

"The aim of Human Resources Notes is to provide concise information on topical human resource management issues to guide effective people management practices."

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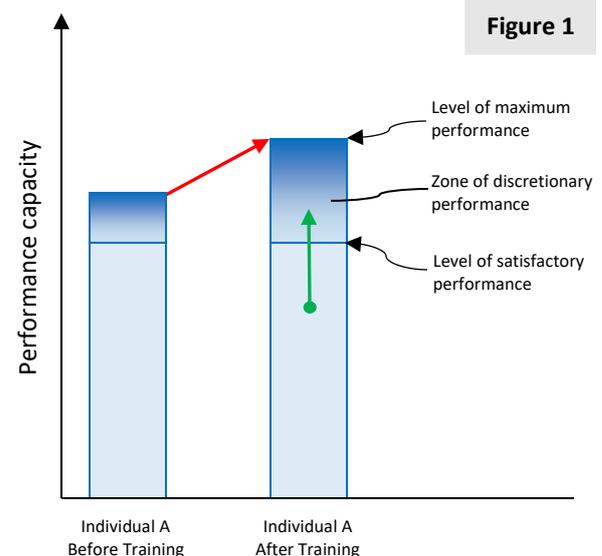
Invest in training for better business performance

Organisations which invest in training their employees can expect the organisation to perform better. At the level of the individual employee, getting trained gives the employee new knowledge or skills which raises the performance capacity of that employee. The employee can do their existing work more effectively or efficiently. Or, the employee can apply new competencies to take on new tasks (See the red arrow in Figure 1). If the employee's job is aligned to the organisation's purpose, then application of the new skills will translate into business performance benefits: lower costs, more output and/or enhanced organisation sustainability.

Training does not only benefit an organisation. It also benefits the employees who are trained. Being trained creates career progression opportunities for an employee and adds new meaning to an employee's work. An employee can confidently take on new work challenges. Training is a route out of a job rut.

A major study concluded that learning and development is one of the top levers an organisation can use to improve employee engagement, and engagement is the key to employee performance and retention. Highly engaged employees try 57 percent harder, perform 20 percent better, and are 87 percent less likely to leave than employees with low levels of commitment. (Corporate Executive Board, 2004). (The green arrow in Figure 1)

The implication seems obvious. Invest heavily in training and business benefits will flow. Yet many business leaders are indifferent or negative about the return on training spend. In the rest of this note I will outline some measures that leaders can take to wisely spend on training and get the positive training benefits of a better bottom line and organisation sustainability.



1. Don't expect training to be a cure-all

The vertical axis in figure 1 is labelled 'performance capacity'. Training does not automatically translate into improved performance. It raises the capacity of an employee to perform at a higher level. Consider a common shopping experience.

You encounter two sales attendants. One is surly and unapproachable. The other is helpful and serves you with enthusiasm. Yet, both attendants went through customer service and product knowledge training. The above mentioned Corporate Executive Board study (2004) sheds light on this challenge. There are potentially hundreds of levers of employee engagement and around 150 of them significantly affect engagement. Management must address multiple levers for business results. A short-term situational factor could also explain the different performance levels of the two sales attendants.

2. Hire right

There are two issues here. Employers often bring people into an organisation who do not have the base competencies needed to perform the work they are hired for. Training to fix this competency shortfall raises an employee's performance capacity to the 'level of satisfactory performance' line (Figure 1) rather than into a 'zone of discretionary performance' where competitive advantage accrues. Secondly, the results of your training will be better if in the first place, you appointed people with the right skill-set, a strong work ethic and a commitment to personal development.

3. Identify training needs properly

Too often training decisions are based on inadequate analysis of training needs, a one-size fits all approach, flavour of the month programmes, making up the numbers, spending available budget and a mistaken belief that any training is better than no training. Unsurprisingly, in these contexts, training produces disappointing results. Managers should ensure that training closely matches the needs of individuals. Will the employee be able to apply new competencies shortly after the training? What useful information about training needs has been gleaned in performance discussions? What are the essential competencies of a job? What are industry / customer / technology changes that affect a job? These are questions which can lead to well targeted training.

