

How to Boost Employee Retention Through Professional Development

Amanda Boelke*

The Great Resignation shows no sign of slowing down. Companies are scrambling to fill positions, but there are not enough strong candidates. This inability to attract top talent can hamper your company's growth and profitability—and seriously weaken your competitive advantage. To combat this, companies are offering new benefits to entice job seekers, including increased compensation, flexible schedules, and the chance for remote or hybrid work. However, many are failing to provide the one thing that most employees say they want: opportunities for professional development. Reimagining your company culture and adding new benefits will help attract and keep the top talent needed for success. These benefits help organizations avoid the high cost of hiring and onboarding replacement

workers by assisting employees in developing essential skills for the roles they are in now and where they would like to see themselves in the future. When utilized correctly, these programs will support a company's succession plan.

The numbers are enough to keep chief executive officers (CEOs) awake at night. According to *Fortune* magazine, 4.3 million people in the United States quit their jobs as of July 2022. And 40% of additional workers are considering doing the same.

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It can be costly if you do not listen to what your employees want. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) reports that, on average, it costs a company six to nine months of an employee's salary to replace them.

But it is more than that. Managing change is hard. Organizations today are experiencing change at a rapid pace in today's work environments.

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Human capital strategy is more critical than ever in today's volatile marketplace—and the solution to your challenges may be less expensive than you think.

It is imperative to predict and mitigate workforce competency risks to remain agile and resilient. By developing targeted, adaptive learning solutions, you can address any “skilling” gaps and stay ahead of change.

Professional development opportunities are investments in your most important asset—your people.

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STARTS WITH YOUR COMPANY CULTURE

Early in my career, I found myself working in my dream field. Professionals surrounded me with elite statuses and experiences. Even though I was fresh out of undergraduate school and inexperienced in the particular field I found myself in, I earned a reputation for learning quickly and getting the job done.

To help me grow, my director at the time wanted to send me for training, but his more experienced deputy advised against it. He believed that if you invested in young employees, they would leave the

organization. I was dumbfounded. A few years later, after my professional development and advancement stalled, I accepted a new opportunity.

According to a report by The Execu | Search Group, 86% of employees say they would change jobs if a new company offered them more opportunities for professional development. The study found that these employees are 15% more engaged than their counterparts at other businesses, and their companies saw 34% higher retention rates.

The numbers should not come as a surprise. Offering professional development opportunities is one way to reinvent company culture. When choosing a place to work, *Forbes* found that Generation Z and Millennials value work-life balance and development opportunities the most. They desire to work for a company that shares their values—and wants to invest in their future.

Adding opportunities for personal development can also improve your company culture. Even if the skills workers learn are not directly transferable to their job, they often allow for a new perspective valuable to any workplace. Employees will appreciate the investment you are making in them as a whole person, and the goodwill di-

rectly translates into more productivity and increased loyalty.

Reimagining your company culture and adding new benefits will help attract and keep the top talent needed for success. These benefits help organizations avoid the high cost of hiring and onboarding replacement workers, by assisting employees in developing essential skills for the roles they are in now and where they would like to see themselves in the future. And when utilized correctly, these programs will support a company's succession plan.

Listen First

According to the *Harvard Business Review*, offering new employees access to learning programs impacts their experiences with your company right out of the gate. It is the first step in building a culture where learning is valued and accepted.

Before creating a professional development program, it is imperative to evaluate the needs of both the employees and the organization.

Aside from conducting a job task analysis, to identify the competencies required for a job role, it is also important to talk to managers to learn what competencies they feel their teams lack or need improving.

This data allows you to find those areas where skills may overlap across job roles, identifying an organization's critical competencies. Offering training in critical skills for your organization not only supports individual employee development but supports your competitive edge, adaptability, and bottom line as well.

By surveying your team, you will discover what employees are interested in learning. It is not unusual to find individuals excelling in areas they are not interested in pursuing. It would be a disservice to the employee, a potential waste of resources, and ultimately, risky for the organization to send individuals to professional development activities for a career trajectory they are uninterested in, no matter how much it helps the organization.

I have a friend who has excellent leadership and technical abilities. Her CEO wanted her to take on more management and employee supervision responsibilities, but that is not where she wants to grow. Her passion is technical work and she wants to continue to develop her expertise in that area. So what is an organization to do to prevent this kind of situation?

To keep your best employees happy and engaged with your organization, listen to and

respect the chosen career path of the individual. Start the discussion and leadership development early. A CareerBuilder survey identified that younger generations are far more interested in becoming managers than older generations. When you identify high performers early in their career, start the discussions and professional development with management as the trajectory. And if you cannot seem to identify talent in-house, you will be left to start the costly recruiting and hiring process. That's why it is important to consider managerial/leader development as part of your employees' professional development.

Customize Your Training

Professional learning opportunities cannot be one-size-fits-all offerings. Expensive, multi-day training events—common with many large organizations—are now a thing of the past, especially in our post-pandemic society.

Consider focused micro-learning opportunities. These frequent, short bursts of training can keep people engaged with what they are learning—and reinforce knowledge transfer and behaviors afterward.

