

Upskilling for Talent Mobility

Preethi Anand



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When I was a teenager, the world's best invention (in my opinion) was the **iPod**. It transported me to an alternate reality, courtesy of Indian musician AR Rahman's early compositions. iPods continue to fascinate me. For the product to materialize, several breakthroughs and changes had to happen—such as packing more storage capacity in a small chip, enabling internet access on hand-held devices, and adoption of music streaming services by record labels, just to name a few. If even one of those many conditions did not occur, iPods would be impossible.

Similar to the conditions that made iPods possible, today's business environment—with globalization, the challenges to attract and retain talent, and employees yearning for development—is ideal for L&D to innovate and strike up strategic partnerships. Although most of the upskilling and reskilling solutions that L&D professionals design as a function are not totally new to us, we are now operating in a completely different landscape—one that is influenced by a dynamic and often unpredictable labor market with increased expectations such as greater learning opportunities from employees, bigger breakthroughs in technology, and more attentive CEOs who make talent attraction and retention their top priority. One such in-demand initiative is upskilling programs for internal mobility.

This *TD at Work* focuses on how upskilling programs can amplify internal mobility in organizations. You will learn:

- A framework for understanding internal mobility in your organization
- How to create a blueprint for upskilling initiatives
- Practical tips to design and implement such programs
- How organizations have used internal mobility programs

Diving Deep Into Internal Mobility

Before beginning work on your upskilling program design, you must understand the talent mobility practices within your organization because they serve as context for the program. Tailor the upskilling program to your company's business and culture.

Internal mobility happens when employees change roles across an organization in search of horizontal or vertical growth opportunities. While vertical growth used to be the most common type of mobility, there is a growing interest in horizontal moves that can help employees develop diverse skills aligned to their long-term career goals. A few companies also include short-term movements, such as a gig or project within the organization, as part of their internal mobility programs. In the context of this issue, I will concentrate only on permanent movements because employers more often design upskilling initiatives for such transfers.

There are a few questions you can ask to better understand your company's internal mobility program, starting with whether you have one at all.

Tailor the upskilling program to your company's business and culture.

Do We Currently Have a Program?

Many organizations have just started investing in internal mobility programs, so there is a high likelihood that your company does not have one. If that is the case, do not lose heart. Internal mobility usually happens by default; employees regularly earn promotions and move across departments, even though it isn't intentionally orchestrated by the business. Regardless, as learning leaders, we can still influence the process through a well-designed upskilling program for mobility.

If there is a mobility program already established or in its infancy, strive to understand who owns the overall agenda and which teams are involved in driving it. Most organizations have staff across HR business partners, recruitment, business leaders, and other functions that play an active role in managing mobility. But the program will likely have one team or leader accountable for it.

Why Have a Program?

Why employers have a mobility program is a tricky question. Every approach to internal mobility is different, and each program seeks to solve specific requirements. In addition, there usually isn't one specific reason but, rather, several for using such a program.

Business Continuity

One of the most common reasons for having an internal mobility program is business continuity. Most recruitment professionals will agree that it is becoming increasingly difficult to hire people to fill roles on time. With an average length of one to three months to secure

outside candidates and a cost of six to nine months' pay to recruit and train new employees, external hiring involves a great deal of time and money, writes Chase Charaba in "Employee Retention: The Real Cost of Losing an Employee." Adding the increased time to train a new employee in the role, organizations of all sizes are struggling to ensure continuity of service. When employers fill positions internally, hiring costs decrease by nearly 20 percent, according to the Human Capital Management Institute.

Career Proposition

The dynamics of the employer-employee relationship have seen a drastic change in the past decade. Employees' expectations of an organization include learning opportunities as well as ensuring the right environment for an enriching career. According to Glint's (a part of LinkedIn) 2021 *Employee Well-Being Report*, only one in five employees believes they can meet their career goals where they work today. Companies that excel at internal mobility, however, retain employees for an average of 5.4 years. That's nearly twice as long as companies that struggle with it, per LinkedIn's *The Skills Advantage Report*. A strong internal mobility program can therefore be a great value proposition to attract and retain talent.

Future Readiness

When creating their next three- or five-year strategies, organizations require different capabilities to meet their strategic goals. A structured development initiative can support creation of a talent pool that will accelerate such plans. Although future readiness is not among the most common reasons employers opt for internal mobility programs, it is slowly gaining in popularity. L&D leaders usually play a pivotal role in

talent-motivated programs because the effectiveness of upskilling is critical to success.

Connect with all program partners and leaders to understand the reason your organization is running a mobility program because speaking with them will unearth more nuances surrounding the program. After outlining the needs, rank them in order of importance and prioritize the desired outcome of your upskilling program.

Armed with in-depth knowledge of the internal mobility process in your organization, you can now design an upskilling program to support it.

Creating the Upskilling Program

If I could take home any prop from a movie set, it would be Jack Sparrow's compass from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which leads to the heart's greatest desire. A compass is also a corporate symbol for navigating careers. Modern businesses, however, have the luxury of adapting a more accurate approach to career development, which is more akin to a GPS than a compass. Thanks to that accuracy, we can design precise, data-driven, collaborative learning initiatives that both support building skills for career development and adapt with the organization.

Prepare

The biggest difference between designing a skilling initiative and an upskilling initiative to promote mobility lies in the kind of service offered. It is the difference between having a direct-to-customer service and a business-to-business service. Essentially, the benefits occur much later during the mobility stage rather than directly at the end of the learning program. At every stage in the process, remember that distinction and imagine that

Figure 1. Steps to Creating an Internal Talent Mobility Program

