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TIPS, TOOLS & INTELLIGENCE
FOR DEVELOPING TALENT



MANAGING LEARNING PROGRAMS STEP BY STEP

Lisa Downs

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LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

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LEARNING PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW	1
SETTING THE STRATEGY	2
DETERMINING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES	8
PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION	10
MEASURING AND COMMUNICATING SUCCESS	13
CONCLUSION	15
REFERENCES & RESOURCES	16

JOB AIDS

Learning Program Vision Questionnaire	18
Learning Program Design Elements Prioritization Tool	19
Learning Program Planning Checklist	20

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When it comes to managing learning programs, often the first question is, “Where do I begin?” It can be a daunting prospect to get a program in place and launched, and even to revise an existing learning program. With many moving parts and pieces, it can be a juggling act to ensure that things are running smoothly. Just know that you’re not alone in this endeavor and there are many places to go for help, including ATD.

Whether you are a new or experienced manager of learning programs, the information and tools provided in this *TD at Work* are designed to give you a road map to put a new program in place or revamp a program that you’ve been dissatisfied with for a while, or have inherited. You can follow this road map in its entirety or simply pull the information that is most useful to you.

In this *TD at Work*, you will learn how to:

- Make the case for the importance of having a learning program.
- Create a vision and secure buy-in for your learning program.
- Identify roles and resources to help you deliver on your learning program.
- Prioritize program needs and ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place.
- Decide an approach to learning program measurement and evaluation.

LEARNING PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

The world of work has changed, and will continue to change, rapidly. To keep pace, we need learning programs that address the needs of both the business and the learners. The 2015 *Global Human Capital Trends* report from Deloitte highlights the fact that many employees are “always on,” with the space between work and life all but gone, and with global teams operating 24/7. It also points out that the balance of power between employer and employee has shifted, with employees functioning more as partners or customers than subordinates.

With these changes to take into account, learning program managers are in a prime position to work in close partnership with the business to ensure the learning and development (L&D) provided is effective.

WITH MARKETS, COMPETITION, AND CUSTOMERS CONSTANTLY CHANGING, IT'S CRUCIAL THAT LEARNING PROGRAMS ARE IN PLACE TO PROVIDE NEEDED SKILL GROWTH FOR EMPLOYEES AND LEADERS, AND SERVE AS A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE FOR THE BUSINESS TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN TALENT.

One of the key trends in the Deloitte report is that organizations are actively looking at their approach to L&D to address increasing skill gaps. Based on surveys and interviews with 3,300 business and human resources leaders across 106 countries, the report found that learning and development was an “important” or “very important” challenge to 74 percent of respondents. Yet only 46 percent believed they were ready to address this challenge. This 28 percentage-point gap is not only a big plummet from a 75 percent readiness score the year prior, but it’s also an opportunity for high-quality learning programs to close the gap.

With a growing economy and skills becoming increasingly specialized, the competition for talent has also increased. Engagement, leadership, and development are at the top of the list when it comes to current talent management challenges facing organizations. In PricewaterhouseCoopers’s 18th *Annual Global CEO Survey*, the availability of key skills is seen as a threat to business by an average of 73 percent of those surveyed. With markets, competition, and customers constantly changing, it’s crucial that learning programs are in place to provide needed skill growth for employees and leaders, and serve as a competitive advantage for the business to attract and retain talent.

Benefits of Learning Programs

There are a variety of benefits to having a learning program in place, not the least of which is helping people grow their skill sets and progress in their careers. When an organization makes the investment in its people and their continued learning, it goes a long way toward being considered an employer of choice and increases the likelihood of retaining talent.

As human beings, we are never a finished product. There are always new things to learn and ways to grow regardless of age and experience level, and by having a learning program in place, we can provide the environment and opportunity for lifelong learning. Benefits such as increased morale and employee engagement, productivity, the ability to keep up with changes in how we work and the tools we use, and improved communication can all be realized with a well-crafted, robust learning program.

Having a program in place is also an opportunity to ensure that an organization has an intentional strategy for addressing all aspects of the employee life cycle—hiring and onboarding, job skills training and leadership development, career development, and succession planning. A cohesive, integrated talent development plan then becomes part of the business's overall strategy.

