a challenging and engaging training programme,” explained Glyn Roberts, Managing Director at Global Knowledge. “The individuality of the programme will often not match the resources, budget or time required to execute and as such compromises will be made which invariably impact both the individual and business.”

The best leaders are those who exercise humility and become mentors and advocates rather than 'bosses'. It is therefore imperative that businesses put team members at the top of the priority list. After all, workers who feel nurtured are happy and most likely to be productive. These are the individuals that can grow and develop even as an organisation, and the wider economy, undergoes rapid shifts. Building trust, garnering loyalty, collaborating and providing opportunities for personal development is what separates a great manager from a good one.

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