Human Resource Development: A Key Strategic Initiative for the Information Management Executive

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As we rush forward to keep pace with advances in technology, growing competition, and mounting external pressure for quality improvement, information management (IM) executives continue to focus on IT projects that align with the organization’s strategic goals and objectives.

Although the realization of these objectives is important to the success of the organization, as well as the IM unit, they should not be the sole concern. Many organizations fail to accomplish these goals by ignoring the requirements of tactical preparedness. This lack of attention can be, in most cases, traced to a poor or nonexistent IM human resource development (HRD) plan.

The training budget is an easy target for IM executives who are looking for a quick, short-term fix for bulging IT expenditures. This form of management-myopia may have a lasting negative impact that far surpasses any short-term savings. A training deficit can hinder IM’s ability to deliver quality customer service. Additionally, new technology and system applications will not yield their anticipated return if the IM unit is not prepared to support them. More important, IM employees will not stay in an environment where they are not adequately trained to do their jobs and do not have ample opportunities to stay current with the latest developments in computers and technology. Finally, IM executives who promote customer service as a strategic theme and credo send a mixed message when they don’t consider their employees’ professional and technical development just as important.

Recognizing that IM employees are also customers, their needs should also be addressed with the same attention and vigor. One cannot expect staff members to deliver support, provide solutions, and achieve strategic objectives if they are not adequately prepared.

Systematic Approach

In order to prepare a strong argument supporting additional funding for professional training, a systematic training assessment should be conducted that ties the needs of the IM employees with the goals and objectives of the organization. This approach, by design, should measure, identify, assess, and evaluate both individual and group education initiatives that will promote development in technical expertise, teaming, and collaboration. Using a combination of surveys, performance evaluations, competency measurements, customer interviews, and employee feedback, the IM executive can address all aspects of HRD that will promote and improve people and communication skills, as well as technical knowledge and skill transfer. Information obtained from this type of comprehensive assessment can give management the necessary information to proactively plan for immediate and long-term professional training and development. If conducted properly, the assessment should lead to an IM training and development plan that will yield the following:

- Employee “people” skills that will promote and maintain harmonious relationships as the workforce continues to become more diverse
- Effective technical training plans that keep employees current with industry changes
- A prepared staff equipped with future knowledge requirements and career development skills
- Overall employee satisfaction levels that will ultimately reduce turnover

IM training programs must also give employees the tools they need to feel productive and satisfied in both their routine and their most challenging work. Studies show that a rigorous and relevant professional training program can outweigh salary as a primary factor for employee retention. Therefore, since the IM employees are ultimately the ones who fulfill the organization’s technology-dependent goals and objectives, their individual input on what type of training they need should be given paramount consideration. “While it is possible to groom individuals for new jobs without considering career issues, such short-term planning is often counterproductive if individuals are given no opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their future.” Furthermore, Karen Watkins, a leading HRD professional, states:

Rather than seeking the narrowest range of behaviors which produce the most efficient results, human resource developers might seek ways to expand the scope of their role to include many pathways to learning and organizational effectiveness. Instructional models could encourage dialogue among learners to identify and pursue their own learning needs, total quality management would not begin with ways to manage quality, but rather with each person reflecting on what quality means in their work and what prevents them from achieving quality results now.

In light of this philosophy, a simple, anonymous employee survey can be administered to assess the immediate technical and long-term professional development needs centered on the following four questions:

1. How do you evaluate your own performance?
2. What information do you use (other than management feedback)
that leads you to believe that you are performing at the highest possible level for what you were hired to do?
3. What issues, problems, or knowledge-gaps prevent you from performing at your most optimal level?
4. What are the training, education, and development resources that you feel you will need to continue to perform at this level in the future (five years)?

By design, this straightforward methodology can promote candid and enlightening responses. Furthermore, by ensuring anonymity, employees do not feel threatened by being open and honest. Finally, the survey’s reliability and validity is enhanced because employee respondents will not experience questionnaire ambiguity that is often a byproduct of multipart, multi-style assessment tools.

Typical Findings

Results from this type of an assessment will produce useful information that the IM executive can use to develop a comprehensive short, intermediate, and long-term employee development plan. Although results may differ from environment to environment, a common theme for many IM support staff will be related to communication. Good communication skill is a principal trait when considering customer service improvements. One poor interaction with a user can kill the overall perception of the IM department. The support staff must be able to provide solace to frustrated users and establish trusting personal relationships that will benefit future problem-solving events. People skills, backed by strong product knowledge, are winning characteristics for customer service representatives.

A targeted skills transfer from seasoned specialists to general support staff members may also be warranted based upon feedback from this survey. User confidence, or lack thereof, can be strongly related to a need for cross-training. Since many organizations have a variety of different systems, on various technological platforms, application-specific skills transfer should be a primary concern when developing a customer service-related training regimen. A customer may think that just because an IM employee cannot give them an immediate and accurate response that they are incompetent. In reality, that employee may be brilliant in his or her respective specialty but not proficient in the topic of question. Furthermore, support staff members do not necessarily need to be proficient in a certain technology or application provided they can utilize a knowledge database or garner a timely expert consult to find the appropriate solution.

Training IM employees on how to get the information and resources they need, when they need them, will not only improve immediate service delivery but also provide an opportunity for staff to participate in the development of member-mentor relationships and team building. These peer-customer relationships are important to IM employees because they rely heavily on user feedback to evaluate and validate their individual performance. They also depend upon peer feedback as a verification mechanism for self-competence. This factor may be more socially related, but its importance should not be diminished. The ability to fix problems the right way the first time is considered a strong factor in the self-evaluation process. This factor lends further credence to IM employees’ keen awareness of the relationship between the ability to stay current with technical knowledge and the capacity to perform at optimal levels.

Evaluating the Intervention

The effectiveness of any training intervention should be measured primarily by how well the plan has achieved its intended results. Ongoing employee reaction to training programs should be actively monitored. When reactions from training sessions are poor, programs can be immediately modified and adjusted if feedback is timely and constructive. As a result, the following strategies can be used to monitor training program success:

- Experts should proctor initial sessions to validate trainee reaction
- Employees should be encouraged to practice their newly acquired skills
- Certification tests should be given at a later date to verify knowledge transfer

Evaluation of the entire HRD intervention will be the most important factor in determining the overall success of the program. Unfortunately, some of the skills that are conceptual or behavioral in nature cannot always be measured definitively:

HRD is not always directly tied to observable, behavioral change. It cultivates individuals so that their organization and work group collectively possess the knowledge and skills necessary to meet present, and prepare for future, responsibilities.

Therefore, actual behavior should be monitored by management observation. The formal job evaluation process can be used to monitor training effectiveness. Job descriptions can be modified to tie newly developed behaviors with performance criteria, duties, and obligations. Since the methods of identifying measurable gaps in skills and behavior are used in the development of the training intervention, these same methods can be helpful in measuring the plan’s overall effectiveness. Quarterly customer satisfaction surveys, employee knowledge and attitude questionnaires, peer performance evaluations, along with a routine analysis of IM service events are all tools that can be used to evaluate how well a training program meets its desired objectives.

In conclusion, an accurate measurement of how well the training plan meets strategic HRD targets will not only prove the success of the intervention, but it will also supply cogent data in support of new funding for future HRD initiatives. Preparing the IM team with the professional and technical skills needed now, as well as in the future, will guarantee a legacy of high-quality professionalism and service excellence for the entire IM unit.
About the Author


References


4See reference 2.

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