



EXECUTIVE TRAINING

Connected and Engaged: The Value of Government Learning

by Donald F. Berbary and Alan A. Malinchak

Innovative chief learning officers are looking beyond traditional training approaches to gain a better understanding of employee engagement and how managers and learning professionals can foster it.

Several days away from the office for a skills-building course, a week's stay in a distant city for a professional conference, or three weeks at a retreat for an executive development program are becoming a thing of the past.

Not long ago, such learning activities were a regular component of the professional development plans of government employees at all levels and on all career paths. But in the new norm of tightening agency budgets—with funds for training and development slashed—such time- and travel-intensive opportunities have been significantly scaled back.

But what are the ramifications of this change? Online courses that employees can complete on their own at any time can often assist in developing the specific knowledge and skills that employees require and save costs over their classroom equivalents. But what about the less tangible but very real learning that takes place as people collaborate to share challenges and insights, work together on cases and exercises, or talk with an expert instructor over lunch or dinner? What about the information learners gain through interaction with employees at other organizations or thought leaders in their field?

As off-site learning opportunities are reduced, what other avenues exist for giving employees the enriching, enlightening learning experiences they seek and deserve? How else can employees gain the insights and build the relationships they need to further the organization's mission?

Numerous studies have shown that highly engaged employees are far more productive and much less likely to leave their organizations than their non-engaged counterparts. Ensuring employee engagement is critical at a time when organizations must find ways to do more with less and must replace the seasoned employees who are retiring.

Who Are the Engaged?

In our work with agencies throughout the federal government, we have found that savvy learning organizations are embracing challenge. By asking the right questions, they're gaining a better understanding of what constitutes employee engagement, how it contributes to organizational productivity, and how to increase it through structured learning activities.

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U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Engaged employees—learning professionals are discovering—are intellectually respected, emotionally connected, actively involved, and meaningfully empowered. They understand and identify with the organization's mission. They know how they can add value, and they take responsibility for doing so. Engaged employees work from a sense of shared purpose and take pride in what they and others do. Appreciative of formal learning opportunities, they are learning on their own all the time.

This article highlights insights from two U.S. government learning leaders on new approaches their organizations have implemented to increase employee engagement:

- Jody Hudson is chief learning officer (CLO) at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC)—the agency that for the past three years has emerged with the No. 1 large-agency ranking on the Partnership for Public Service's annual Best Places to Work rankings based on the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.
- Fred Lang is the chief learning officer and director of the Office of Training and Knowledge Management at the U.S. Department of Commerce as well as the founder of the Federal Chief Learning Officer Council.

From our discussions with these well-recognized leaders and our own reflections, there are some very distinct characteristics of highly engaged employees.

Engaged Workers Get the Big Picture

Highly engaged employees possess a strong conceptual grasp of what their organization, as a whole and in its component parts, is all about. They understand its mission, and the mission's importance and implications. They comprehend its major goals and functions, and how they interrelate with one another and those of other organizations. Most importantly, they are clear about their own jobs—what's expected and why, how their work interrelates with others, and how it serves stakeholders needs and interests.

When this cognitive engagement exists, employees can both perform at the highest level and productively envision how they will contribute further as their careers progress. They can help their organization address immediate tactical challenges and prepare strategically to meet long-range demands. The knowledge that they are competent to do so is empowering; as they gain confidence and motivation, their productivity increases.

Rotational Assignments

When he arrived at the NRC in early 2009, Hudson found an organizational culture in which rotational, or "stretch," assignments were well established. As CLO, he has been instrumental in advocating, perpetuating, and

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extending this approach as a means of engaging employees and strengthening the organization.

“The average time to mature from entry-level to the Senior Executive Service (SES) level has shrunk from 23 years to 16,” Hudson explains. “In that compressed timeframe, we need to ensure the same breadth of experiences that add up to ‘wisdom.’ We’ve got to develop leaders faster.”

