

9.4: Putting It Together- Onboarding, Training, and Developing Employees



Of course, building talent is not a new idea. As Zig Ziglar famously noted: “You don’t build a business. You build people, and people build the business.” To be clear, people building—including reskilling, upskilling and developing soft skills—will be a shared responsibility going forward.

AT&T’s talent overhaul—a program titled Workforce 2020 (WF2020)—serves as an example of how the building process can be accomplished at scale—specifically, with a workforce of almost 300,000 employees, roughly half of which are union members. This following overview is drawn from a Harvard Business Review article written by and interviews with AT&T’s chief strategy officer John Donovan and Deloitte vice chairman Cathy Benko^[1].

In launching WF2020, AT&T set expectations up front, giving “every employee who wants it the chance to change with the organization” and making it clear that “employees interested in new roles would be required to use their own time—and in some cases, invest their own money in—their reeducation.”^[2] With the understanding that this was a matter of survival, training and development program details were included in union contracts with union support. Buy-in from both union members and non-union employees allowed for the “continuity of the institutional knowledge and informal networks” critical to an organization’s functioning.

AT&T’s gambit reflects the reality that many of the technologies shaping business are advancing so rapidly that traditional methods of training and development can’t keep pace. Three years into the initiative, AT&T estimated that 140,000 employees were actively engaged in reskilling for newly created roles. This is, in fact, our new operating reality; the expectation is that roles and required skills will change every four years.



In the first phase of WF2020, managers identified required skills and current gaps, created “future role profiles” and developed a blueprint for sourcing skills internally. To increase job mobility and promote the development of transferable skills, 250 roles were consolidated to 80. To support the transition, human resources launched an online self-service platform that provided access to a range of tools and training including a career profile tool and career intelligence tool, with links to related skills training. Once skills gaps have been identified—either through the self-service platform or in conversations with management, employees can address the gaps by taking online courses, pursuing nanodegrees or certification or degree programs developed in partnership with Udacity and Georgia Tech. For perspective, in a five month period in early 2016, retrained employees filled half of the company’s technology management jobs and earned 47% of promotions.

The final—critical—step in the initiative is effecting a change in mindset. In order to build a culture of continuous learning, employees need to embrace a more dynamic approach to career development. Instead of a corporate ladder, employees need to adapt a multidirectional or “lattice” approach that supports lateral, diagonal and both ascending and descending career moves. Final perspective point: “Essential to lattice thinking is the principle that individuals actively own their development, which fundamentally changes the social contract between employer and employee.”^[3]

1. Donovan, John and Cathy Benko. "[Inside AT&T's Talent Overhaul](#)." Harvard Business Review. October 2016. Accessed July 18, 2019. ↵
2. Ibid. ↵
3. Ibid. ↵

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