



# How L&D Can Support Small and Medium Enterprises



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It is impossible for organizations to grow and thrive without a skilled and engaged workforce. This is particularly relevant for small- to medium-sized enterprises that have many of the same needs as a multinational company without the same level of resources.

Employee development may seem like a luxury to smaller enterprises—one they cannot afford or that doesn't rank as a priority for the business. Indeed, with all that leaders of small- to medium-sized enterprises need to deal with, it's understandable why learning and development may slip down their to-do lists. And is the return-on-investment really worth it, after all?

This is where the learning professional comes in. Understanding the world of the small- to medium-sized enterprise and methods for modern workplace learning allows us to add value by providing lower-cost, relevant solutions.

## **Employee development is a priority**

Employee development and learning needs must come up the small- to medium-sized enterprise priority list.

There is a famous quote from Abraham Lincoln: "If I had six hours to chop down a tree, I'd spend the first four hours sharpening the axe." A woodcutter would end up cutting fewer trees each day if he felt he didn't have time to sharpen his axe. Likewise, small- to medium-sized enterprises may be so caught up in today's activities that there isn't time devoted to improving their performance over the long term. Employee development is one of those things that is important but rarely becomes urgent because the payback is less immediate. Despite that, developing staff is a vital contributor to a company's survival to longer-term growth for small- to medium-sized enterprises.

Here are some ways that L&D can make the difference for smaller companies.



**Recruitment and retention.** Small- to medium-sized enterprises fight to recruit and retain the best talent against much larger, successful, and known organizations—particularly with Millennials making up the largest population in this workforce. Harvard Business Review found that the top attribute Millennials look for in jobs is career development. They are eager to enhance their skill sets, and astute employers need to provide opportunities for them to learn if they want to bring them on board and, more importantly, keep them there. Providing opportunities for personal and professional development is a massive draw for recruiting potential employees and for retaining current top talent.

**Role diversity.** Often, leaders and employees at small- to medium-sized enterprises are asked to wear many hats, including some that are unfamiliar or out of their core competencies. To give individuals the best possible chance of success and the capabilities they need to rise to the challenges, it is critical that they have exposure to opportunities to grow and develop themselves.

**Keeping pace.** Competitors, customers, and business factors drive constant change within businesses. Additionally, the trends in technology, such as social, mobile, and Big Data may affect many business practices. Keeping pace with the demand for technical skills is often a major challenge for organizations of all sizes, and small- to medium-sized enterprises need to be able to compete in this shifting environment.

## **Modern learning approaches provide benefit**

Small- to medium-sized enterprises cannot afford to ignore employee development. However, how can they possibly justify the time and financial investment to upskill their staff?



Fortunately, as we are aware, learning does not have to be a huge investment, with a large L&D department, expensive external providers, or costly learning management systems. There is a place for formal learning, of course, but real sustainable capability development takes place in the flow of work, which also has the added benefits of minimizing time off the job and maximizing returns in terms of increased proficiency directly affecting business goals.

In fact, modern workplace learning methods and approaches suit smaller companies to a tee. L&D departments have traditionally focused on training people in the classroom or more recently through e-learning. In the modern workplace, however, there are more relevant solutions to improving performance problems, such as integrating learning and work. Smaller companies can use on-hand or easy-to-find resources to ensure their employees remain inspired and ready to meet current and future workplace demands. Examples include in-house subject matter experts, videos in the public domain, line managers who can provide on-the-job experience and feedback, and creating peer support groups.

## **L&D can help**

Small- to medium-sized enterprises need to offer employees opportunities to learn from experience, savvy line managers, feedback, curated content, communities of interest and so on. From this, they can create valuable development that motivates people, creates a more flexible organization, meets business needs, and is cost effective. There are several broad areas to put into action.

To implement a learning culture takes commitment from business founders and leaders. Put employee development on the management agenda as a key priority for long-term business growth. The L&D expert can clarify the benefits and help outline what will work best for that particular business.



Form a team that is passionate about learning, including subject matter experts, people skilled in learning, team leaders, and the like. L&D professionals can help by passing on knowledge about how people learn, demonstrating expertise in development, and being a source of insight.

Develop a learning framework that includes development plans, learning resources, feedback loops, opportunities to learn on the job, communities of interest, and measures of success. This is where L&D experts can add tremendous value. With a combination of business knowledge and adult development experience, a holistic and bespoke model of learning that will grow as the company grows can be developed.

This initial investment of time in planning, creating appropriate business-specific learning approaches, and implementing a framework will ensure an approach that grows with the business and provides a solid basis for engaged and capable employees.