The Move to Talent Management

Don’t forget about learning! • BY JOSH BERSIN

One of the most frequently discussed topics in corporate learning and development is the integration of learning with talent management. Our conversations with learning leaders typically focus on questions such as:

• Do we need a CLO, or should the role be replaced by a vice president of talent management?
• How do we better align learning with HR?
• Should we replace our LMS with a talent management suite?
• What is the role of learning, competency and capability management in our integrated talent management strategy?

In this year’s research into high-impact learning organizations, we found that more than 45 percent of all learning executives rate integration with talent management as one of their top training strategies.

However, as you’re exploring and advancing your company’s talent management strategy, it’s important to keep your eye on the ball when it comes to learning. In the past few months, we have seen a distinct back-to-basics thinking among many of our research members.

These executives are focusing on aligning, managing and measuring existing training investments to reduce costs. They’re exploring how to further integrate LMSs with collaboration systems and portals to better provide a complete learning solution. They’re looking into ways to increase emphasis on effective and innovative content sharing and reuse, and less emphasis on formal content development.

I am not implying integrated talent management isn’t important — it is actually critical. Today, more than a third of the companies we encounter are in the middle of a wrenching transformation or change in leadership. There is no way to navigate today’s dramatic business changes without a strong focus on capability analysis, succession management, leadership development and a culture that promotes change. These disciplines are the fabric of talent management, and learning executives must understand, support and integrate learning programs and resources with these initiatives.

Consider the recent merger of two regional banks.

One company focused on traditional retail banking and excelled in its low-cost, high-value retail operation. The other had a major focus on small businesses and a focus on high net-worth customers.

The merged companies were geographically separated, had two sales forces, two IT departments, two sets of regional offices, two lending operations and two different sets of core competencies. How could the two merge effectively?

The answer was to build an integrated, combined talent management strategy that addressed both sets of competencies and created development, succession and performance management processes that incorporated the best from both organizations. This strategy is being built by the learning and development team, which is assessing skills and developing an integrated career model.

My point is that we must ensure learning and development is not overlooked and underfunded in the rush to develop talent management strategies. Very recently, several of my CLO friends and colleagues have found themselves on the outside looking in. They’ve lost their jobs as a result of learning budget cuts and perhaps an overemphasis on newer areas of talent management.

In today’s business world, this kind of thinking is dangerous. The traditional disciplines of critical skills analysis, competency management, instructional design and performance consulting are just as important now as before.

Learning executives should look at their roles from two perspectives. On one hand, build and deploy performance-driven training programs that drive operational excellence, quality and efficiency. These programs — such as sales training, product and systems rollouts and systems training — make your company’s operations work effectively.

On the other hand, develop talent-driven training programs. These programs, such as leadership development and career development, are complex, multiyear investments with many moving parts. They involve competency analysis, assessment, developmental assignments, coaching and traditional learning. These programs demand your expertise and skills, and they bridge the gap between training and talent management.

In the months and years ahead, there is much work to do. We must reinforce this point continually, even as we are grappling with issues related to these challenging economic times.