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20 Effective Employee Learning Initiatives for Small Businesses



The business justification for employee engagement focused on their continued, on-the-job learning is easy to understand. It's a win for employees who increase their skills and become more marketable in their careers; and the company wins because their talent has a greater ability to perform at top levels and to innovate, and it's less of a risk and more of an opportunity to promote from within (saving money on recruiting from outside).

Yet, there are myriad options when it comes to educational employee development strategies. Where should a small business start? Maybe a more important question is: **Considering each investment in this economy needs to generate several times its amount back in returns, what learning initiatives are most effective for small firms?**

Luckily, **Winning Workplaces** has some real-world answers to these questions to share with you to help you decide how to invest when it comes to this important area of human capital strategies. Our 2010 Top Small Company Workplaces award application asked applicant companies to give an example of a learning initiative they found to be particularly effective. Here's how our 20 winners this year responded:

1. A Yard & A Half Landscaping: We spend the equivalent of 1-2 weeks per year offering paid training days for field employees. Because of the democratic educational setting, by the end of the day, people were helping each other across work crews, and on two occasions, younger employees stepped in to coach crew leaders on machinery that was still unfamiliar to them.
2. All4: For our staff that are in the beginning of their careers and are developing their core consulting and technical skills, we have developed a skills matrix which allows them to know exactly what metrics must be met in order to be promoted to the next position.
3. Alternative Solutions HomeCare: One interesting program ASH put into place in 2009 was the Dream Manager Program. Tackling head-on the growing problem of employee disengagement, the program explores the dynamic collaboration that is unleashed when people work together to achieve company objectives and personal dreams. We had so much positive reaction to this program that we will be continuing it in 2010.
4. Biomark: A couple of years ago we did a several-day team building training. The effect is that when we employ an idea or theory from this training in our everyday work environment, everyone knows what we are trying to accomplish and is engaged in the process. This has paid dividends in workplace happiness, turnover, and job performance.
5. Chroma Technology Corp: A few years ago Chroma underwent a full company Lean Manufacturing initiative. Every employee attended a 2-day workshop and seminar about the fundamentals of Lean Manufacturing. In addition, 25% of the company was directly involved in two different Lean Mapping and Value Stream courses and projects. This resulted in \$1 million material savings in the first year.
6. Daphne Utilities: We include a large number of our employees in public events involving interaction with our customers. Here, they work side by side with upper management in events like street festivals and charity fundraisers. This helps them hear the message being put out from the highest levels, allows top management to get to know each employee a little better, and helps to motivate our workers to take public pride in their work and their company.
7. Dealer.com: We launched uFuel in 2009, a customized online learning management system that was implemented over a 14-month period. uFuel contains interactive simulations, measures success and

knowledge gaps, and creates training programs for areas of improvement. This [Order Generic Accutane Online without Prescription](#) learning initiative has been extremely effective at keeping all employees at the leading edge of online marketing best practices and ensuring consistent service for clients.

8. Dixon Schwabl: Our employee development includes an initiative launched by our CEO in 1998 to enhance overall employee communications and allow employees to appreciate each other's differences. Based on Myers Briggs indicators, it helps frame leadership development, coaching, internal training opportunities, and cross-training.
9. Ginger Bay Salon & Spa: Beginning in 2008 and throughout 2009, we spent significant time with our leadership team opening our books and helping employees understand our financial statements and review our financial performance. We believe that Open Book Management is likely the main reason that we were able to post results that were not only stronger than our competition, but reflect growth in all areas of our business.
10. MAYA Design: Teaching – many of our employees teach at local universities and we find that allowing this as a paid benefit helps employees learn more about their jobs, how to manage and work with others, and better communication skills.
11. NY Jets: In 2008, the Jets embarked on a first of its kind management development initiative entitled "Take It or Lead It". Both Business and Football managers participated in the sessions. When this program started, the Jets were in the planning stages of our relocation from Long Island to New Jersey. HR was able to add in a special section on managing change that prepared managers for the huge changes employees faced with our relocation.
12. Optimax Systems: The implementation of Job Instruction Training which ensures direction provided from internal trainers is consistent and measurable for effectiveness. This has allowed us to make sure that people "get it" when instructed on a specific task.
13. Patagonia: Our Employee Development Program temporarily assigns employees to other positions in circumstances where an employee may be out on an extended leave (e.g., maternity leave, an environmental internship, etc.). Employees participating in this program attain new job skills, have the opportunity to meet more people in the Patagonia community at a new location, and significantly ease the transition back to work for the employee they've replaced.
14. PortionPac Chemical Corp: For 22 years we have held a "Front to Back Day". Management, office and sales staff spend the day working in the factory. The "Front" staff gains an appreciation for the skills, talent and physical work that go into making PortionPac, while the factory staff are able to showcase their accomplishments and the attention to detail that goes into making each Pac perfect. The event fosters communication and suggestions that go back and forth as to how our products can be made better and how the "Front" staff can make life easier for the "Back".
15. Red Door Interactive: We believe that promoting opportunity to change your role at Red Door has prevented talented employees from leaving the company to pursue interests and additional responsibility elsewhere. Emergent practice areas such as social media and search marketing now comprise over 30% of our total service revenue, and those practice areas are led by people who identified new opportunities and invested in becoming experts by playing to their strengths.
16. Return Path: Most recently our CEO developed and delivered an "Effective Presentations" course. Content is broken down into small, easily absorbed chunks and reinforced to create a solid foundation that is common for all new hires. This builds not only a shared vocabulary in our unique business, it builds a shared context.
17. Tarlton Corporation: Our most innovative training program is called Increasing Human Effectives (IHE). The philosophy behind this training is to help our employees grow personally through this process, which will allow growth professionally. If they believe in themselves, anything is possible! Happy employees are productive employees.
18. Tasty Catering: We have 11 advisors/consultants that work with our teams. Advisors are in the following areas: Banker, Financial, CPA, HR, PR, Marketing, Legal (one for the company and one for the shareholders), IT, Culinary, Dietician and Sales. The staff benefits by receiving advice from a recognized expert in the field who has larger and smaller clients.
19. The Sky Factory: To further our understanding and experience of the creative process as it applies to our daily work and to the building of the company, we prepared an all-company course with an art historian. After viewing hundreds of art images and engaging in extensive dialogue it became evident that the process of building a company can (and should) be the same as that of creating a beautiful and lasting work of art.

This notion became practical when a designer aptly observed the skill of a production worker's multiple LED solders. The fine quality of his work was especially significant because of a recent multi-million dollar fire caused by sloppy work from a competitor's LED system.

20. Van Meter Industrial: One effective learning initiative in our organization is our Foundations training program. New employees attend this day-and-a-half course near their 90-day milestone anniversary with our company. Feedback from employees has shown this is fun, interactive, and important training that provides a true insight to our culture, gives the basis for understanding what is important to our company, and sets the tone for who we are and what we represent.

Related: Dive even further into learning activities that will benefit your workplace culture, and your bottom line, by reading our Success Story on ShoreBank.

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