



NEWSLETTER

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IMPORTANCE OF PROVISION OF LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES BY EMPLOYERS

Even during downturns, it is as important as ever for employers to provide training opportunities to existing and new employees.

These are challenging economic times. The unemployment rate is at an all-time high, CEO confidence is plummeting, and slashed budgets are forcing businesses to do more with less. As unprecedented as these times are, experts agree that this is the time for learning executives to show the strategic business value of workplace learning and performance (WLP).¹ - American Society for Training & Development

By learning, we generally mean in-house or external training opportunities, as well as education opportunities. “Training” is most often depicted as being different from “education” which is broader in context and generally provided through post-secondary institutions. Training is often more directly related to one’s employment and job functions within an organization, while education can be related to broadening the knowledge-base of someone, particularly where professional certification and renewal is required. A training example would be management training provided within an organization, including mentoring. On the other hand, as part of furthering their formal education, a person may seek to obtain or improve management skills through enrolment in an MBA program.

How well are Canadian organizations doing in providing sufficient learning opportunities?

Even prior to the current recession, Canadian organizations have been accused of not providing sufficient learning opportunities for their employees. In 2006, the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) commissioned a discussion paper, *Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada*, prepared by Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN). In its study, CPRN found that one third of Canadian workers say they’re not getting the training they need. Less than 30 percent of adult workers in Canada participate in job-related education and training, compared to 45 percent in the United States. American firms spend almost fifty percent more on training than Canadian firms. Canada is also far behind European countries such as Sweden and the United Kingdom when it comes to providing learning opportunities.

“Canada’s performance in workplace learning has been lacking for many years,” says Dr. Sharon Manson Singer, CPRN President. “The evidence is clear that employers who invest heavily in learning programs for their employees usually experience a high rate of return on that investment through increased productivity and reduced staff turnover.”²

¹ *Mission Critical – How to Communicate the Value of Learning in Difficult Economic Times*: American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), 2009 (<http://www.astd.org/>)

² *Collaboration Is Key to More Workplace Learning Investment*. Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN), Press Release, April 3, 2008

“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”

At present, Canada appears to be under-performing in workplace learning in comparison with other countries. For example, Mark Goldenberg of the CCL notes in a recent discussion paper that international studies indicate that Canada has recently slipped from 12th to 20th place in terms of the priority that employers place on training their workers. His paper also notes that almost one-third of Canadian workers report unmet job-related training needs.³

Why should organizations invest more in providing learning opportunities?

According to the Canadian Council on Learning, investment in developing the skills and knowledge of Canadian workers is important to Canadian workers and the country's economy. According to the Council, there are several reasons for this:

- ◆ We can no longer rely on large youth cohorts to renew the skills of the workforce: most of the people who will be in the workforce in 2015 are in it today.
- ◆ The rapid pace of change in technology and the demands of the global knowledge economy have resulted in higher and frequently changing skill requirements that need to be met in order for Canada to be competitive.
- ◆ Skills training can help improve the future employment prospects of laid-off workers while helping growing industries to meet their skills needs.⁴

Canadians pride themselves on living in an “information society” and “knowledge economy”. We have an excellent education system and highly skilled labour force, strongly supported by governments at the federal, provincial and local levels. Our knowledge workers can be among the best in the world given the existing opportunities. In today's global economy, it is paramount that organizations support “continuous learning” in order to generate market opportunities, promote innovation, improve productivity, and effectively utilize the enormous pool of available and future Canadian talent.

Not only must organizations facilitate the growth of knowledge within their organizations, but they must also find ways to ensure the transfer of knowledge throughout their organizations. Employees must be allowed to take information, use it to develop a knowledge base and to share that knowledge to stimulate further innovation and productivity in pursuing organizational objectives. By doing this, Canada can become more competitive on the world stage and proactively contribute to the world economy and international community.

How can organizations better promote learning opportunities?

Learning organizations are those that will succeed, attracting the best and the brightest that Canada and the world have to offer. There are a number of steps that an organization can take to promote learning opportunities:

- ☞ Employee appraisals should include not only potential training opportunities (e.g. work assignments, job rotation, mentoring, etc.) directly related to one's employment, but also external educational opportunities (e.g. professional development, college/university courses, etc.) related to personal skills and continuous career development.

³ *Employer investment in workplace learning in Canada*: Mark Goldenberg, Canadian Council on Learning, www.ccl-cca.ca/WorkLearning

⁴ *Employer Investment in Training Critical for Canada's Workers and Economy*. Canadian Council on Learning, Press Release, April 2, 2009

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- ☞ Continuous learning should be supported by both administrative and financial policies, including employee subsidization upon successful completion of external courses.
- ☞ On-going needs for learning opportunities should be regularly assessed and identified for each position within an organization.
- ☞ Organizations should annually evaluate the implementation and results of continuous learning policies and programs in order to determine their effectiveness and use by employees.
- ☞ E-learning opportunities should be explored within organizations, particularly those with Intranet capabilities, for potential delivery efficiencies and cost effectiveness.
- ☞ Organizations should explore “best practices” in the area of education and learning through such organizations as the Conference Board of Canada.

Recommended Reading:

Moving Forward on Workplace Learning, by Ron Saunders, calls for Canadian employers to increase their investment in training employees. Participants at the November 2006 national "Forum on Employer Investment in Workplace Learning" agreed that Canada is losing a competitive edge. They also believe that leadership at the national level is needed to catch up. In the report, released in February 2007, participants identified several ideas for action.

<http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1615&l=en>

Employer Investment in Workplace Learning in Canada, by CPRN Research Associate Mark Goldenberg, assesses the impact of current employer investment in training, examines incentives used in other countries, and offers suggestions for improvement. The report was released in September 2006. <http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1529&l=en>

Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Work and Learning Knowledge Centre, Canadian Council on Learning: www.ccl-cca.ca/WorkLearning
- ◆ Canadian Policy Research Networks: <http://www.cprn.org/>
- ◆ Conference Board of Canada: Education and Learning – Best Practices: <http://www.conferenceboard.ca/topics/education/best-practices.aspx>

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