4. Ensure that new competencies are applied on the job

There are few things more powerful than an overflowing email inbox to disconnect a training beneficiary from the training they attended the previous day. Despite good intentions, it is easy for a trained person to quickly fall back into old routines. Figure 1 shows an increase in performance capacity in a trained employee. A manager's role is to ensure that the 'level of satisfactory performance' line is moved up in tandem with the new 'maximum level of performance' line. Managers must require training participants to put their new skills into practice when they return to their jobs. This can be kickstarted by meeting with staff returning from training and confirming the learning outcomes; how the training will be applied and thereafter doing regular follow-ups to make sure the skills are implemented.

Training can raise the performance of employees to new levels thereby contributing to organisational success and competitive advantage. Well-chosen training rejuvenates and upgrades organisation capability. ■

Zero tolerance of sexual harassment (LAC judgment)

The Labour Court found that a major South African insurer was, in terms of s60 of the Employment Equity Act ("the EEA"), at fault for having failed to take reasonable steps to protect an employee after the insurer became aware of her being sexually harassed at work by her manager. The insurer appealed the judgment in the Labour Appeal Court (LAC).

There were four incidents underlying the court proceedings. After the first occasion of unwanted sexual attention, the employee took the incident up with the perpetrator and she considered the matter resolved. However, there were three further incidents when the employee was sexually

harassed. The manager stood too close, made unwarranted comments, inappropriately touched her, and on one occasion forced his tongue in her mouth.

The employee said that she reported the sexual harassment to management and the insurer failed to react thereon. However, she later discovered that the manager was contacted and informed of the matter in her absence but nobody came back to her to help her deal with the situation, or to resolve the issue. The employee resigned but was persuaded by a different member of management to withdraw her resignation so that the insurer could deal with the matter. In the following two-week period, the insurer took no steps to investigate the sexual harassment complaint.

The employee resigned a second time and a week later she referred a dispute to the CCMA characterising the dispute as constructive dismissal in the light of the ongoing sexual harassment.

The case moved through the dispute resolution system and got to the Labour Court where the employee gave evidence in person. The Labour Court accepted her version and issued a judgment in her favour. In the LAC, the insurer attacked the employee's credibility based on contradictions in her testimony and inability (some two years later) to remember precise details and dates.

In upholding the Labour Court's finding that the sexual harassment was proved, the LAC noted that the employer did not call the manager to refute the employee's version.

The LAC severely criticised the cross examination of the employee by an advocate on behalf of the insurer. The LAC described it as a vicious and sustained attack on the employee's person, her motives and credibility and the reliability of her evidence over some three days of unacceptably harsh, cruel and vicious cross-examination. The result, according to the LAC was that the employee became the victim of unwarranted and unjustified secondary harassment at the hands of the insurer.

The LAC found that the insurer adopted precisely the response that the Employment Equity Act (EEA) seeks to prevent. The insurer failed to recognise the seriousness of the conduct complained of; lacked interest in resolving the issue in the manner required; failed to consult and take the necessary steps to eliminate the conduct complained of; and failed to do all that was reasonably practicable to ensure that the manager would not act in a manner contrary to the provisions of the EEA.

The LAC dismissed the employer's appeal with costs and ordered the insurer to pay the employee R250'000 in damages.

The occurrence of sexual harassment is a form of misconduct which has serious consequences. For the victim, it can have a devastating effect on personal wellbeing. For the employer, there can be significant financial and reputational consequences if the employer is found to have not done enough to prevent harassment taking place and to deal effectively with it if it does happen.

This case serves as a warning to employers. Employers should have clear a sexual harassment policy, which is communicated throughout the organisation. Any cases which are reported must be investigated and pursued expeditiously to finalisation. The employer must take steps to protect the dignity of victims. Employers who do not act quickly and who do not act decisively against errant employees face harsh censure and penalties imposed by the courts. ■

Annual report of the Commission for Employment Equity

The Commission for Employment Equity, established in terms of Chapter 4 of the Employment Equity Act (EEA), is a body of representatives of government, organised labour, employers and community. The Commission advises the Minister of Labour on employment equity implementation; recognises achievements of progressive employers and conducts research and submits reports to the Minister of Labour on

the EEA. Earlier this month, the Commission released its 17th annual report. The employment equity scorecard of private sector employers was not good (Commission for Employment Equity, 2017). Key findings were:

