

Effective Learning and Development Programs – Best Practices

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Abstract:

Best companies in the world have realized that by continuously developing and training their employees they can acquire the core competencies needed for competitive advantage and flexibility. These organizations encourage their employees to learn continuously there by realizing the benefits of self-development and an habit of learning and sharing. Every employee is encouraged to have measurable goals to enable him to plan his/her career path and learning path.

The most effective learning and development programs have following features incorporated:

- Strategy driven: All training and development programs should align with overall organization strategic goals and yield business results.
- ROI: The training program should be measured as every other business activity, It must show a return on investment either on short term or long term.
- Methodologies: Learning & Development methodology can be identified from amongst eLearning, CBTs, Class room training, knowledge sharing sessions & continuous educational program in reputed institutions based on the type of business the organization is engaged.
- Ownership: Employees should be encouraged to identify their own needs to create individual learning plans, and to seek learning opportunities. This makes every employee accountable for the training he/she has identified and the responsibility falls on that individual, his boss and the organization.
- Continuous learning process: The process of learning never ceases, the companies should ensure that learning occurs before, during and after scheduled learning events also.

Effective Learning and Development Programs – Best Practices

"An organization's ability to learn and translate that learning into action is the ultimate competitive advantage."

Jack Welch, ex-CEO, GE

Introduction

Opportunities are a pathway through which enterprises develop, grow, and prosper. Failure to explore and exploit opportunities is sure to trap them in a downward spiral of stagnation, decay, decline and eventual extinction. But how may firms create opportunities in a dynamic business environment characterized by overcapacity, saturated markets and fleeting competitive advantages? The answer lies in the firms' relentless cultivation and development of knowledge for exploring and exploiting opportunities for continuous creation of value.

- Knowledge is the key resource for sustained profitable growth
- Firms must acquire, organize, develop, and deploy knowledge
- Firms must encourage employees to acquire knowledge and realize the benefits
- Firms must realize that intellectual capital means to exploit wealth creation opportunities

This paper outlines briefly about the best practices an organization can adopt to enable their employees to learn continuously and there by realize the benefits of learning and sharing.

Integrated to Companies Core Values

Every organization should integrate their core values with learning and sharing. This is because, achieving the highest levels of performance requires a well-executed approach to organizational learning and development. It is a goal of visionary leaders Fig1.



Organizational Learning

The term organizational learning refers to continuous improvement of existing approaches and processes and adaptation to change, leading to new goals and/or approaches. Learning needs have to be embedded in the way the organization works. The term embedded means that learning:

- Is a regular part of the daily work
- Is practiced at personal, work unit, and organizational levels
- Results in solving problems at source
- Is focused on sharing knowledge throughout the organization
- Is driven by opportunities to affect significant change and do better

Sources for learning include employee ideas, research and development (R&D), customer input, best practice sharing and benchmarking.

Organizational learning can result in: (1) enhancing value to customers through new and improved products and services; (2) developing new business opportunities; (3) reducing errors, defects, waste, and related costs; (4) improving responsiveness and cycle time performance; (5) increasing productivity and effectiveness in the use of all resources throughout the organization; and (6) enhancing the organization's performance in fulfilling its public responsibilities and service as a good citizen.

Employee success and growth

By providing opportunities for personal learning and practicing new skills, every employee feels motivated and achieves success. Organizations can invest in the employee personal learning through education, training, and opportunities for continuous growth.

Personal learning can result in: (1) more satisfied and versatile employees; (2) greater opportunity for organizational cross-functional learning; and (3) an improved environment for innovation.

Better products and services

Every company's mission is to help its customers to achieve their business objectives. This is possible if the employees are innovative and highly knowledgeable. This can be achieved by focusing on organizational learning.

