DIGITAL BEAT

Technology Kicks Up Leadership Development

By Darin E. Hartley

Bam! Some basic technologies can help leverage leadership development in your organization.

Last month's column discussed trends associated with e-learning. In this month's Digital Beat, because *T+D* focuses on leadership development, I decided to run a parallel piece on leadership development's interrelationships with technology.

When I think of leadership development, I think of these major phases: recruiting and on-boarding, competency development, and competency maintenance. Recruiting and on-boarding implies all of those activities associated with finding, attracting, and hiring the best possible managers for your organization. Competency development is about developing the new leaders once they're part of the team. Competency maintenance is keeping leaders competent in the plethora of skills and knowledge required for them to perform at peak levels.

Let's take a look at how technology can facilitate each of those major categories of leadership development.

Recruiting, on-boarding

Regarding recruiting and on-boarding, the use of technology has now become ubiquitous. There are literally millions of résumés in a variety of job and applicant services trying to locate the best-fit open position. There are thousands of organizations out there looking for the right manager or leader. You've probably heard of some of them: monster.com, hotjobs.yahoo.com, careerbuilder.com, dice.com, flipdog.com. Job candidates post their résumés on sites like those, sometimes creating multiple versions of the résumé to have a greater chance of matching the needs of a prospective employer. Many of the search engines are keyed to meta-tags from specific words on a résumé. Applicants with more similarity in terms to a job posting increase the likelihood that their résumé will mesh with one of the openings and catch the attention of the prospective employer.

Technology-enabled tools increase the volume of applicants for any position, but they aren't a panacea for winning the talent wars. Because of the ease with which someone can submit résumés to Internet-based job-finding sites, the number of applicants for any opening can be daunting. It's common to have 400 or more applicants for a single job, and that complicates the selection process immensely. Combine that with a stretched and tired economy, and you can see that choosing the best-fit manager is never easy.

Once a decision is made to hire someone, and the hire is made, it's imperative that the new manager, director, vice president, or other leader has the best chance possible to ramp up with minimum delay. In an ideal situation, the new employee blends in immediately with his or her counterparts and provides value quickly.

The tools

Technology can help with the on-boarding aspect of leadership development in a variety of ways.

PDAs. Some companies are providing their incoming leaders with "pre-loaded" PDAs (personal digital assistants). A pre-loaded PDA contains all of the key contact information in the organization, key tasks to undertake, and, in some cases, digital images of staff and other people that the new employee needs to know. The pre-planning and process development for the initial PDA to be set up can be time-consuming, but subsequent PDAs are easier to set up.

CD-ROMs. Many companies are using CD-ROMs that contain valuable new-hire information, including hyperlinks to key Websites on the company intranet; digitized videos featuring corporate leaders; digitized videos of corporate spaces, manufacturing facilities, and product lines; and discussions on the corporate culture. All add value for the new employee and can be used anywhere he or she has access to a CD-ROM drive.

When I worked at Dell Computer, we created a nice on-boarding CD-ROM for newly hired managers. It included a variety of information as described previously, plus information on the Austin, Texas area, including schools, culture, climate, and housing market.

Websites. Companies often create Websites or Web-based tool kits for their new managers. These include a centralized collection of information that is key to new managers, including performance management, hiring, termination, ethics, procurement policies, and many other processes and procedures. They're often referred to as "survival guides" because they contain information that new managers and leaders will refer to on a regular basis.

Competency development

Once the new leaders are part of the company, it's important that they are developed appropriately.

In a fantasy world, all new employees (leaders and nonleaders) would match totally with the qualifications required for their new positions. That would mean that the need for training and development for these folks would be nonexistent. In the current evolving world of work, jobs are changing on a regular basis and there's generally no rote way to get all of the skills, knowledge, and information required to be successful in any position. That's where competency development, aided by technology, comes into play.

Web-based learning. There are a variety of ways that competency development is occurring for leaders in organizations. One is Web-based courses from a variety of sources such as ecornell.com and uphoenix.edu. Their course offerings often blend Web-based learning with some element of synchronous learning. Web seminars are popular now, with a wide selection of topics, and enable many individuals to learn from a subject matter expert and in a multitude of locations, simultaneously. Examples are webex.com and Microsoft's product. ❯❯❯❯

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Communities of practice. These are made up of like-minded leaders (or other distinct groups) who get together within virtual communities to ask questions and get answers. Examples are communispace.com and the many groups at groups.yahoo.com.

I spoke with some folks at Boeing, Paul Yost and Michelle Chamberlain, about Boeing's powerful Web-based tool that helps leaders develop their competence in a variety of leadership and management topics. Called *Waypoint,* it was developed and is based on an ongoing, 10-year longitudinal study of 100 managers and leaders inside Boeing. Career paths, key learning, tools, processes, templates, additional reading, and resources are assembled in a thematically designed tool that facilitates the continued development of Boeing leaders.

Of course there are many competency-based tools, especially on the Web, for leaders to consider. They include systems that help identify key competencies and groupings of competencies, sample competency models for various job descriptions, and so forth, as well as Web-based coaches and tools to support people in their quest for leadership development. Web.com is an example focused on the IT industry.

Competency maintenance

Competency maintenance is the process people use to help maintain their competence once they have it. It's done different ways. Because of the refresher nature of this type of content, organizations seem to be more open to such nontraditional training approaches as Web-based learning, self-paced CD-ROMs, email updates, and technology-enabled communications. The thinking is that when competence on a subject is

Ten Tips Checklist

Here are 10 tips for technology-enabled leadership development.

1. Know your audience. Is technology the appropriate way to go? Is your audience ready?

2. Don't use technology just for the sake of using technology.

3. Pilot anything you develop or plan to implement for leaders, with leaders in your organization.

4. Pilot the same solution with a group of people not at leader level to get their feedback.

5. Revise any solutions after pilot to make sure the key recommendations for change are captured.

6. Investigate new technologies and tools for leadership.

7. Research leadership development on the Web.

8. Read a business journal or the business section of a major newspaper at least once a week, preferably daily, to keep up with key trends.

9. Create a community for leadership in your organization. It's easy to locate names and titles in the organizational directory. The hard part is facilitating the linkages inside your organization. How are you doing that?

10. Innovate. Experiment. Know that you will make some mistakes.

gained initially, the learning intervention is generally more rigorous and technology is a great way to minimize time spent getting refreshed.

For example, it's typical that all managers or leaders in an organization have legal, regulatory, and managerial training required in such areas as hiring and firing,

preventing sexual harassment, ethics, procurement practices, compliances, and export control. To explain further, let's say that Lisa Jones, a marketing director at the ABC Company, completed a course on procurement practices for her company in 2003. It was an eight-hour, classroom-based course. At the ABC Company, the annual refreshers have been converted to two-hour, self-paced Web courses that can check Lisa's knowledge of procurement practices. In 2004, Lisa is receiving refresher content, streamlined because of the compression associated with well-developed, technology-enabled learning.

The beat goes on

So, the digital beat is prevalent in leadership development. Don't get me wrong: There's still plenty of classroom-based training and traditional forms of learning happening. That's fine. Now, people are more likely and better enabled to find the best balance between what has to be taught in a classroom and what makes sense to leverage with technology.

How are you leveraging technology for leadership development in your organization?

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Your Input
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