TRAIN TO RETAIN:
A CHRO’S GUIDE TO EQUITABLE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT
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Eliminating skills gaps, improving retention, and increasing diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) are three of the biggest workplace challenges today. But HR leaders can better address these three issues by recognizing that they are deeply connected and require a coordinated strategy. When developing strategies to combat high turnover, HR executives must learn to view skills development through a DE&I lens to address equality shortfalls within their skills development efforts and improve retention.

In July 2022 alone, 4.1 million workers left their jobs, adding to a growing shortage of labor across numerous industries. While many executives might respond to this data by focusing on salary or workplace flexibility, they should recognize that skills training is also a critical factor affecting workers’ career choices. Recent data shows that 58% of employees plan to change jobs if they aren’t offered professional development, continuing education or career training. A recent McKinsey study revealed that lack of training and development opportunities was the top reason for employee departures.

However, 40% of HR leaders can’t create skills development solutions quickly enough to keep pace with evolving skill needs. One answer is for leaders to focus less on the skills themselves and more on the people developing the skills. A Momentive study identified a correlation between employees who feel their company is doing enough or too much to address DE&I issues and opinions on whether the company offers advancement opportunities. Roughly two-thirds of respondents believed their DE&I-focused employer provided good or excellent advancement opportunities.

Training is imperative because 4 in every 10 workers will quit within the first 12 months if they don’t receive the necessary job training to become effective. But for many of these workers, biases can affect the development opportunities available to them, which may prevent them from reaching their full potential and could end up leading them to seek employment elsewhere. It’s up to HR executives to take steps to address conscious and unconscious biases in the workplace, ensuring fair and equitable training and skills development across the organization.
BIASES CONTRIBUTING TO TODAY’S SKILLS GAP

It’s important to think holistically about what bias can look like. It is often depicted as overt animosity toward a specific group. But workplace bias can also be unconscious and may affect many different groups in ways that can overlap. Research shows a variety of ways in which bias can affect workers:

- A majority of Black and Hispanic American workers could be shut out of or underprepared for 86% of available jobs in the U.S. by 2045.7
- LGBTQ professionals in STEM fields were more likely to experience systemic inequalities, including career limitations, than their non-LGBTQ peers.6
- Over half of women (61%) believe that having a child will disrupt their ability to advance at work.9
- Research shows certain social groups are perceived as lacking important “soft skills” (e.g., Black men being characterized as “less motivated” than their white counterparts).10 That same study reported that soft skills perceived as “female” are associated with wage penalties (examples of such skills given in the research include empathy, respect, sensitivity and dedication).
- Research suggests height can unfairly influence a worker’s career opportunities, with tall individuals being perceived as better leaders.11 Similarly, other studies have found negative perceptions regarding weight in work settings.12

“These biases can really get in the way of who will get developed and the skills that they’re able to acquire during their tenure within an organization,” said Deanna Kimbrel, chief diversity officer and director of the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion for New York’s Monroe County. “As people—and even as leaders—we’re going to be biased. But we have to have mechanisms and processes that allow us to mitigate some of our biased decision-making.”
If CHROs and their organizations want to keep top talent, they must act to close skills gaps. “People are not just leaving [their jobs] because of money,” Kimbrel said. “They’re leaving for a place where they can grow, where they can be developed.”

This is especially true for younger generations. A study by Deloitte recently found that 29% of Millennials and Generation Z chose their current employer because of learning and development opportunities.  

Nearly 9 in 10 Millennials (87%) cite access to professional development or career growth as important. These findings are significant given that Millennials and Generation Z are the most diverse generations in U.S. history.  

Another study from Buck revealed that 60% of Millennials expect their employer to demonstrate a DE&I commitment.

It’s essential for HR executives to understand the interconnected nature of their internal processes and how that impacts retention. Bias in the workplace limits opportunities for specific workers. When employees can’t develop at work, they leave in search of a company that will allow them to grow. As such, providing workers with equitable opportunities for development will go a long way toward addressing retention. Employees believe professional development is the top way to build company culture. 