Three-month rotational assignments begin at the entry level at NRC and continue for those with management potential. Four-month rotational assignments take SES candidates from regional offices to the headquarters or vice versa, to different NRC organizations or functions, or to outside organizations. As a result, both the employee and organization benefit.

“They’re not stovepiped,” Hudson says. “They know how the organization works, and they can connect the dots.”

Mentoring

Along with rotational assignments, live workshops, career counseling, and online training, the U.S. Department of Commerce has made mentoring a key component of the career enrichment opportunities it offers every employee. An electronic database helps match applicants in dynamic mentor and mentee pairs (although pairs may self-select as well). Training is provided for new and established mentors and mentees.

Along with providing specific guidance and advice, mentors broaden their protégés’ horizons by helping them understand the organization’s mission and their work from new angles. And, it’s a two-way street. Presented with their protégés’ issues and concerns, mentors receive new information and stretch their thinking to offer new perspectives. Both become more engaged with the organization’s challenges as they build a relationship with each other.

Engaged Workers Feel Appreciated

An individual’s sense of engagement is as much emotional as it is cognitive. To become engaged and stay engaged, an employee must feel recognized and understood, and needed and appreciated. This dimension of engagement—or the lack of it—depends on interpersonal connectedness. “People leave people, not organizations,” Lang says.

Manager and Executive Involvement

Along with opportunities for growth and development and the achievement of a good match between individual skill set and organizational mission, the other key drivers of employee engagement are relationship-oriented, according to Hudson. Engaged employees enjoy a healthy relationship with their immediate supervisors. They also have a positive view of their organization’s senior leadership.

Hudson’s learning organization focuses strongly on supervisory education. Through its Leadership Potential Program, it identifies the best candidates for management roles and develops their managerial skills.

This past year, the NRC slipped a bit on an OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey question relating to the degree to which managers engage employees and take an interest in their personal development.

“We had to engage our manager audience—primarily scientists, technicians, and engineers—in a way that would resonate with them,” says Hudson. “That meant showing them data. We showed them stats that clearly demonstrated how much more effective training is if, beforehand, they tell the employee, ‘Here’s why we’re sending you and what we expect you to learn’ and, afterwards, ‘here’s your path going forward to put what you’re learning into practice.’ We used data to demonstrate how much more learning will stick when they’re directly involved in shaping their employees’ roadmaps.”

Communication and Validation

The learning organization at NRC ensures that NRC leadership focuses on the Best Places to Work survey results, analyzes the feedback received from employees, and communicates how the organization is responding. Senior executives are given talking points to help them communicate the findings, and steps are being taken to address them effectively.

“People know somebody’s paying attention,” Hudson says. “They feel their views are important and their input is valued.”

Under Lang’s leadership, an emphasis on promoting dialogue underpins the Commerce Department’s career enrichment initiatives—mentoring and otherwise—and its leadership succession strategy.

“You have to have a dialogue with your employees,” Lang says. “It’s not ‘we’ and ‘they.’ You’re one of the team. You must learn what’s important to employees, know what’s important to the organization, and find ways to merge the two.”

Engaged Workers Connect Interpersonally

Whether or not communities of practice as such exist within the organization, an organization that fosters employee engagement—both cognitively and emotionally—also supports a community-of-practice dynamic in which people come together regularly and informally to learn from each other as they seek to improve their work (See sidebar). Employees know they have access to and may contribute to the collective learning taking place within the organization.

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice are well established at NRC; at last count there were 60 of them within the organization. Hudson considers it his organization’s job to make certain that NRC leverages existing, long-standing communities and supports the growth of new ones.

“The 80/20 rule is in effect,” he says. “While an organization may spend 80 percent of its learning budget on formal classroom training and e-learning, it’s the 20 percent spent on informal modes such as knowledge sharing, mentoring, coaching, and peer-to-peer collaboration that have greater effect. That’s where the real power lies.”

