How to Prioritize Your Team's Professional Development, Even Remotely

When the current global health crisis hit the United States, offices across the nation experienced an exodus of sorts. Workers who could perform their responsibilities from home found themselves suddenly working remotely.

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In a remote work survey, PwC found in June that although only 39 percent of companies expected most of their office workers to work remotely at least one day a week before the crisis hit, that number has risen to 77 percent during the crisis and is expected to remain at around 55 percent after. In fact, more than 67 percent of companies plan to keep their remote work policies in place permanently, according to an S&P report.

With this influx of remote work, companies have been reeling to adjust to their new workplace reality. But one thing that bosses need to make sure doesn't slip through the cracks during this time is professional development.
Just because many companies are still fully remote due to the current crisis, that doesn't mean they can just put professional development on hold. Employees crave growth opportunities, and their work location doesn't change that. In fact, a Harris Poll survey for Instructure found that about 70 percent of workers in the U.S. were at least "somewhat likely to leave their current company" to find a workplace more focused on employee learning.

When I think about the "why" behind investing in professional development, I think of a quote I once read that went something like this:

**CFO:** But what happens if we invest all of this money into professional development for our team members and then they leave?

**CEO:** What happens if we don't and they stay?

If company leaders want a successful organization that's full of people who are bought in and working hard toward the company's mission, they need to invest in their people. Especially during these uncertain times when employees feel like their jobs have gotten harder, companies need to do everything in their power to make employees feel valued. That's why leaders should infuse professional development into their new remote company culture and make sure they're equipping their teams to do their best work and advance their careers. Here are five ways to do it:

1. **Adapt your normal professional development activities to your new virtual environment.**

Before the current global health crisis, my company was accustomed to having a quarterly professional development day. The whole team would gather at our headquarters for educational sessions, brainstorms and team bonding activities for a full workday. But since the crisis began, we've had to pivot our strategy and take our professional development virtual.

When you transition your professional development activities into a virtual setting, keep in mind that it will probably need to look different from what you're used to. For example, at our company, rather than doing our normal professional development day, we realized we'd need to split our sessions up across multiple days and weeks to prevent burnout and **Zoom fatigue**. Be willing to brainstorm with your team and make adjustments to your strategy as you go.

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2. **Invest in virtual learning software.**

E-learning software is a helpful tool that allows companies to easily share training information, process documents and company policies with all employees. It also enables company leaders to facilitate professional development opportunities virtually. At my company, we already used Lessonly, but the platform has been so valuable for continuing trainings and learnings while we’re all remote.

Another example of a company embracing e-learning is IBEX, an IT consultancy firm. It provides many e-learning courses that cover leadership and project management topics, plus IT training and certification.

3. **Invest in an alternative learning option.**

Companies' internal professional development won’t necessarily be enough to satisfy employees' drive to continually learn and grow, so it can be beneficial to invest in external options that provide more comprehensive learning opportunities.

My company decided to sign up for MasterClass to provide more development opportunities for employees. This platform allows our team members to choose from a vast array of online classes so they can learn new things in areas that they're personally passionate about. Subjects learners can choose from include business, art, music, writing, science and sports.

4. **Offer training and support on topics that are relevant now.**

While internal professional development is important, company leadership shouldn't hesitate to bring in experts to discuss timely topics that employees care about and might need help with.

For example, my company brought in Adrian Campbell of Chimeric Leadership to speak about wellness and stress reduction, specifically as they relate to what we're all experiencing with the global health crisis. During the session, Campbell created a space where employees could share experiences and brainstorm ways to reduce stress, and she demonstrated some stress-relieving exercises our team members could do at home. This is a great example of looking at what employees are experiencing and providing tangible learning that the team needs and can use now.

EY has also offered timely education around mental health and emotional well-being. The company offered free apps to help employees build emotional resilience and improve sleep habits and a free 12-week course on mindfulness.

5. **Set aside budget for professional development.**
Professional development doesn't stop where the company's provided resources end. Countless more opportunities exist for employees to take ownership of their professional development and spur their careers forward. While companies can't necessarily facilitate all of these opportunities, it can support employees in their pursuit of greater knowledge and skill. And creating such a culture is vital: According to Bersin, companies that nurture employees' desires to learn are 30 percent more likely to be industry market leaders for the long haul.

That's why companies should consider setting aside funds each year that employees can use for professional development. Every senior employee at my company can invest up to $1,000 per year into their own professional development. This might involve purchasing books or enrolling in courses. During the current crisis, some employees have opted to use this budget on things such as virtual conferences. The important thing? That employees feel supported and encouraged to steer their professional development in the direction they choose.

Companies have a lot on their plates right now. They're juggling a crisis, a weakened economy, remote work — the list goes on. But while leaders are keeping all those plates are spinning, there's one in particular they can't let drop: professional development. Try out these five tips to make sure your company's professional development is effective and makes employees feel like a valued part of your culture.

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