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Essential Skills for Your Organization

How do you Motivate Self-Directed Learning?

Your Learning and Development Guide to Helping People Build New Skills

This guide looks at how you and your learning and development team can motivate self-directed learners.

Please feel free to share it inside your organization.

Create a relaxed and informal space for learning in your organization.

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Self-directed learning has an increasingly important place in learning and development. But motivation can be a challenge for some people. So, how can you encourage people to engage with self-directed learning?

Self-directed learning has dominated the landscape of learning and development in recent years.

It's popular for many reasons – but mainly because it's relatively inexpensive, and it gives large numbers of people the training they need, when they need it. This means that leaders can feel confident that their people can quickly access the latest information in a format that suits the way that they want to learn.

However, self-directed learning also presents L&D professionals with challenges. In particular, how do you motivate people when they're responsible for their own learning?

In this Learning and Development Guide, we'll look how you can motivate people to engage with your self-directed learning program.

1.   Meet Needs

People are unlikely to engage with learning that doesn't meet their needs.

A 2008 study on generational differences highlighted how widely learners' approaches vary because of age. According to the study, individuals from the baby boomer generation (born from 1943-1960) learn by asking, "What does it mean?" Generation X people (1965-1977) ask, "Does it work?" and millennials (1982-2000) ask, "How do we build it?"

You'll therefore need to look for learning content that can provide different types of self-directed activities for different audiences and age groups. For example, knowledge that can be put to use straight away may be most useful for Generation Xers, while millennials are likely to prefer working through real-life examples.

There are also differences in how people from different age groups consume content. For instance, another piece of research shows that people who use a lot of digital technology are likely to have shorter attention spans. Keep this in mind when you select resources.

2.   Make Learning "Just in Time"

Timing is crucial to engagement and commitment. Adult learners tend to respond best to learning that's short, sharp, and impactful; and they want content that relates directly to their current needs.

This makes on-demand learning ideal for the workplace: learners can "dip in" when they need to learn a new skill, and apply what they have learned straight away. This is highly motivating, because it meets learners' immediate needs.

It also means that people can learn at a time and in a place that suits their energy levels and their schedule.

3.   "Sell" Your Learning Program

Once you have selected your learning content, you should think about how to tell your audience about it.

Where you can, give concrete examples of how different segments of your workforce have benefited from this type of self-directed learning – this helps to connect learning portfolios with employees' working realities. Use testimonials and case studies, too, to show how learning can be applied practically and successfully. This will increase take-up, and it will make it more likely that people will use the skills they've learned in their jobs.

On a longer-term basis, self-directed learning needs to be "marketed" within your organization, supported by an internal communications plan. Ask learning providers for help with how to do this successfully.

4.   Mix it up

The most advanced self-directed learning initiatives help learners create personalized learning strategies.

They also take into account different modes of learning. Some studies on learning styles in the workplace

suggest that self-directed learners need a blend of media such as articles, worksheets, audio resources, and videos to learn best.

These studies also showed that learners are motivated when they discuss concepts and ideas within a small group setting.

5.   Get Managers Involved

Managers therefore need to take an active role in the learning process to keep their people involved. You can support managers by giving them resources that help them do this – they can use these to prompt discussion and pique curiosity among their team members.

In the long term, this will demonstrate managers' commitment to learning and development, and, on a practical level, it will help them stay aware of the skills that their people need.

6.   Create a "Learning Hub"

A 2008 study showed that learners often struggle to learn in a traditional office environment. A more recent analysis suggested that people may learn better in designated learning areas, with more relaxed surroundings such as sofas, snack facilities, and informal meeting areas.

So, where you can, set aside a designated space for learning, so that people can enjoy the contrast between this and their everyday work space, and so that they can come to associate learning with a fresh, pleasant environment.

7.   Look Online

Self-directed learning is often in an online format, so, harness technology to bring like-minded learners together. The sense of connection you can achieve with this can be highly motivating.

For example, use social media, or set up online communities to help learners connect with and support their peers. Let them be motivated by one another.

8.   Support Yourself

Technology has created a huge range of opportunities for self-directed learning. However, it has also generated many new challenges for L&D teams.

It's important that you keep up to date with learning offerings, and with the theory and the technologies that lie behind them. Use our LinkedIn group for L&D professionals to share your experiences, and to learn from fellow professionals. Click here to join.

Visit www.mindtools.com/corporate to find out how your organization can access more than 1000 resources on leadership, management, problem solving, and communication.

You can also license more than 60 one-hour training courses and hundreds of business podcasts. Used together, these will help you develop and embed skills organization-wide.

References

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