



# Intellectual Innovation

## A Paradigm Shift in Workforce Development

*Michael Cook*

Every organization struggles with recruiting and retaining the quality personnel needed to meet the ever-evolving requirements of the mission. Today's workforce complexity adds a unique challenge. As every manager and supervisor knows, the required work becomes more challenging over time, not less so.

Technology and innovation drive the challenge, forcing organizations to recruit and retain employees who can respond to the organizations' missions or operational requirements.

Here lies the challenge. How can organizations find, develop and keep employees in this dynamic and complex environment that constantly forces those who operate within it to question how to achieve continuous improvements? Perhaps a paradigm shift is needed in how we do this.

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## The Challenge

Innovation drives everything we do. In developing and delivering complex weapons systems to the warfighter or logistically maintaining the systems or training personnel to operate them safely and effectively, innovation is never far from the overarching acquisition process. The paradigm has been to enable technology to meet the innovative challenge of developing the workforce. Faster computers, interactive simulation software, Web-based training sites and Web-enabling technologies are just a few ways in which technology has been the focus of innovative training, education and professional development.

Although it is readily presented as important in workforce development, technology all too often has become synonymous with innovation in the minds of managers and supervisors trying to develop their respective employees so they can meet their unique workforce requirements. But employing existing technology or seeking to employ emerging technologies actually may not provide the innovation needed to meet current challenges. Although technological advances have provided huge benefits to a number of different fields over the years, technology is neither the only answer nor the only way to innovate. At times, technology can become a crutch that prevents an organization from seeking better ways to deliver the training and provide the professional development opportunities that employees need in order to excel.

Innovation evolves from necessity and successful utilization of available resources. In other words, take what is available and find new and improved ways to employ it. Technology often has been the resource readily at hand and has shaped the paradigm many now operate within. In the case of many training and educational methods used to develop the workforce, the paradigm can and should shift. We should focus on the resources at hand and develop training and development initiatives that incorporate a holistic approach to developing the workforce.

Technology need not and should not be totally disregarded. However, to succeed in austere times in which many research and development budgets are shrinking, we must all take a new and different look at the assumptions and standard ways of doing things. The challenge is for managers and supervisors to realize this in order to change the paradigm. The benefit may

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be a better and cheaper method of developing the workforce and meeting operational requirements.

## The First Step

Among the most commonly overlooked resources of organizations are their current employees. Every organization has abundant experience, education, knowledge, skills and abilities that remain dormant because they never are utilized. However, these resources often are not captured by management, and therefore their existence remains unknown. These intellectual resources in essence are wasted.

The first step in shifting the personnel development

paradigm is to capture and understand the abilities of current employees and try to share them across the organization. This is done easily through resumé and records reviews as well as personal interviews with employees. Documenting the intangible resources of knowledge and experience is an important first step. Supervisors and managers identify educational programs completed, years in the current career field, specific training received, unique assignments and a number of other important facts that become organizational resources that can be used.

There are two indirect but crucial benefits of this first step. First, it allows the employees an opportunity to discuss their contributions to the team and opens dialog on how to improve the organization. Many employees truly want to perform well, help those around them and improve the organization in order to achieve success. Employees also want to know that managers and supervisors value and respect their contributions, and open collaboration between managers and employees makes that awareness possible.

Any organization may allocate funds for employee training. Sometimes this is necessary, such as for certifications or the successful completion of exams. However, it often is not necessary. The organization could save time and money by employing the one-time common practice of on-the-job training (OJT). An OJT program matches new employees up with experienced employees to share the experience, education, knowledge, skills and abilities. This offers a win-win opportunity. The new employee benefits from gaining knowledge and insight from the experienced employee. The experienced employee gains the satisfaction of sharing his or her

knowledge and insight in order to improve the organization. An OJT program also provides team-building opportunities, creates camaraderie and develops a sense of ownership on the part of experienced employees.

The second indirect benefit is the development and sharing of ideas on how to improve employee training. Not only do experienced employees have a wealth of knowledge and experience, but they also have an abundance of ideas. In many cases, employees are likelier to remain in an organization that values their input. On the central focus of innovation, they may have previously undiscussed ideas on how to better train the workforce. Perhaps it is an idea on areas of training that could be eliminated, or perhaps the need to alter the sequence of training in order to improve understanding. We must come to realize that innovation need not consist of groundbreaking discoveries. Sometimes simple changes produce huge benefits and change how we think about things.