Approach towards effective learning and development

Organizations must realize that by continuously developing and training their employees they can acquire the core competencies needed for the competitive advantage and flexibility. Effective learning and development should have the following features in order to be effective [6]:

- Strategy driven
- Return on Investment (ROI)
- Methodologies
- Ownership
- Continuous learning process

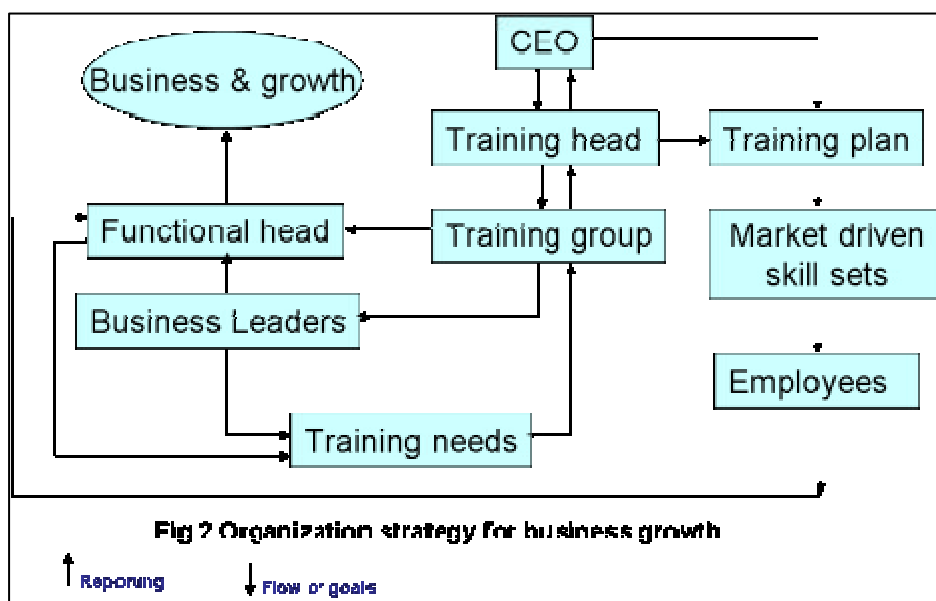
These features are listed in the Table1 with the core areas of focus.

Effective approach for learning & development – Table 1

Strategy driven	Alignment of training and development with Organization goals
Return on Investment	Short Term / Long Term ROI
Methodologies	eLearning Classroom training Knowledge sharing sessions Continuous educational program
Ownership	Individual learning plans Certifications Competency development Training calendar
Continuous learning process	Motivation to learn

Strategy driven:

Organization strategy should focus on deploying the Training and Development program effectively in such a way it yields business results. One way of doing this is to have a group structure [4] as shown in Fig2. The function of the training group will be to interact with the functional group heads and business leaders and understand the skill sets needed for the organization [7] to compete in the market and develop them. The training needs of the organization will be captured in this way for both long and short term. By identifying the training needs, the training group head designs a training plan for the employees which will be deployed after approval from the CEO.



Return on investment (ROI):

The Return on investment [3] on the training can be measured by the effectiveness [4] of the programs. Training feedbacks collected at regular periods from both the trainees and the functional heads help in measuring the impact of training. Some of the measures that indicate short term returns from training are - productivity increase, reduction in defect density etc. Fig 3 shows an improvement in trends in defect density and productivity resulted due to training.

Some of the measures that can be used to measure for returns on the long term are - customer retention, employee retention, reduction in recruitment cost etc. Benchmarking should be made with the competitors of similar businesses to compare the long term returns. The Fig 4 shows trend in Customer Satisfaction Index resulted due to training. Based on these measurements the organization can monitor the effectiveness of the training and take steps to improve the business strategy.

