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Winning Workforce, Worldwide

December 03, 2008
In our global economy, the greatest secret to success isn't the latest and best technology or infrastructure. It's your people. Building human potential, some say, is the new global initiative.
By Lois Webster

As the global economy becomes increasingly more knowledge-based, human capital and the ability to maximize the workforce potential are developing into strategic advantages. In this environment, industrial competitiveness is based on the engagement and productivity of knowledge workers as they strive to create new products and services and foster unshakeable relationships with clients. This mandate reinforces the need for organizations to assist employees globally in developing their individual potential and inspiring their energy while operating within corporate expectations to increase efficiency and productivity. Although opportunities for developing human potential are abundant, many businesses are not prepared to fully manage the global challenges in achieving the end result.

Increasing Human Potential

Developing employees to perform at their best is a vital goal for any organization. Leaders can accomplish this by tapping into employees' abilities, aspirations, and desires for their lives to have significance. Each employee has a uniqueness that can contribute to the success of the organization as a whole. Additionally, because employees come from different cultures, geographies, educational backgrounds, and perspectives, they bring specialized skills and needs to their employers and peers.

One way to energize the global workforce is by providing them with the opportunity to engage in lifelong learning, regardless of their physical location. Tom Christensen, manager of John Deere Learning at John Deere (Moline, IL), has firsthand experience in this area. "We appreciate that people want to continue learning, so we provide them with opportunities to do that in a variety of ways. One of them is with John Deere Learning—our virtual learning management system (LMS)," says Christensen.

Through John Deere Learning employees and their managers jointly select a set of courses to enroll in for increasing skills, knowledge, and capabilities, thus providing employees with opportunities for enhancing their potential. These courses were designed by worldwide subject matter experts from the John Deere corporation.



The Importance of Technology

The use of technology is crucial for organizations that are committed to developing human potential on a global basis. It provides a fast, easy way of connecting employees worldwide with their company's identity and vision. Through the use of technology, everyone in the organization can get the same information or the same message at approximately the same time. Electronically, a CEO can communicate a company's vision, talk about the implications of an acquisition, and build aspirations for the future.

In addition, technology enables companies to conduct virtual meetings, video conferencing, and online training. One of the *Fortune* 500 companies of the LearnShare Consortium conducts live sessions to train HR professionals on how to coach and mentor. In addition, employees have universal access to business resources (e.g., product specifications and job aids) regardless of what part of the

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world they work or reside.

Challenges in Emerging Markets

Global competition is in its prime as many emerging markets enter the scene. While many of these newer markets have real buying power and raw talent, there are substantial challenges for corporations that conduct business internationally. They include:

1. Significant differences in knowledge and skills. Employees in some emerging markets may not even be familiar with or understand word processing, database management, graphic design, or other computer-related tasks.

Additionally, many of these individuals may not own or have ever used the products manufactured by the corporation, i.e., cars, PDAs, or international travel. That's one reason why some successful international corporations are providing more foundational learning for employees who work in emerging markets.

2. Infrastructure and social challenges. In some remote areas, electricity may not be available 24/7. Or travel distances and lack of transportation may hamper employees' abilities to get to work daily. Even basic needs such having enough money to purchase lunches, clothing, shoes, or other necessities can play a role in the development of a stable workforce. Global corporations need to address these issues in a compatible way to the local culture where they arise in each part of the world.

3. Government restrictions. In some cases, employees in emerging markets may have Internet access, but it may be controlled by the government or limited by the number of lines available in that particular country. There may be strong privacy issues or other government regulations that need to be addressed as a company doing business globally.

4. Language differences. While English may be spoken in business worldwide, and is the official business language in many countries, there are still many regional differences in spoken and written communication. These differences can affect how employee training is conducted globally and how training materials are written.

Currently, John Deere is in the process of making its LMS available to employees in India. "We try to focus on the needs of the particular region and have identified a number of courses that we've asked the regional training people there to find sources for teaching these courses," says Christensen. "We want to account for the cultural differences between what we might consider the right way to deliver course material here in North America and what they might consider the correct way in another culture." Having an enterprise-wide, global LMS that is translated into selected languages is one of the best ways to offer up-to-date communication and consistent learning to the workforce.

5. Training formats. While mature markets have transitioned from typical classroom to Web-based training, this type of learning is not feasible in some parts of the world. Training materials need to be appropriate for the global audience and may have to contain more in-depth information (and translated locally in the appropriate language) to compensate for minimal experience in the topic.

An Engaged Workforce

Companies are competing for the world's resources and looking for approaches to develop a highly energized, committed workforce. While marketing and financial departments in organizations have been operating in the worldwide arena for a while, finding and engaging the best talent globally lags behind other corporate functions.

By tapping into employees' desires to be part of something bigger than themselves, and determining how to connect them globally, companies can empower and maximize potential to generate creative solutions for the world's challenges.

Lois Webster is CEO and general manager of Toledo, Ohio-based LearnShare LLC, a technology company that specializes in the development and implementation of integrated software and related professional services that provide customers with tools to manage the performance and build the talent of their workforce on a global scale. For more information, please call 419.327.4160, e-mail lw@learnshare.com, or visit www.learnshare.com.

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