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Digital Article / Talent Management

# How to Build a Successful Upskilling Program

Employees say they want more training and development — but often struggle to identify which skills they’re looking for. *by Susan R. Vroman and Tiffany Danko*

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**As the Covid pandemic accelerated how and where work got done,** employee reskilling became a short-term survival strategy to fuel or sustain company growth. Companies found that investing in skills learning enabled both performance and reliability of their workers.

Companies looking to retain their workers amid the Great Resignation, however, need to move beyond this short-term approach. Upskilling is a longer-term investment in augmenting the knowledge, skills, and competencies that help employees advance their careers. When employees are offered and encouraged to take advantage of upskilling opportunities for their personal or professional growth, people metrics, such as employee engagement and retention, also go up.

“Employees want to understand future career opportunities, and what skills, competencies, and capabilities they need to get there,” Patrice Low, vice president of human resources at Cengage Group told us. Noting that Covid has caused many people to examine their personal and professional priorities, Low added: “Companies that can’t help answer some element of these critical questions will lose out on great talent.”

Yet determining what to include in organizational upskilling programs is nuanced and complicated. Erin Posnick, team lead of corporate training and development at Medicus Healthcare Solutions, explained that “unfortunately, most of the time, those same employees who say they want more training also struggle to identify what skills and development they’d like more of.”

The question for organizational and human resources leaders therefore becomes: What is the right way to identify and implement upskilling for your workforce? We spoke to several HR and learning executives across different industries to understand this challenge, offering three key considerations to guide leaders based on these insights.

## **1. Empower Your Employees to Own Their Career Development**

One of the smartest and most strategic things a company can do is bring on employees who do not fit just one job or requisition, but instead

find people who can shift when the business shifts,” said Posnick. These employees often know how they wish to grow within the company, they just need the tools to get there, she explained.

At Cengage Group, a company with more than 4,000 employees worldwide, “Careers are employee owned, manager supported, company enabled,” said Low. Her team, frontline managers, and organizational leaders collaborate to connect individual interests, operational goals, and organizational gaps in order to determine what upskilling L&D to pursue. But it all starts with employee self-advocacy.

To enable this, managers at Cengage Group are trained to hold meaningful one-on-one meetings with their direct reports every week. During this time, employees discuss professional interests and goals, and self-advocate to gain managerial support (e.g., introductions, projects to get involved with, etc.) as appropriate. If on-the-job opportunities are not available, employees may enroll in the many formal upskilling programs offered by HR. If a program is not currently offered, it is considered for future training development.

Insurance company John Hancock offers an online self-service learning center, called the Pursuit Learning Hub, with a variety of courses for employees’ personal and professional development. While managers may suggest their direct reports pursue topics based on organizational goals or anticipated activities, employees are empowered to select any class that interests them. There is no limit to how many classes one can take, and employees are given one afternoon of paid time each month to participate. The company reports that employees collectively spent 12,000 hours developing their skillsets in October 2021 alone.

While employees may not know what to call a formal training program, they know what they are interested in learning more about, doing more

of, or managing. Empowering those who are doing the work today enables their potential to lead it tomorrow. Upskilling programs are at the core of this empowerment and training.

## 2. Show Where Ideas Go

We often remind our clients that you cannot blame an employee for leaving if they told you what they wanted, and you didn't respond. If you ask your employees for input on upskilling efforts, it's important for them to see where their ideas go ... and even more important that you use them.

An HR executive we spoke with suggests that company leaders should constantly "identify the recurring themes in feedback and surveys, congregate that data and then determine when and how to offer the upskilling options that may apply towards operational and talent development goals."

At Medicus, a \$200 million company with only 215 employees, "turnover is detrimental to our operations," Posnick explained. When an uptick in resignations was noticed in a job category, the L&D team gathered employee feedback on why employees were leaving, then, they acted. Posnik's team collaborated with operators to identify barriers and opportunities to enhance the upskilling experience at key moments in the employee lifecycle. The result was a layered, four-week program that, when designed and implemented, improved retention by 50%.

When gaps in formal upskilling programs are identified at Cengage Group, they are communicated to HR business partners, who in turn raise trends and themes to HR and operations leadership. Decisions on what to pursue and add to company-wide upskilling offerings are made in concert, then communicated to the organization as new options.

Inculcating individual goals with organizational L&D strategy is an investment that has potential for strong returns. At Cengage Group, results from the company's bi-annual survey show that employees are proud to work there, turnover remains low, and employee engagement scores are higher now than they had been in years.

### 3. Provide a Road Map

By offering upskilling opportunities, companies have the opportunity to develop a more multi-faceted and balanced workforce. But employees get frustrated by lengthy training processes without an end in sight, or when they don't know how they are doing. Adding to this frustration, as an HR executive shared, "There are only so many titles we can promote folks to," so there may not be immediate rewards for training efforts.

An important aspect of any upskilling program is to identify clear paths and milestones for performance measurement. This methodology gives employees insight into the process while also enabling them to play a role in advancing their progress.

Cengage Group employs role performance dimensions, which clearly articulate competencies desired at different job levels. Knowing exactly what the company is looking for to demonstrate that you "Ensure Accountability" or "Optimize Diverse Talent" enables employees to self-evaluate their standing and to identify personal gaps/opportunities as they continue their upskilling journey. Companies that don't have their own articulated competencies can start with resources such as [Korn Ferry's Leadership Architect](#).

Employees at Medicus also can evaluate their own performance against company measures. Using a RYG (Red, Yellow, Green) metric, employees both self-evaluate and concurrently count on managers and involved learning specialists to review demonstrated progress and

performance. The combination empowers employees to take ownership for their efforts while receiving regular feedback to calibrate company expectations against their actual performance.

By knowing what's expected for career progression and providing clear metrics for individual evaluation, employees have a framework within which to work. Further, companies have a framework to use in evaluating the impact of upskilling programs, examining metrics for training and development, retention, advancement, and others as part of the organization's long-term strategy. Investing in and engaging your employees now builds your future-ready workforce.

### The Future of Work: Upskilling Integration

The last year and half has very clearly shown that the future of work is now, and upskilling is an integral tool for retaining and developing employees for organizational growth and strategic positioning. In order to, as Wayne Gretzky stated, *skate to where the puck will be*, it sometimes can be challenging to identify the skills and competencies that different audiences will find valuable to stay with your organization, developing for future performance.

As your organization considers opportunities to upskill your employees, empowerment, engagement, and planning are critical. Listening to your employees needs and wants, then acting on them, will position you for future success.

**[Editor's Note (4/26/22):** This piece has been updated to reflect John Hancock's current policy of one afternoon of paid time off per month for employee skill building.]

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