To leverage that power, his organization identifies and promotes those communities of practice that are most closely linked with the NRC’s major functions. It identifies “high-risk knowledge assets—seasoned

Why Communities of Practice?

Communities of practice have been around as long as human beings have exchanged knowledge and information informally. The term was not coined until 1991, however, when anthropologist Jean Lave and social-learning theorist Etienne Wenger introduced it in their book *Situated Learning*.

The concept is continually being redefined and refined, but most would agree that a community of practice is characterized by three essential elements:

Shared interest. Members are involved in the same field of professional or artistic endeavor.

Practitioner involvement. Members are actively working in that field, willing to devote time and attention on a sustained basis to get better at it.

Community orientation. Members take the view that they’re getting better at it together, through the interactions and exchanges that take place among them.

Sometimes called learning or knowledge networks, communities of practice have garnered much interest as a learning strategy over the past two decades as organizations have looked for ways to transfer knowledge and build collective learning.

experts nearing retirement—to make sure they’re actively involved in the appropriate communities. It also ensures that NRC instructors are active members of the relevant communities.

Communities of Practice + Social Networking

Critically important, Hudson also promulgates the use of social networking technology to increase the reach and impact of the organization’s communities of practice exponentially.

“When members of a community engage in online conversations, it’s one-to-many instead of one-on-one,” Hudson explains. “And instead of just a one-time exchange the conversation is now part of a discussion thread that can be found by someone who will benefit years from now.”

NRC is responsible for ensuring public safety by regulating commercial nuclear power plants and other

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uses of nuclear materials. Social-networking-supported communities of practice exist around all of the agency’s major licensing, inspection, and enforcement functions. For example, the resident inspectors responsible for ensuring safety at operating reactors and materials facilities throughout the country now have anytime, anywhere access to co-workers in all four NRC regions, enabling them to share valuable information and experience in real time.

That is highly important in an organization with a workload that has expanded dramatically in recent years as employees deal with an industry in which interest has surged and technology is changing rapidly. Being able to access expertise or confer with others throughout the organization whenever and wherever they need helps employees carry out their responsibilities far more effectively and efficiently.

“They become smart together,” Hudson says. “A dialogue gets started, and collective learning goes up very rapidly.”

NRC’s Knowledge Center affords every employee the opportunity to set up a Facebook-like profile, join existing communities of practice, or create his own community. Hudson acknowledges there’s a technology-adoption curve that can be steep at first, especially for employees who aren’t already used to having hundreds of online “friends.” It may take a while, he cautions, for an online community of practice to get traction. But once it does, it becomes self-sustaining. The participation of respected, seasoned employees who act as catalysts is extremely helpful.

Hudson emphasizes that the benefits are not only one-sided. Not only do newer employees tap into all the knowledge that’s shared, they also raise questions, offer

Acronyms Unite— CLOs Embrace COPs

In 2005 Fred Lang founded a community of practice—known as COP—for federal government chief learning officers or CLOs. It has now become more formalized as the Interagency Chief Learning Officer Council. The council fosters collaboration among agencies. It reaches out to provide “internal consultant” support to other federal government communities of practice, such as Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCO), Chief Acquisition Officers (CAO), Chief Information Officers (CIO), and Chief Financial Officers (CFO) councils.

the latest information, or bring new perspectives to those of greater experience. And not only do learners have access to their instructors long after courses end; but instructors who participate in communities of practice can keep their fingers on the pulse of the organization and update course content accordingly.

Engaged Workers Get Latitude to Learn

In some cases there is no substitute for the deep, rich intellectual comprehension, emotional understanding, and interpersonal relationships that can be built through a sustained, structured in-person learning session. Savvy learning professionals and managers will continue to advocate these opportunities to their employees.

But these same managers and professionals recognize that what is more important is ensuring that employees grasp the organization’s mission and their part in achieving it, communicating that employees’ contributions are valued, supporting collective learning through informal means of interacting, and giving employees the resources and the latitude to learn whenever, wherever, and however they choose.

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