

The Need to Go Deep

Companies have to make big investments to build a capability supply chain • BY JOSH BERSIN



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We just completed “Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends,” a study of global talent trends around the world, and one of the top five issues on the minds of 2,500 global organizations is workforce capability.

Some 75 percent of companies believe their workforce capability is a critical issue, yet only 15 percent believe they are ready to address it. Companies today face three major problems.

First, the supply of technical skills in software engineering, data analytics, life and health sciences, advanced manufacturing and other technical fields is not keeping up with demand. Dice.com, a recruitment website, recently surveyed software engineers and found 65 percent of them “could easily find a better job” if they looked.

Second, there is an increasing amount of proprietary knowledge needed to operate within most companies. Oil and gas companies, for example, regularly tell us it takes five to seven years for experienced petroleum engineers to become fully productive within their company because of all the proprietary systems, processes and tools. This means that core skills are not enough.

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Third, as a result of this new “skills-based economy,” there is an explosion of interest and new sources of learning and content online. The massive open online course market has exploded, and people are entering the workforce with more online education than ever before. Employers have to accept this shift and learn how to accredit and take advantage of the technical courses online.

Our conclusion is the solution is not more training or better recruiting, but rather a new approach to capability development. Learning leaders have to start thinking about organizations as supply chains for skills. Each of us is in a continuous learning mode, and our companies must provide education, experiences and developmental feedback to help build our skills day by day, year by year, forever.

CLOs have to move beyond building courses and programs that improve sales, service or professional skills, and invest in talent-driven learning: investments in more expensive, complex, multiyear development programs that bring people up the learning curve from knowledgeable to expert.

For example, a large oil company invested millions to build a well drilling simulation program that lets employees learn to explore, drill and make mistakes on some of the most complex oil and gas reserves in the world in a simulated environment.

Cisco Systems invested tens of millions in its enterprise sales program, and it goes on throughout a sales person’s career. British American Tobacco developed a deep skills program for marketing professionals that takes many years to complete. Even Coldwell Banker developed a deep skills training program for commercial sales professionals that extends over a period of years.

These deep skills development programs take time and patience to build. But they are among the most valuable things you can do. They let you look at your entire skills supply chain, enable people to enter wherever they are and let them develop deeper skills year by year.

This skills supply chain strategy has many benefits. First, if you project skills gaps into the future, these programs help fill the skills pipeline needed in the future. Second, these programs create high levels of engagement among your people and are fantastic ways to attract high potentials. Third, these programs help people build expertise in your company, which leads to higher productivity and better customer service.

Early in my career I spent 10 years working at IBM. I will never forget that during that time I was continuously exposed to career development programs in every area of the computing industry: operating systems, software, hardware, service, as well as sales, customer interaction skills and managerial skills. This skills supply chain within IBM made the company one of the most successful and enduring businesses in the world. Even today I rely on many of the things I learned in those programs.

Take a look at your own learning offerings, and make sure some of your programs fit into a deep skills model. In today’s talent-constrained economy, deep skills and a continuous supply chain of skills may be one of the most important competitive advantages you have. **CLO**