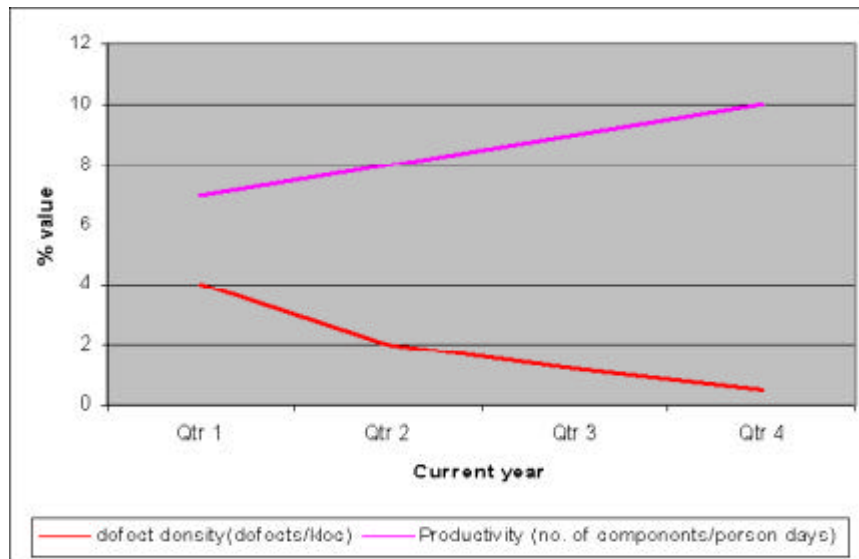


Fig 3 Effectiveness Short term

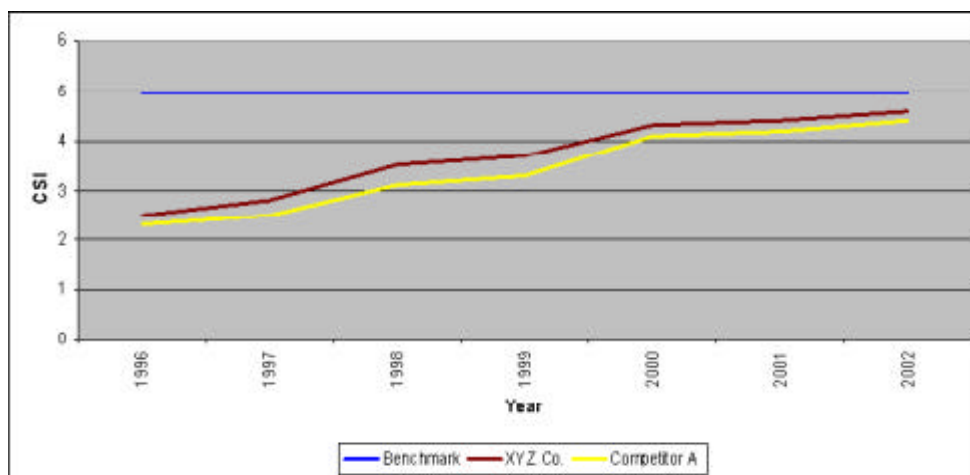


Fig 4 Effectiveness Long term

The measures mentioned above have many factors contributing to them and the effectiveness of the training and development is also one of them.

Methodologies:

Organizations can identify some of the following methodologies depending on the needs and business the organization is engaged in to facilitate the training and developmental programs for their employees:

1) e-Learning – It is one of the most preferred choices of the corporates since the employees are becoming tech-savvy now a days. Business Week reports that e-learning will grow to about \$13.6 billion by the end of 2004 [2]. Many employees are able to attend the training delivered by the instructors in far away locations through teleconference or videoconference. With the advent of internet, e-learning communities are fast catching up. Exchange of information and knowledge is made possible in very short time through these communities.

The sectors of e-learning are [3]:

- Portals
- Edu-commerce companies
- Network platforms

2) Computer based training (CBTs) – As the cost for instructor and the text books go up computer based training is the best alternative. Many learning materials are available in CD-ROMs and one can learn these courses at ones convenience on a PC. The materials can be stored easily and this encourages self learning. Custom made PowerPoint presentations and word documents can also be used as training material and employees can make use of these whenever in need without waiting for an opportunity to be taught in a classroom.

