

Alan O'Neill: 'Learning and development remains a valuable tool in battle for talent'

How to fast-track learning within your workforce by developing a proactive and engaging L&D plan



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• [Email](#)

There is a crisis in the workplace right now due to a shortage of talent. Almost every sector that I work with is challenged with recruiting and then retaining good people. The war for talent is heating up. Earlier this month, Vodafone announced 16 weeks' paid parental leave. How can small and medium-sized enterprises compete?

Organisations have always had to clarify their value proposition from a customer perspective, but to cope with this developing trend, they now have to clearly define their employee value proposition. There is much research that suggests a significant reason for employees leaving their job is the lack of development opportunities. Consequently, learning and development (L&D) simply has to be on your agenda.

In the past, an employee's skill-set might last them for 30 years, the whole of their career. Now, because of the volume, complexity and speed of change in the world, new skills have a lifespan of only five years. You can let your people 'discover' the new skills in the deep end, which is costly and risky, or you can fast-track their learning by having a proactive L&D plan.

Over the past few weeks, I have written about the challenges with developing employees. Regardless of whether they are disgruntled or performing well, we as managers have a duty to develop them further. Today, I want to focus on L&D. Nicola O'Neill (no relation) is managing director of Harvest Resources, the leaders in Ireland for bespoke learning solutions. She outlined some current trends in the world of L&D to me:

- **Personalised adaptive learning.** As a customer of Netflix and Amazon, I get regular emails informing me of new releases. This is all personalised based on my history. Likewise, my social media feeds and YouTube adapt content for me. With this same approach, employees can proactively source content to build their competencies to match the organisation's needs. This can be done through self-learning, using digital platforms or in one-to-one meetings.
- **Collaborative social learning.** Many organisations have internal 'circles of learning' to fast-track L&D. Triangle Computer Services is a client that I work closely with, and I know that the technical directors give internal training workshops to colleagues on a regular basis.
- **Peer Learning.** There are five generations in the workplace today. And the extent of knowledge and skills that can be passed from one generation to another should be exploited.
- **Classroom.** Despite all of the new delivery options, classroom training is still the most widely used. I actually spent time as an owner of Harvest many years ago and it was all about classroom at that time. I'm not surprised this medium is still the most popular. After all, learning new skills should be experiential.

Tips for Developing a Learning Plan for your Employees:

1 Context

The first thing to do is to consider the context for whatever development you are planning. What is the near-term strategy for the business? For example, plans to enter new export markets, to develop alternative revenue streams, or make an acquisition all present different types of needs for new competencies.

2 Training Needs Analysis (TNA)

When you have considered your context, list the new and existing competencies that are required to deliver on that strategy. Create a simple TNA by listing the competencies in a grid down the left-hand side of a spreadsheet. Then list the names of the relevant employees in columns to the right. Now use some form of rating scale to identify development needs of each individual.

3 Commonalities

With this TNA, look for commonalities. In other words, if there are a number of employees that require the same learning, you'll save money through economies of scale by organising group training for them. There are a number of ways to maximise your investment.

Start by exploring if you have a resource on your team to conduct the training in-house.

But be careful; the skill of training others is very different to that of using the skill in normal work mode. Just because someone is a great salesperson, doesn't necessarily mean they can train others effectively.

If you don't have an internal resource, then engage the support of an external provider. The advantage in this approach is that you can influence the content and design of the programme.

4 Personalised Development

If the newly required competencies are for key individuals only, then if you have the resource, consider one-to-one mentoring internally. If not, search for 'open programmes', where L&D providers offer single seats in a pre-designed programme.

As we mentioned earlier, it may also be possible to develop a self-learning plan using other resources, such as YouTube and TED Talks.

5 Regular chats

Stay close to the individuals that are going through a learning programme. Have regular update chats with them to ensure they are getting the opportunity to use the new skills.

I've been involved in this industry for 28 years and I have developed a high degree of cynicism for L&D. Let me quickly explain. Far too often, I've seen clients investing in L&D and then do next to nothing internally to enable or support the new skills. L&D is a key element in change. It's not necessarily the change in itself, so follow-up is essential.

The Last Word

Large organisations typically spend almost 3pc of their payroll on L&D. That seems a little on the low side in my view. But it's not always about money. I know of family businesses that insisted on the next generation being seconded out to other organisations. That's more about building learning experiences than just training.

As a past president of the Irish Institute of Training and Development, Nicola advised me that its annual conference at Croke Park in Dublin (on December 4) is worth attending. That is where you will hear up-to-date trends discussed in more detail. You'll also get advice on how to maximise return on your L&D spend.

Alan O'Neill, author of Premium is the New Black, is managing director of Kara Change Management, specialists in strategy, culture and people development. Go to www.kara.ie

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