Challenges in Managing Learning Programs

One of the biggest obstacles to managing a learning program is a lack of time, whether real, perceived, or self-imposed. For many, a lack of capacity to build and execute on a learning program is an issue, as well as the time for participants and leaders to devote to a program.

Another potential obstacle is a lack of resources, human or monetary (or both), to spend on a program. It's common for L&D to be thought of and treated as a cost rather than an investment, and has historically been one of the first things cut when there's a downturn.

Increasingly, a challenge is also figuring out how to scale a learning program across multiple geographies, especially for global organizations. Being able to get the right learning to the right people at the right place and time can be easier said than done.

IN THE COMPETITION FOR TALENT, THOSE WHO INVEST IN THEIR PEOPLE WILL WIN OUT.

Finally, learning program managers may also encounter pushback from leaders as to why the investment in learning should be made now, as opposed to focusing on operations, sales, product development, customer support, or any other aspect of the business that's perhaps viewed as more urgent or critical.

Regardless of the challenges you face, if you make a strong case for the importance of learning, you'll find that when the next downturn happens, learning will be perceived as crucial to the success of the business instead of more overhead to be reduced. Review the Key Questions for Overcoming Obstacles sidebar, which will help you in this effort. In the competition for talent, those who invest in their people will win out.

SETTING THE STRATEGY

Although it's tempting to start your learning program management work by thinking of all the activities you can do and training you can provide, you'll benefit more in the long run from first focusing on a strategic plan. A clear, compelling strategy is an excellent communication vehicle for your program. It's a road map, based on collected data and aligned with business goals, that will show you what skills, knowledge, and abilities specific audiences need.

The more you can tie your program strategy to the vision, mission, and goals of the organization, the better. This alignment communicates to your stakeholders that you're aware of what they deem important and that you have the business acumen to ensure your learning program supports and contributes to the organization's results. To set the strategy for your program, first attend to these four pieces:

- creating a vision
- assessing needs
- securing executive buy-in and support
- deciding on an approach to learning.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Here are some questions you and your team can ask yourselves to anticipate and manage obstacles that may come up as you gain buy-in for your learning program.

1. How will the learning program make people's lives easier?
2. We've gotten this far without a formal learning program. Why do we need one now?
3. What's the anticipated budget and how will the organization benefit from spending the money?
4. What research do you have that supports your approach to the learning program?
5. How much time will senior leaders and managers need to invest in the program? Why and how will they need to be involved?
6. We have people spread out over _____ geographic areas/countries/cities. How do you anticipate scaling the program to reach them all?
7. How will you ensure that the time people spend in the program is worthwhile—will the program take their daily workloads into consideration?
8. How will you make sure participants have easy access to the learning and information they need?
9. How will the learning program help us attract and retain talent?
10. How will we know that the program is here to stay, instead of a trend that will change next year?

Creating a Vision

A great first step with managing a learning program is to set a vision for the program. That way, you and your stakeholders are clear about where it's going, and which road you'll take to get there.

The Learning Program Vision Questionnaire job aid, at the end of this *TD at Work*, can assist you in forming a program vision. The questions provided can help get ideas flowing for what you want the program to be, preferably phrased in a way that's both aspirational and inspirational to your team and organization. The program vision should also stand the test of time, regardless of strategy and organizational changes. A vision statement like, "Leading the way through accessible, relevant learning for all" is timeless and flexible, while also containing multiple elements such as leadership, accessibility, relevance, and inclusion. Not the best vision statement by any means, but this gives you an idea.

A common approach for crafting a program vision is to facilitate (or have an external third party facilitate) a working session with you and your team with the outcome of documenting an initial vision. If it's just you, talk with people within the organization to find out what they think is important for a program and what they see for its future to help write a vision statement. Circulate first drafts to get feedback, as it will likely go through multiple iterations before being finalized.

Be sure to take into consideration the organization's critical documents and artifacts, including its vision, mission, and values, as well as current business strategies, goals, and priorities. Incorporate these elements into your vision to align your learning program with what's most important to the organization and its business results. Doing so will help you gain support for the program—your vision will demonstrate that the program isn't something that's just nice to have, but is intentionally a key part of the business strategy.

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