### Determine Knowledge and Experience Gaps

Once supervisors have performed the background due diligence for organization members, the next step is to identify employee gaps in knowledge and experience. Typically, organizations ignore the training or knowledge shortfalls of the more experienced employees. This is a mistake. Although experienced employees need less training than new employees, eliminating training often results in occupational apathy.

Experienced employees may feel that, since they receive no training opportunities, they have reached the limit of their professional development. This is not conducive to the development of innovative ideas for improving the organization. It also may impede knowledge-sharing for newer employees if the more experienced employees have no incentive to train others who may compete with them for future career advancement or opportunities. Both scenarios are potentially damaging, not only to the organizational growth and development but potentially to effective job performance.

Once the gaps in knowledge and experience have been identified for all employees, a strategy can be developed that benefits everyone. Two key components to the strategy for innovatively developing a well-trained workforce are mentorship and tailored training programs. Each component can play a unique and vital role in applying innovative strategies and not just technological strategies.

### Develop a Mentorship Program

As with any program or initiative, it is only as good as the buy-in from the

organization and should be supported from the top down. Leadership-supported mentorship programs can play a critical role in the knowledge transfer between experienced and new employees. Mentorship programs help indoctrinate new employees, transfer knowledge, create a more adhesive workforce and encourage the sharing of ideas across all levels of an organization.

Mentors interact and communicate with new employees, and vice versa. Mentors also share their thoughts with management on the progress and capabilities of new employees. Mentors discuss mentorship techniques and challenges with peers and share ideas on how to be better mentors. Good mentors also take ownership of the process and prove to be exceptional stewards for the organization; they make the extra effort to improve the organization and freely share ideas on how to do so.

This open communication across the entire organization and the contributions of mentors creates and fosters idea-sharing and the possibility for innovative ideas to take root. For many organizations, the best benefit is that this results in no cost to the organization's budget and may actually save money in the long run. The benefits associated with cost-avoidance and cost savings have a pivotal role in today's operational environment.

### Developing Tailored Training Plans

The problem with most training plans is that the approach taken all too often is to develop a one-size fits all plan. The cookie-cutter approach leads itself to fast creation of a plan—however, not a very good plan. Supervisors need a paradigm shift away from the generic and toward the tailored training plan that takes into account the individual employee and includes assignment of a mentor to the new employees. In many organizations, this can be seen as an innovative approach.

Every employee comes with unique education, knowledge, experience and abilities. Instead of trying to train everyone according to a prepackaged set of training courses or objectives, organizations should develop a tailored plan that focuses on what each employee needs to learn. Time and effort are saved by focusing on the knowledge and skill gaps instead of a list of courses or objectives, some of which may not be needed if the employee already developed has the skillset associated with the training.

Another key aspect of the tailored training plan is the realization that each employee learns in a different way, which can include the use of visual and/or audible as well as the hands-on method of instruction. Employees also have varying learning abilities and disabilities, and require varying lengths of time to learn and

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retain new things. There is an associated completion date in an overwhelming percentage of training plans. It is important to understand that not every employee can retain the knowledge and gain the experience and proficiency to compete a training plan within a month, or 6 months or even a year.

Tailored training must emphasize collaboration between the supervisor and the employee in developing a plan and a timeline that the employee can complete. The plan should look at the holistic approach. Some employees may need significant formal classroom training. Others may find OJT or online courses better suited to them, or possibly a combination OJT, online and classroom learning. The key is for the plan to be tailored to the individual and not to the job being performed.

Mentors play a critical role in helping the new employees achieve their training objectives. In many cases, the mentor has been in the shoes of the new employee and understands how to gain the knowledge and training to do the job. To assist the employees, mentors bring many tools to the table—including lessons learned, information on degree and certification programs, and pitfalls to avoid during a career.

## Conclusion

Although this article is centered on innovation, nothing here is groundbreaking. Many of these concepts and practices have been around for generations. However, the author does feel that seeking ways to solve the workforce development through nontechnological methods can lead to innovative breakthroughs. Every supervisor and manager must make it a priority to recruit the best employees possible, develop every employee the best way possible, value the contributions they make and challenge them so that they want to stay within the organization.

Before we look to new technology to solve our workforce development issues, let's look at the intellectual resources already available within the organization. The rewards and benefits of employee development and retention are enormous. In today's technological environment, any avenue that leads to attainment of these goals is truly innovative, whether technology is used or not. 

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