

The Benefits of Employees Who Never Stop Learning

Companies should encourage their employees to continue learning in order to grow. But the employees won't be the only ones benefitting from their education. Companies also achieve success when their employees learn.

Encouraging and enabling employees to pursue educational opportunities not only benefits the individual employees—it also helps the company. Four basic company needs are enhanced through investments in employee education: succession planning, knowledge expansion, networking, and employee performance.

As leaders of our departments and companies, we need to help our employees continue their education. We should help raise our employees up by assisting in their education rather than hold them down because we think the bottom line won't support costs. That means encouraging—I say insisting—our employees to seek additional opportunities and providing support for those options. We need to provide room in our budgets to help employees further their knowledge, making sure it is a line item in the planning for the future of the company.

My own experiences throughout my career help demonstrate

the value that comes from a company or leader encouraging continued education. One example comes from when I was a freight bill processor. My job satisfaction was low, and I discussed this with the head of the department. He told me that I could do more with additional education and provided the tools I needed. He told me how the company would help pay for my college education based on my grade point average and the

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relevance of courses to my position, pay for a membership in an educational-type association (I chose IMA®), and provide on-the-job training within the department and with other areas relevant to my work.

I moved from freight bill processor to positions with more responsibility. As I progressed through my college courses and attended educational meetings offered by IMA, I also progressed in my job to AP supervisor, AR su-

pervisor, and, finally, to department head assistant, which put me in line for department head. That was my manager's course of action for succession planning, and I was the beneficiary of his plan. Following my mentor, I have used succession planning in all my other positions as well as with employees I have supervised.

My education outside the company realm also afforded me knowledge expansion. I was able to learn about other parts of the company's operations and the synergy of those operational units with each other. Even though I sat in a cubicle, the information I was exposed to helped me visualize the manufacturing process and all the areas relevant to the product cycle, from raw product to sales to cash flow.

I used this knowledge expansion when I identified a relevant missing cost reporting component in our monthly activity. It was the exposure of underreporting of use tax for our operations in four states, and these amounts could have been significant. We had been reporting the use tax when it was paid, not incurred, which wasn't in line with the matching principle of accounting. I helped the IT department develop a data field



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to capture this information. Members of IT set the field's value as a "debit" expense, and, within two months, a return to a supplier should have been a reduction in use taxes. Because I understood this fact, and my report didn't represent the expected value, I went back to IT to explain that the field could create either a debit or a credit and wasn't finite. My knowledge expansion helped to resolve this issue quickly.

A different experience from my career shows the value of networking. I was assigned a new job responsibility. Excited to be able to grow within my job again, I looked forward to the new work. Yet I was expected to be effective on the job with minimal training by my supervisor. The job was overwhelming at first, involving figures for 12 different entities relating to inventory that I had to use for our Last-In, First-Out (LIFO) calculations. As I struggled to get a handle on the new work, I remembered a presentation about LIFO that an IMA member had made and decided to call him to discuss it. He was happy to help me with the responsibility. I was able to get the work done in a timely fashion, and my supervisor gave me a great review. More importantly, when a job opened up at the company, I connected this IMA member to the HR department, and our company hired a well-qualified person. My job success and hiring a very capable person for the company would not have occurred without networking.

The additional educational opportunities that my supervisor encouraged me to pursue made me a

more capable and confident person. An employee who is satisfied with his or her job tends to be more productive. When a new circumstance occurs, your employee is more adept at responding to the challenge. It reduces employee turnover since the employee knows the company is vested in his or her career success. Education is a motivator that leads to better communication and self-confidence among employees. Both internal and external relationships improve, contributing to the bottom line. An employee receiving additional educational opportunities keeps a company running since he or she is being stimulated and able to be creative with problem solving.

Once the decision has been made to encourage employees, there are various options. There's always the typical degree-based opportunities, including encouraging employees to earn or complete a bachelor's degree, get a master's, such as an MBA, or even

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earn a doctorate. Other opportunities include getting a certification or attending educational events outside the company's sphere, such as outside member association meetings, annual conferences presented in his or her field of study, webinars, books, and software training.

In my opinion and based on my own experiences, there's a tremendous return on investment in providing a continuing education path for your employees. Succession planning becomes more assured, as the stronger candidates will have a sense of security from the knowledge that the company will experience less turmoil following a change in personnel. The increased knowledge of the employees also improves the possibility of finding better solutions or identifying problems that might have been overlooked previously, while the personal connections that employees make while participating in the educational programs can lead to a broader knowledge base and potential new job candidates. Finally, the improved attitude and morale that comes with having employees who feel more confident and capable will lead to greater results and a more positive working environment. I know it did for me, and I hope you will make it happen for you and your employees. **SF**

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