

The Employees of Merkle

Merkle
Lanham, Maryland

Merkle, a database marketing firm of nearly 800 employees, also has nearly 800 trainers. That's because almost all of Merkle's education and training offerings are designed and delivered by employees, for employees. There are no professional trainers employed by the Merkle Institute of Technology, the umbrella organization for corporate learning.

MIT was the brainchild of CEO David Williams, who purchased the company in 1988 at the age of 25. About three years after taking the helm, Williams conceived MIT as a way to share knowledge and connect with employees in the fast-growing firm (Merkle had only 24 employees in 1988). "I wanted to empower employees to make better decisions," Williams says. "It seemed that important information resided in too few hands."

Originally, Williams taught all of the courses himself. "It forced me to become an expert on a lot of different topics, although I didn't really care what people learned about. The idea was to motivate—to create a culture and energy around learning."

As the company grew from service to innovation, MIT's core competencies for critical roles were defined, and training and development opportunities are tailored to support those competencies. Participation in MIT courses as both a learner and an instructor is mandatory for all employees, and measurements are integrated into job expectations and performance reviews.

An employee's level in the company determines how many credits he must earn each year, ranging from 10 for non-exempt associates to 75 credits for vice presidents and above (not even Williams is exempt). Completion of the necessary credits is required for promotion, raise, and bonus consideration.

Merkle employees also earn credits for their MIT service as deans, assistant deans, curriculum reviewers, and development committee members in addition to their regular jobs.

Martha Spivey, Merkle's director of workforce development, ensures that MIT's offerings are aligned with organizational goals and objectives. She helps establish MIT's strategy, priorities, and processes.

"Education and training are an integral part of the culture. As we seek to create a company that is world-class in all that it does, we must keep increasing our skill sets. That is the key to our success," says Spivey.

Williams views employee learning and development as crucial to his company's continued ability to thrive.

"Success and experience are the greatest enemies of learning, but in this business we are trying to invent a landscape that doesn't exist. Continuous learning is not optional for us," he says.

ASTD ONLINE EXCLUSIVE Go to www.astd.org/astd/publications/td_magazine to read more.