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Perspectives from the Top—A Collection of Thoughts on Employee Learning and Development from Five CEOs

by Kate Hoeppele, CAEL

As part of its mission to remove the barriers to lifelong learning, CAEL launched WorkforceChicago2.0 in 2001 to help influence the culture and policies of the private sector regarding employee learning and development. One of the key goals of this initiative is creating a “voice” for the private sector regarding the importance of lifelong learning.

Over the past two years, the program’s director, Michelle Sanford, has conducted one-on-one interviews with five CEOs from prominent businesses involved with WorkforceChicago2.0. In these interviews, which have been published in the program’s quarterly e-newsletter Smartwork, the CEOs have shared their unique perspectives on some of the issues facing the workforce, both now and in the future. Though each interview has had a distinctive focus or theme, in revisiting the discussions, there are a few topics that each leader has touched on:

- The business imperative of investing in the workforce
- The importance of developing leadership at all levels
- The need for collaboration with higher education
- The pervasive effect of technology on the learning and development landscape

This article explores these topics and, using the CEOs’ own words, portrays their unique perspectives from the tops of their industries.

The Business Imperative

With numerous events across the globe having a possible impact on a business’ bottom line in the course of a single day, resources are often spread thin—especially regarding employee learning and development programs.

Lately, however, this has been shifting as many business leaders are coming to recognize the direct impact that their employees’ skills and education can have on revenue-enhancing areas, such as customer service or product knowledge. In her interview from the November 2005 SmartWork, Anne Arvia, former President and CEO of ShoreBank, explained that the real challenge lies not in determining whether to invest, but where to invest:

To me, making this investment was a no-brainer. It really is all about the employees! The real risks in employee learning and development are deciding what kinds of programs to implement, what things do you really want to capture, measure, and change—and how do you assess yourself as a company. It helps when we are very strategic about how that money gets allocated and do constant re-assessments to find



WorkforceChicago2.0

is an initiative that recognizes Chicagoland companies exhibiting exemplary employee learning and development strategies that build a culture of high performance, productivity, and pride. It brings together business leaders, academic leaders, and public officials in an effort to highlight and promote excellence in workforce development.

WorkforceChicago2.0 is a partnership among CAEL, HRMAC, and World Business Chicago and is administered by CAEL. Similar initiatives are underway in Philadelphia and St. Louis.



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out where we are and how things have changed.

As more and more companies make the link between human capital investment and the bottom line—the tools used to measure these investments, like self-assessments and metrics, will become increasingly prominent.

Developing Leadership Skills at All Levels

Aside from developing more applied skills, there is also an increasing need to cultivate general leadership skills throughout all levels of the workforce. Even for companies in industries with a high volume of technical knowledge, like cellular service provider U.S. Cellular, there has been a focus on developing leaders that can not only do, but teach—leaders who can build success for entire teams, not just at the individual level. Indeed, this constant learning is one of the core values promoted by President and CEO of U.S. Cellular, Jack Rooney:

Learning isn't just absorbing. Learning is then reiterating what you absorbed in a way that the associates can understand and improve their performance. So, everyday our leaders have to be out there teaching—and for the leader to do a good job teaching, he has to be in a position to understand that his success is going to be the success of the team he's leading.

For some companies where a lower percentage of the workforce has an advanced or college degree, the element of motivation also comes into play when trying to develop these skills. One industry where this is especially prevalent is manufacturing. As Pat Ormsby, President and CEO of Bimba Manufacturing, explains, this poses both a challenge and an opportunity:

I think that's a particular challenge for manufacturers: we are employing a lot of people that aren't motivated to move on with their education. I think that if you can motivate them, you can really increase their skill levels throughout the company. The key is: how do you do that? How do you reach them? We've been able to get them interested by doing assessments of what skills they need to be able to advance in their jobs—not to graduate, but to move ahead at Bimba. Maybe these people have never had someone that has sat down with them and said that. I think that's both the challenge and the opportunity—how can we motivate front line manufacturing employees to continue learning?

Companies can't be the only impetus driving employees to pursue further education and skills development. There is also an important role that our schools play in getting employees to a base educational level. Yet, developing talented, skilled leaders at all levels of the workforce is an effort in which all sides must participate. As Jack Rooney of U.S. Cellular said, "We can either shake our fingers and go, tsk, tsk, tsk, or we can get out there and pull our oar too."

Collaborating with Higher Education to Meet Business Needs

Higher education institutions are in a position to play an integral part in helping companies and their workforces meet education and skill needs. Though some companies have been able to strike partnerships with individual educational providers, it has often occurred on a hit-or-miss basis, with little formal structure and highly dependent upon the willingness and creativity of individual personalities involved in the partnership. Many believe that much more might be accomplished if these partnerships were formed more systematically and at the regional level. In June of 2006, Ray McCaskey, President and CEO of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Illinois, remarked on what the regional effects of such collaboration might be:

In a broad sense, I would see a more stable and productive employment environment if we actually had in place something that cuts across all of the businesses in Chicago that helped all of us align the skills and abilities of our workers with the actual needs of the jobs. I think we would see lower turnover across industry and less outsourcing of jobs or loss of jobs to other places. I think that a systematic approach means that instead of just one or two companies benefiting in some small way, finding something that really changes the whole employment structure in the city.

With faculty who are skilled in teaching and who understand how adults learn, a more systematic method of collaboration could prove a win-win-win for all parties: business, higher education, and the individual employees.

Navigating a Changing Technological Landscape

It would be difficult to have even a cursory discussion with a CEO in today's age without covering the topic of technology. Technological advances have completely changed the landscape of business, and the rapid pace of technology changes creates a constant need for retraining at all levels of the workforce. Despite this challenge, technological innovations have also allowed for the cheaper delivery of education and training through e-learning, videoconferencing, webinars, and much more.

As always, change can either be accepted or resisted, and the ability of a company to be flexible and foster employee engagement around this change greatly affects its success. One such champion of this approach is Tim Reedy, the President and CEO of ConferencePlus—a global audio, web, and videoconferencing provider with a strong track record of excellent customer service:

One of our mantras is you can accept change or you can get run over by it, so we were concerned with resistance to change. However, we found that the continuous training of employees helps overcome resistance by setting the expectation that things are always changing. There are a lot of different ways of talking about change, but change is inevitable. We try to involve people in the changes that we do make. Whether it's changing a process, procedure, or policy, we solicit feedback from frontline employees. The more that you engage people, the less resistance to implementing new programs and new ideas. We try to do as much as we can to explain why we are making changes and why we are instituting new programs and why it will be good for them.

Views from the Top—A Forecast for the Future Workforce

These salient issues are at the forefront of business in today's competitive global economy, and as such, will likely have an impact on the quality and accessibility of employee learning and development opportunities in the future. The thoughts and views of these CEOs provide a unique insight into what will be the key issues of the future—an insight to which educators and policymakers should take notice.

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