- White males remain significantly and disproportionately represented in top and senior management levels in the private sector.
- Whites and Indians account for a small portion of the workforce but their representation continues to dominate at the middle-to-upper occupational levels.
- Foreign Nationals occupy a large part of the workforce and their representation in senior management positions is growing.
- Africans continue to occupy the largest portion of the workforce with their representation mainly concentrated at the bottom occupational levels.
- Female representation at top and senior management remains very low with the status static over the last three years.
- Disability representation across all occupational levels remains very low.
- South African workplaces remain racialized and gendered (sic).

In responding to the report, the Minister of Labour (2017) was critical of employers stating, “what the [Employment Equity] Act seeks to achieve, is disappointingly still far from being accomplished. I urge you therefore, not to be discouraged by the picture we see in this report, but to use it as a source of inspiration to work even harder moving forward.”

The Minister said government will “consider, drafting-in harsher consequences for non-compliance. It’s time to *up the ante* and this may include promulgating the *stick* sections of the Employment Equity Act because quite frankly, the *carrot* sections have not delivered the desired results. We are seriously considering approaching the President to enact the more punitive Sections and Chapters of the EE Act, which were, initially excluded from the earlier promulgation. This will give the Employment Equity Act, real teeth and will bite where it hurts the most, and that is, designated employers’ revenue.”

The need for most employers to review their approach to employment equity is evident. ■

Three ways to overcome the challenges of open plan offices

Open plan offices are popular. Many advantages of an open plan layout were used to motivate the shift to this layout. There is easier and more frequent interaction between employees, increased collaboration, a sense of camaraderie, enhanced flow of information and teamwork, greater flexibility to accommodate evolving staffing needs and reduced costs tied to construction, utilities and office equipment. (Sumner, 2015) The significant cost advantage of this configuration is a compelling reason not to reverse the trend to open plan.

The challenges created by open plan offices are equally well known and include noise levels, dissatisfaction with ambient temperatures, smells, invasion of privacy, unwanted interaction and frequent disruptions which are all environmental phenomena that can contribute to unhealthy conflict and lower employee productivity.

To ensure there is no adverse effect on productivity in an open plan layout, managers must implement measures to foster a harmonious working environment. Here are three such measures:

1. Implement open plan etiquette

Typically, this is a list of around ten behavioural rules for the open plan occupants. The rules cover considerate behaviours such as “announce yourself even if there is no door”; “just because you can hear a conversation does not mean that you can join”; and “no loitering”.

Some factors which may help make the rules successful are:

- Involve employees in creating the rules.

- Create a forum to discuss and train people on the rules.
- Use company policy to regulate conflict triggers like temperature control, radio stations, and permissible food.
- Encourage frequent breaks from work away from desks. The sociable types can use the breaks for noisy social gatherings and those who favour quiet can retire to a secluded spot. Such breaks are good for productivity.
- Sound proof the “pause area” so the socialites can chatter noisily.
- Incorporate “*contribution to open plan working*” in regular work performance discussions.

2. Re-organise the seating plan

Break away from ‘logical’ functional area seating plans and consider seating people per different criteria. For example, cluster noisy people in the west and the quieter ones in the east. Consider changing the angle of seating to minimise direct line of sight positioning. One solution is to allow certain people to work from home for all or some of their time.

3. Build barriers and add physical design features

New design features retro-fitted to an office space are likely to be expensive, may not be attractive and at best offer a partial solution. There are three ‘ABCs of acoustic design’ to consider: *Absorb*, using specially designed ceiling tiles for example, *Block*, using dividers and similar barriers, and *Cover*, using white sound masking for example. There are some cost-effective barriers such as higher dividers between desks. Office plants offer several benefits including sound absorption. (Fedele, 2015)

The only total solution to the challenges presented by open plan offices is to move into purpose designed offices offering almost all people a dedicated and private workspace. This ‘counter-trend’ decision is likely to be prohibitively expensive. ■

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