They are also ideal for time-starved professionals, especially those juggling work with parenting or school or both. I

recently joined the working mothers' "club." Our common denominator? We are too busy to do much outside of work and parenting. As someone who works, is active in my community, and has young children, my free time now comes in small windows—15 minutes here, 30 minutes there—mostly while I am rocking my infant to sleep. My free time has evaporated.

Flexible micro-learning allows parents to undergo training while waiting for their children to finish sports practice or other after-school activities. The same can be said of employees who commute to and from work by train or bus, especially those with commutes longer than 30 minutes. Their blocks of uninterrupted time present opportunities to pick up new knowledge and skills.

It is important to remember that everyone has different needs and learning styles. On-line training courses or videos are often a better fit, but they must also work with various types of technology, from desktops to tablets to cell phones. While many workers enjoy on-line training, other employees may prefer or respond well to mentoring or coaching opportunities. The connections that form through these face-to-face opportunities can build engagement, allowing manag-

ers to evaluate employees for future promotions. Additionally, if external mentoring or coaching opportunities are possible, employees can expand their professional networks, which can pay dividends for the company.

Design Programs for All Employees

Everyone can benefit from professional development opportunities—even experienced employees or members of your leadership team.

After I left my first job, I worked for an organization where training and education opportunities were abundant. Life was great. But, thinking back, I realize that I was often the only person on the team excited to attend the courses.

My colleagues were older than me and often said they were not interested in any training, often citing the adage, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” Were they tired and burnt out? Did they see themselves as experts?

Organizational readiness is a continuous process. Even among the most experienced workers, skills gaps often occur as your organization grows and adapts to the marketplace.

Start by identifying the skills needed to address performance gaps. Then share with

employees why these skills are essential to the company’s future.

Leveraging credentialing programs, including the ultra-personalized micro-credentials, can be one way to address skill gaps in your workforce. Microcredentials are short, competency-based credentials that demonstrate an individual’s mastery of a particular skill set. These can be “stacked” and provide a track to earning an education certificate or degree. When used, be transparent with employees. Let them know that credentialing is not a barrier to future promotion but a roadmap for employees and managers to design career pathways, assist individuals in tailoring their training and education experiences, and assess performance.

But do not stop there. When was the last time your senior leadership received management training? Most executives move into positions based on their experience and accomplishments, not their leadership and communication skills.

Poor managers create unnecessary stress and additional work. Professional development opportunities in communication, coaching, change management, and accountability will benefit your organization.

Your company will thrive when people at all levels believe in continuous learning.

Measure Your Results

Change does not happen overnight, especially when modifying behaviors and mindsets. It is essential to understand which new learning programs are working—and which ones need retooling.

Communicate regularly with your employees and provide surveys after each training session. Ask these questions:

- Was the training helpful?
- Did the methods of instruction and content fit their learning styles, roles within the company, and lifestyle?
- Was it clear to them why skilling/upskilling goals are essential?
- Are they familiar with personal development opportunities offered by the company? Do they believe they will take advantage of them in the future?

Check-in with your frontline managers and HR. Do they see a difference in employees’ productivity, skills, and engagement? If you spoke with managers before you implemented new training programs, use the information you gathered as a

benchmark to measure future performance.

You will not see results overnight, but you may be able to measure the success of your program over time through several metrics: productivity, employee engagement, company culture, and retention.

Remember, personal and professional development programs should change as your company grows. Do not be afraid to reevaluate what you have learned and pivot to new opportunities when the time is right. No one likes stale things.

LOOKING AHEAD

Have you heard of the phenomenon of “quiet quitting?” It goes like this. Many employees are no longer going above and beyond at work. Instead, they are doing the bare minimum to keep their jobs.

These workers are not quitting their jobs. In many cases, they are establishing work-life balance for themselves. This trend is especially true for Millennials and Generation Z.

Consider this: There are 56 million Millennials in the workforce today, representing 35% of the total U.S. labor force. It might be easy to brush aside their ideas on work, but that would be a mistake. It is important to note that while most workers recognize skilling and upskilling as an investment and benefit, most want training paid for by the employer and offered during working hours. Again, work-life balance.

But I believe there is more at play here. “Quiet quitting” partly stems from companies’ failure to keep their employees engaged and excited about the future of the organization. Employees become blind to their future within the organization.

Do not underestimate the benefits of listening to your employees. And demonstrate that you are listening by taking actionable steps to meet these needs. Personal and professional development opportunities are investments in your people—and critical for your organization’s success.

Thinking back on my experiences with professional development, I am left with a question: “What makes an expert?” Do wisdom and knowledge only come from decades of experience? Is there such a thing as “unconscious competence,” where you reach a point, and nothing is left to learn?

No. I believe an expert is a continual learner who understands that change is inevitable. There will always be unknowns, and I, along with many others, will always seek to quench our thirst for knowledge. Creating a culture of learning and growth is the key to an organization’s success in adapting to change. Providing continual learning opportunities to all employee levels will build your company’s capabilities, ultimately providing the organization with resilience and agility. I challenge you to think of this as an opportunity for a massive reinvention of your company.