

Increase Learner Retention Using Resources at Hand

Let TD serve as the center of a creative hub for learning.

BY DIANE LAW

Talent development has become an even more critical organizational function during the past few years: To do their jobs well, TD professionals need to be performance consultants, thought leaders, designers, innovators, and implementers, and—most of all—they need to ensure that learning makes a difference by improving individual and organizational performance. That means employees are learning the most value-adding skills, retaining the essential knowledge to excel at their jobs, and applying their new capabilities back in the workplace. That's a big ask, particularly if you are a small department or one-person shop.

Fortunately, the new trends in TD play right into the hands of a small department. Today, learning and the creation of learning opportunities are about collaborating, focusing on where the TD function can make the most impact, and identifying actions to ensure that employees apply and retain what they've learned. Doing so can be easier for an individual or small department to implement than a large TD department, which may be less agile and have more ingrained current methods of working.

To get started, look at the resources you already have in your organization—for example, managers, colleagues, and subject matter experts—who can be of more value than paying for external courses, creating personalized learning, or trying to meet everyone's needs yourself.

I recently supported the HR department of a small engineering company in the UK that had a tight budget for formal training. The company's leaders knew they needed to offer significant professional development to hire and retain the caliber of staff required, so the TD team began examining how we could use the expertise already in-house to create better and more targeted learning than staff could get elsewhere.

Don't get carried away by producing. Traditionally, the organization's TD staff were the sole custodians of designing or sourcing face-to-face training, e-learning, and digital resources—a time-consuming and expensive endeavor. When a manager spotted a business issue such as poor sales, a request to create a negotiation skills course would follow. That would result in a flurry of activity to create an online or face-to-face course. The training initiative would be good, but would it solve the problem?

We decided on a new approach. The first step was to reach out to everyone in the company and ask them for any resources that had helped them improve their performance. We received a wealth of videos, articles, names of people, job experiences, and so on, and cataloged them by topic, level, and type, with attribution to the contributor. Employees could view the resources at the point of need, thus ensuring their relevance and immediate use and embedding the learning into their work. We encouraged staff to annotate the resources with examples of how and when they employed them on the job and to include the results.

Benefits for Learners

Learners and managers are involved in the creation and curation of resources, with learning on the job ensuring improved retention. They spend less time on courses and more time collaborating and actively learning.

Benefits for TD

TD staff can do more with less. By using managers, subject matter experts, and collaborative communities, the TD role becomes more advisory and value-adding.

Organizational Benefits

Learning becomes more central to the organization's culture and more agile. Learning built into the flow of work improves performance.

Manager as mentor. There is nothing more relevant to improving performance and retaining learning than integrating development into the everyday work environment. That relies on every manager seeing staff development as a critical part of their role. Therefore, investing in line managers' development would have a value-multiplier effect.

Working from the top down, managers' supervisors could become role models and lead by example. Although the company had some great examples of good managers, many supervisors considered management to be about getting the current job done. We needed to shift their focus,

SOLUTION

Asking all employees to offer development resources creates ownership and ensures content is relevant.

which wasn't a quick win. But it sent signals that the organization was serious about development.

We provided guidelines and support on coaching behaviors, listening techniques, ideas for stretch assignments, and on-the-job learning to senior-level managers. That cascaded down to the people they managed.

Subject matter experts. Every successful company, big or small, has a wealth of internal experts. In the engineering firm, the TD team generally interviewed the SMEs about their specialist topic, created materials, and checked in at regular intervals to ensure the training development process was on track. We decided to shift to a more active network of ex-

perts: Rather than turning SMEs' knowledge into courses, we set up the SMEs for success by determining the right format for each of them to play to their strengths.

Peer collaboration. Communities of interest foster collaboration and cooperation, the exchange of diverse perspectives, and the creation of entirely new knowledge. At the engineering company, TD's role transitioned to one that enabled such communities to form, function effectively, and provide sustained value to their members and the organization. We created cohorts from people who were inducted together, attended courses together, were of the same level, and shared interests.

In addition to the money and time saved by not investing in another training or e-learning module, getting the entire organization involved in developmental efforts led to many benefits.

Amassing resources that had been useful to other employees created a positive atmosphere and engagement. Employees retained information as they trialed and practiced the skills on the job. It also meant the TD function saved a lot of time trying to find or create the volume of useful resources employees provided.

We knew managers can make or break employee experience. Although there was a heavy time investment at the start of the process, after we got top managers committed, they championed the change themselves. Managers began to take more responsibility, and they were measured on it. They began to coach, give feedback, support,

and look for stretch opportunities. Staff felt more motivated.

The TD staff became more of an advisor to the managers rather than doing the training ourselves. We collected examples and shared how people were learning on the job and created a monthly award. Because learning was in the real world, employees practiced skills, managers offered feedback, and thus, employees retained the knowledge and skills.

To help SMEs help us and other employees, we created templates for frequently asked questions with key topic take-aways. We hosted one SME per month at a lunch & learn, which we tagged and recorded for future reference. Some SMEs even agreed to be contacted directly with questions from staff.

After we created cohorts of staff members, the groups were self-monitoring, which saved us time. Some communities

RESULTS



The company saw a 70 percent increase in staff involvement in learning activities.

thrived, while others perished if they served no value.

Focusing on using the resources available meant shifting TD from doing to coordinating, advising, and creating momentum. Admittedly, it is an up-front time investment, particularly for one person. But involving others is reaping rewards in the longer term as the changes become embedded into the organizational culture. This necessitated a shift from creating content to curating content, from designing courses to enabling collaboration, and from conducting training needs analysis to sense-making across different contexts—and then bringing it all together.

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