RailBusinessDaily

A Close Shave: Develop employee skills

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The biggest challenge facing HR right now is building a learning organisation with the right skilled workforce*. In response to this, A Close Shave, who have developed the learning and knowledge sharing platform Academy, has written the article below:

Why is it beneficial to focus on learning in your rail organisation? Well, it promotes a growth mindset amongst employees, ensures your staff stays with your company for longer, and creates a workplace culture where knowledge sharing is at the forefront.

Let's talk skill development!

For both employer and employee, having the right tools to get the job done is paramount. Competences can be broken down into three areas:

(1) theoretical knowledge

(2) practical skills

(3) approach/mentality

These aspects are closely intertwined: without basic skills, you are unable to complete a task; without basic knowledge, you are unable to identify which skills are required; and without the right approach, you are not motivated or able to pursue new skills nor the necessary knowledge.

In order to foster a learning environment in your organisation, you must support all these aspects of competence development. This is not achieved overnight, of course. But there are four dimensions that are particularly relevant to look at: mindset, materials, culture and business. In the following, we'll take a closer look at these and how they influence employee learning habits.

Mindset

Four out of five millennials state that professional development opportunities are decisive in applying for a new job. They want to learn, grow and develop in the workplace. Why? Most likely, it's just the way their brain is wired. But that doesn't mean that the rest of the workforce isn't learning-orientated as well (or that they can't be taught to be).

The key is intentional learning. Named the singlemost fundamental skill in 2020 by McKinsey, intentional learning – or active learning, as it is also called – is fuelled by two mindsets: growth and curiosity.

It is based on the belief that knowledge is not a fixed point, something taught in school and checked off a list. Rather, acquiring knowledge is a life-long process, and you must ack-nowledge that you do not have all the answers at once.

Although this may seem obvious for some, we have seen time and time again that companies struggle to re-skill their employees, and that individuals feel they are butting their head against a wall trying to learn new tricks – most prominently illustrated in the generational learning gap within technological skills.

By employing an intentional learning mindset you shift focus away from strictly measuring employees via their current abilities. Instead, you are able to view employees in terms of opportunity and growth potential.

Communicating this to your employees will enable them to do the same; rather than selling themselves short, they are able to articulate their developmental needs and identify new areas ripe for exploration. As such, you are strengthening the employee-employer bond, and ensuring that staff stay with you longer.

Materials

As an employer or manager it is your job to provide the necessary tools to your staff. If you are interested in supporting their development, this includes training them to think in terms of intentional learning. In order to do that, you must provide the framework for growth: in part, this is done through communication, in part, through a series of physical and digital learning materials made accessible for employees.

In-service training courses are falling in popularity. Yet the need for re-skilling is on the rise. Although this may seem at odds, trends like hack schooling and micro-degrees have found their niche. This is because they are able to cater to the individual's needs: learn how you like, when you can.

Traditional methods of up-skilling, like sending an entire department on a week-long ex-ternal course, have proven to be ineffective for many. Or rather, it has become evident that these formal learning environments must be supplemented with informal and personalised learning in order to be effective.

Provide your employees with bite-sized information when they are learning something new.

Just-in-time learning is highly effective, as it strengthens the transfer of knowledge: theory is put into practice quickly, and adjustments can be made accordingly.

In other words, teach your employees what they need to know in order to succeed. Make additional skills and masterclasses available to those with ambitions of career progression, but don't expect everyone to learn everything at once – or at the same pace. Monitor progress at a departmental and individual level, in order to assist where needed and create the best possible framework for peer-to-peer training.

Culture

Creating a workplace culture with a focus on skill development has many benefits. It will make your organisation more attractive to new hires, and ensure motivated and happy employees who stay with you longer and act as brand ambassadors.

Learn more about the value of a digitised workplace culture by clicking here.

Clearly communicating that training, mentorship and skill development is on offer for all employees should be a priority. First of all, it relieves some of the pressure your staff may be feeling. Research shows that an increasing percentage of the workforce struggle with stress, impostor syndrome and dissatisfaction at work. In large part, this is caused by changing demands in their sector, such as new technologies or global crises.

Only 45% of millennials believe they possess some, but not all skills and knowledge required for future success. – Deloitte Millennial Survey 2020

Reassure employees that they will not just be replaced with a younger model (or a robot!) when new ways of doing things are introduced in the company.

Tell them: Nobody expects you to know everything about software that was released six months ago. But by providing you with ample time, easy-to-understand coursework, a trainer/mentor, and an atmosphere where trying (and failing) is encouraged, we are confident you will learn in time.

Invest in your employees, and they will invest in you.

Facilitate knowledge sharing online and offline. Create informal learning environments through work channels on Slack (or Academy) and make sure the break room is a space to exchange not only weekend plans but hacks for better workflows. Peer-to-peer learning strengthens your entire community, as it empowers employees and validates their expertise.

Business

Catering to different learning patterns will also make an impact on your bottom-line. Giving employees options to choose from when they are re- and up-skilling minimizes the risk of staff seeking job opportunities outside of the company. This is because you are allowing them a space to develop professionally, as well as catering to their personal needs.

Some learners are visual, some prefer to study outside active office hours, and others need extra attention for a more hands-on approach. When your business can identify and accommodate employee learning needs, you ensure they will get the most out of the teaching materials you provide.

Having a clear plan for pre- and onboarding similarly saves you precious resources. New hires feel they are in safe hands, and you can quickly determine whether they are the right candidate for long-term employment. Especially if their onboarding is (partly) digital. Digitised training allows you to closely monitor progress, communicate knowledge to large groups simultaneously, and reward individuals even when you cannot meet face-to-face.

Let's do it

So, what should you keep in mind when developing your employees' skillset? Here's a to-do list to get you started:

• Remember (and actively communicate that) growth is a continuous project, not limited to a 3-month onboarding period

• Give employees in all parts of your organisation the opportunity to develop their skills

• Make training available for acute needs (just-in-time learning), and for professional deve-lopment (competence and capacity building for the future)

• Structure your teaching in a way that allows employees a high degree of transfer from theory to practice

• Employ blended learning, where digital materials and face-to-face training go hand-in-hand

• Keep an eye on departmental and individual progress, so you know what the best next step is

• Reward employees who are completing and repeating training courses

• Encourage feedback and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, in order to ensure your training is the best it can possibly be.

In Academy, we do all this with a feature called Skill Tree.

A Skill Tree is comprised of a series of courses consisting of various learning modules, some passive (e.g. news, information, procedures), some active (e.g. quizzes, activities in the physical workplace). An employee can use Skill Tree to develop their skills, both in order to effectively complete their current assignments or for the purpose of developing their profile – for instance with the intention of becoming a candidate for promotion.

Professional progression is at the heart of Skill Tree. An employer can create one or more Skill Trees and track an individual's activity throughout. This provides a manager with real-time information about how to best help an employee – as well as giving them common ground to discuss development plans and problem solve, if an employee is not living up to expectations.

And naturally, Academy is a mobile-first platform. As such, you can learn on the go and are never more than a few clicks away from honing your skills.

Want to know more about skill development and Skill Tree? Click here to get in touch.

*Source: Nordic Learning Trends 2020