Of course, additional skills training doesn’t magically solve generations of skills inequity and disadvantaged employees. However, when you rethink how—and why—you deploy talent development, you can see people as people instead of viewing them only in terms of their skills. This mindset change can make a significant long-term difference.
3 STEPS TO BRIDGE YOUR SKILLS GAP

Moving forward, it’ll take three things to develop employees equitably:

1. Analyzing your inequities.
2. Implementing equitable strategies.
3. Uniting the C-suite through accountability.

Step One: Analysis

The first step CHROs should take is to uncover trends in staff development. This is also a good time to partner with DE&I leaders to identify inequities in development investment, including by demographic. If the organization doesn’t have internal DE&I leaders, then the immediate responsibility will fall to HR’s executive leadership. In this situation, consider hiring a DE&I consultant to offer an unbiased view of your organization’s development initiatives and where they fall short.

When analyzing your development investments, Kimbrel suggested you ask the following questions:

- Where is development investment going?
- What policies are in place related to development?
- Who is entitled to development, and when?
- What are the results of those investments?
- For those who quit, what training did they receive?
Analyzing your organization’s existing skill set is also an opportunity to reassess what skills should be prioritized. “The organization needs to work hand-in-hand with their employee population to decide what skills are needed to progress,” said Serena Fong, vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion partnerships at The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research.

Research from recruitment software provider iCIMS revealed that 94% of recruiting professionals believe that employees with strong soft skills have a better chance of getting promoted to leadership roles than employees with more years of experience. As such, employees who don’t have a chance to develop these skills will find themselves at a disadvantage for career advancement.

“One many skills—especially soft skills—are often undervalued but highly necessary to advance,” Fong explained. “HR leaders must work with their staff to determine skill priorities and base their organization’s strategy on those redefined needs.”

One common challenge CHROs encounter at this stage is a lack of relevant internal data. “People are often unaware of developmental trends because they haven’t implemented the right technology that will allow them to track those things,” Kimbrel said. “It’s important to have the right tech in place because it allows you to track consistently.”

Some of the software solutions that can help to gather data about skills development include:

- Learning management systems.
- Learning experience systems.
- Online course software.
- Micro-learning apps/software.

While the specifics of an ideal HR tech stack may vary based on the organization, having the right tools in place provides the necessary data to identify gaps in existing skills programs. If your organization has invested in more advanced people-analytics capabilities, adding this data will grant further insight into skills development and how it overlaps with DE&I initiatives, such as whether certain demographics quit sooner or fail to advance at equal rates within your workforce.

Once your inequities and priorities have been determined, the next step is adding interventions to increase equity—and decrease bias—within the developmental process.
Step Two: Strategy

When CHROs create a talent development strategy based on their new data and understanding, they should include these six action items to ensure equitable skills development and training.

A. Create standardized policies

Without consistent policies related to development, Kimbrel said, your organization is setting itself up for inequities as employees make individual judgment calls. “In some organizations, you may find there’s no standardization, and people are pretty much using their self-discretion. By standardizing policies, we can add equity to them because the more policies are based on self-discretion, the more likely they are to have biases surrounding decisions,” she said.

B. Rethink the skills and experience required to advance

Stringent job requirements unfairly prevent many people from breaking through to higher-level roles—especially if they can’t easily access training or gain experience, or if the experience is more preferred than required to do the job. For example, Fong noted that many companies require CEO experience to serve on a board, which harms female candidates because only

8.8% of Fortune 500 companies are run by women.19

“When you cut those numbers down further around race and ethnicity, the numbers shrink dramatically, and by dismissing the skewed candidate slate, you simply feed that gap,” she said.

C. Employ visible stretch assignments

Offering stretch assignments to employees can help them expand their skill sets while giving employers a fuller picture of the capabilities and potential their employees possess. “Stretch assignments and things of that nature can help equalize development,” Kimbrel said. She also emphasized that these assignments can help improve visibility for employees who may not be well-networked within the organization.

Of note, stretch assignments work best when employees are also given access to the knowledge and support needed to succeed at the task. Otherwise, an uncompleted stretch assignment looks like a failed opportunity and may result in unfair bias against the employee.
D. Customize growth plans

Rather than assigning rigid development tracks or granting access to online courses and wishing employees well, ask them how they see themselves, how they want to develop and through which mediums they learn best. This guided yet collaborative approach creates a better match between development opportunities and the employee’s preferred path. For example, without this exchange, an employee who would rather remain a valuable contributor might be placed on a leadership track. That mismatch is likely to harm the employee’s development and cause the individual to look for another job, not to mention hurt the organization’s productivity.

Ask employees questions like:

- Where do you want to be?
- Where do you see yourself?
- And how can we help you?