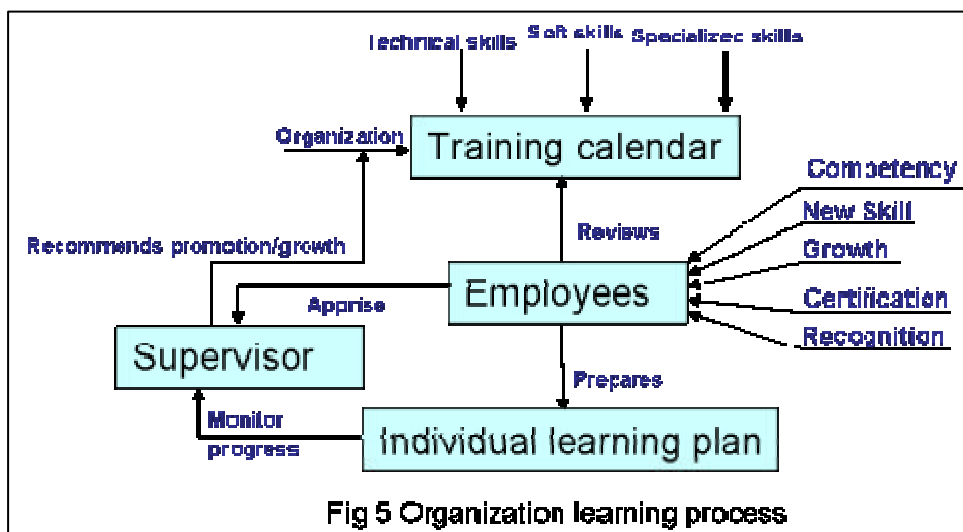
3) Classroom training (CRTs) – It is the oldest method for imparting training, now a days many corporate conduct class room training with the aid of computer, internet and other multimedia products. This helps the trainees to participate effectively with the instructor and there by enhances the speed of learning process. This is not cost effective compared to the above two methods but it is one of the very effective methods.

4) Mobile learning – Mobile phones and palm tops are in vogue today and have become excellent tools for learning. Imagine an executive preparing to meet his client; while he waits for the meeting to start, he uses his personal digital assistant for communications and e-learning. With the information accessible to him, not only does he stay up-to-date on the market issues essential to his position, but he also receives regular notifications from message boards, news portals and his employer.

5) Continuous education programs in reputed institutions – Organization can educate their employees through universities and reputed education institutions based on the type of business they are engaged. Many institutions are willing to prepare a curriculum for the employees as required by the business units. This enables the employees to earn knowledge and degree and ensures commitment to the organization.

Ownership:

Employees should be encouraged to identify their own needs to create individual learning plans, and to seek learning opportunities. Organization can guide employees to prepare their individual learning plan by recommending a list of specific courseware based upon the needs of the organization. Organization can advocate their employees to choose their mentor who will guide the employees to understand their competency gap and update their skill sets. A systematic process [7] as shown in Fig 5 can be followed to enable the employee accountable for their training. The organization should also conduct a satisfaction survey to the employees to know their feedback on training. The employees should be encouraged to have their own training calendar as shown in Fig 6 and schedule their plan thus making them accountable. The organization can recommend the number of training days should each employee put in a year and benchmark the percentage effort spent on training as shown in Fig 7. This helps both the employees and the organization to capture the effort put in training and development. Employees can add value in their work and work towards their growth in the organization.



Training calendar

Activity	November		December		January		February		March	
	1-15	16-30	1-15	16-31	1-15	16-31	1-15	16-29	1-15	16-31
Creativity										
J2EE										
Leadership training										
Quality										

Fig 6 Training calendar



Fig 7 Effort spent on training

Continuous learning process:

The Process of learning never ceases. It is an ability to learn to learn, learning need not be a linear event where a learner goes to a formal learning program, gains areas of knowledge and skills about the process, and then the learning ceases. Organizations can establish structures and processes that cultivate continuous learning. Based on the premise that continuous learning is driven by goal attainment, goal setting Human Resource Management (HRM) practices should support continuous learning in the workplace. For example, if a performance appraisal [5] reveals opportunities for development, instruction may help to address it. If a firm uses individualized development plans, the manager and the subordinate generate a list of personal, professional, and developmental goals. The developmental goals may point directly to a learning opportunity. Personal and professional goals may point to a deficiency which in turn points to a learning opportunity. These common HRM practices can be used to generate goals that involve continuous learning opportunities. The learning experiences themselves should improve both the worker's self-efficacy and ability, which in turn should improve his/her commitment to the performance goals. As a result, more and more difficult goals can be achieved, which in turn feeds the self-efficacy of the worker.

Conclusion:

Organizations realize business results by continuously developing and training their employees. The above discussed approaches provide ways and means of making training and development programs effective. An effective training and development program makes the employees committed to the organization and also makes them productive and successful. Employees will in turn be motivated to have self-development and will develop learning and sharing as a habit.

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