

Why it's time to make a change to become a learning organisation

Written by Ben Foote, CEO of The Australian Institute of Management



Regardless of which industry you're in, the days of predictable business growth are gone. Empowered by rapid advances in digital technology, unseen competitors are infiltrating every market place and flipping decades old business models upside down. On top of that, automation will cause the most seismic shift in the global workforce since the industrial revolution, meaning your employees will need to be radically reskilled for tasks that involve empathy, teamwork and communication – human skills, in other words.

So, how do you put your people and your organisation in the best position to succeed in this volatile, complex and uncertain environment? The answer is to become a learning organisation that promotes a culture of lifelong learning for each and every employee.

Disrupting the disruptors

Innovation has always been an important factor in determining an organisation's success or failure, but it's become exponentially more essential in today's digital economy.

Recent research from PA Consulting reveals that while two-thirds of organisations believe their survival hinges on innovation, less than a third report they're innovating successfully enough to drive real growth. To be able to spot new opportunities for revenue or efficiencies, you need your people to begin adopting the innovative mindset and creativity of start-ups.

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Obviously, it's impossible to completely replicate the nimble agility of a tiny start-up, but you can develop a "test and learn" mindset amongst your workforce. This is about empowering them to test new ideas, fail often and learn the lessons of those experiments. More importantly, it's about encouraging them to understand that an orientation to learning is essential for them to stay relevant in an era of constant innovation.

Breaking down silos

Departments will continue to be an easy way to arrange an organisational structure, as there's efficiency and productivity synergies from having areas of expertise concentrated in specialist teams.

However, for organisations to achieve greater competitive agility from innovation, there's a growing trend towards the creation of multidisciplinary project teams. Professor Amy Edmondson from Harvard Business School recently wrote in McKinsey Quarterly that "the size of innovating teams has grown larger and the skills brought together are more diverse than ever. This is because, as knowledge expands, expertise both deepens and narrows—necessitating collaboration across fields to produce great results."

Formal learning and development programs kill two birds with one stone here, as they do more than just help your people to acquire the latest knowledge and expertise. By placing employees from different departments into a formal training program together, it encourages them to learn more about each other's' roles and become comfortable working with people from seemingly incompatible areas of expertise.

Winning the war for talent

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It has never been more difficult to attract, recruit and retain the talent you need for driving your organisation forward. A recent LinkedIn survey of learning and development managers reported that 69% rate talent recruitment as a top priority. To be able to compete for the star players you need, it's vital that your organisation is seen as an employer of choice. The best way to do that is to be seen as an employer who values the continuous development of their people, at every level.

Your employees aren't just looking for a pay check anymore, as they want to feel a greater sense of fulfillment and satisfaction through their work. While your organisation might not be in the business of saving rainforests or feeding the homeless, you can provide people with the fulfillment they need by focusing on innovative professional development programs that blend classroom learning, online modules and workplace mentoring.

Ultimately, today's workforce want to feel that you're investing in them to prepare them for the constantly changing nature of the business world. At the same time, you reap the benefits of turbo charged innovation, improved productivity, and an inclusive workplace culture by becoming an organisation that's committed to continuous learning.

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