Embracing this strategy gives your employees ownership over their growth. This is especially beneficial for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups who have lacked ownership opportunities. By engaging with employees on their growth plans, companies are also more likely to increase their loyalty.

However, be aware that early-career employees may not be able to effectively answer such questions. Because of such cases, HR executives need to ensure that mentorship opportunities are available to all employees upon request so that workers can find their niche.

E. Talk the talk, then walk the walk

CHROs should create development plans that reach every level of the organization, then communicate those opportunities widely. Take steps to ensure all employees know how to access the development resources that align with their interests and goals. Let staff know that every employee can come to HR for help designing a personalized development program.

But talking about skills development isn’t enough. “When I am deploying a training within an organization, I start with the leaders,” Kimbrel said. “I try to make sure leaders have some perspective and an understanding of what the training is before deploying it out to the entire staff. That way, when questions come up, leaders can share their experience and act as a role model.”

“The accomplishment is setting up the strategy—and then you refine it over and over.”

Serena Fong
Vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion partnerships at The Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research
F. Communicate plans equitably

“It’s critical to ensure communication reaches all people, and that means communicating equitably,” Fong said. Consider remote employees when giving in-person updates, for example. Consider how to make information about skills training plans widely available and on demand, especially when you have employees across many time zones.

Also, consider the channels you use to distribute information. For example, you might communicate key information over e-mail, but that should also live in an employee intranet where workers can access it at any time. Likewise, consider how employees who have been on leave—such as maternity/paternity, sabbatical or short-term disability—can access this information as they return to work.

Remember, equitable development doesn’t happen on the first try. Keep communication lines open so your employees can voice their thoughts. Listening to feedback and optimizing your development initiative is a never-ending process. “The accomplishment is setting up the strategy — and then you refine it over and over,” Fong said.
“I think it’s important to let the rest of the C-suite know that growth and development are a part of our human biological needs. When those needs aren’t met, you’re not fostering an environment where people can thrive.”

Deanna Kimbrel
Chief diversity officer and director of the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion for New York’s Monroe County

Step Three: Accountability

After putting equitable strategies into place, CHROs need to track progress and share it with the executive team at least quarterly. “If you’re only sharing progress once a year, as many organizations do, it’s too late; by that time, too much time has passed, and you don’t have enough time to adjust something that may be missing,” Kimbrel said.

Share your goals and progress with the entire organization at least once a year. If you don’t already, consider publishing an annual DE&I report that includes your upskilling strategies and results.

Accountability is essential for finding success with skills development plans, including at the leadership level. Have fellow leaders engage in learning about types of bias in the workplace and how skills development and DE&I intersect, and then participate in the conversations. For even stronger accountability, Kimbrel suggested making equitable development goals a competency for leaders. “Leaders are critical to the development of employees and those of marginalized backgrounds, and that development should be a leadership competency to add a level of accountability,” she said. “I think it’s important to let the rest of the C-suite know that growth and development are a part of our human biological needs. When those needs aren’t met, you’re not fostering an environment where people can thrive.”
Employees fundamentally want a fair chance to learn, grow and advance at work.

“People don’t want to get what they get unfairly, nor do they want to be shut out unfairly,” Fong said. Without fairness and equity in the workplace, trends like “quiet quitting” will continue as employees get tired of doing more without a reward in the form of a promotion or a salary increase.

By contrast, organizations that provide equal opportunities for real growth will entice their people to stay. For example, one recent report shows that 86% of professionals would change jobs for a company with better professional development opportunities and other data shows that employees who get professional development opportunities have a 34% higher retention rate.
As a real-world example, Adobe has placed special focus on creating career growth opportunities for employees from underrepresented groups and aligning skills development with DE&I. According to data from Comparably, 71% of employees would not leave Adobe even if they were offered a job for more money, and 88% of Adobe workers feel their company does what it should to retain them.

“Equitable skills training creates loyalty within an organization because employees feel that the company is truly interested in their growth and development,” Kimbrel said.

HR leaders should begin this journey by shifting their focus to a people-first approach to talent. Talk to employees and learn what employees need to succeed. Invest in the technology necessary to collect data and identify biases and trends in your processes and opportunities. Get other perspectives from consultants and DE&I professionals.

With labor shortages plaguing virtually every industry, HR executives can’t afford not to establish equitable opportunities across their organizations. The needs of employees are shifting, and those who can’t adapt will ultimately fail to compete for talent.
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