



Learning and the Mindsets that promote it

Employee training and reskilling proves to be top-of-mind for HR professionals. The need to improve learning and development was noted as a top-rated challenge in Deloitte's Global Human Capital Trends report this year. The reasons, while seemingly apparent, include the dearth of skilled talent available for hire, the difficulties of internationals getting required work visas, the retirement of the baby boomers, the increasing sophistication of technology used at work, and in some cases, the lack of preparedness for the workplace of high school and college graduates. Employees see the need as well; the same report cited "opportunity to learn" as among the top reasons candidates took a job.

Yet, solely 10 percent of HR respondents felt they were very ready to address the need for learning and development in their organizations.

At the same time, the nature of jobs at work is changing: the widespread and growing use of machine learning, artificial intelligence, and robots in the workplace require different skills in those working with these technologies. (Robot repair is just one opportunity that comes to mind.) The reliance on HR analytics, as another example, requires a professional staff that understands how such metrics relate to the conduct of business in their organizations.¹

The Learning Conundrum

Full disclosure: I think the brain is like a sponge and, under ordinary circumstances, an individual can keep soaking up new information forever. To me, learning is an imperative and its opposite is like the fried-up loofa on the bathtub shelf. That being said, naysayers often get hung up on the perceived limits of learning, with questions such as: "If I start taking voice lessons at 35, can I become a professional opera singer?" The answer is "Maybe, but unlikely" –

but only because that is the wrong question.

Let's look at stars – like our opera singer for a minute. Here we have a formula:

$$\text{Talent} + \text{Practice} = \text{Mastery}$$

While Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours² may be questionable, practice and the successive improvement that it brings is necessary for even the talented to achieve mastery. Think Serena Williams, Mikhail Baryshnikov, or Joshua Bell. But stellar talent may be relatively rare; rarer than we need to concern ourselves with in considering the education of the workplace. But this we know: mastery comes with practice – both the desire and the opportunity to practice.

In organizations that rely on knowledge workers, the talent – rather than a great backhand or plie' – is knowledge, or more precisely, the ability to learn on the job the specific knowledge required both to accomplish the job at hand and grow into the next job. Not only do new hires crave knowledge concerning the position for which they are hired, but they also want assurance that they will get the learning necessary to get them to the next level. They have the desire to learn. This is where the concept of mindsets comes to play.

The research by the NeuroLeadership Institute, headquartered in New York City, applies here, with practical definitions and expertise in how HR professionals can apply growth mindset to their organizations. The institute defines a "growth mindset" as:

- *The belief that skills and abilities can be improved, and*
- *That developing your skills and abilities is the purpose of the work you do.*

A business culture that fosters a growth mindset, then, is a culture in which all employees are seen as possessing potential, are encouraged to

Endnotes

¹ Erica Volini, Jeff Schwartz, Indranil Roy, Maren Hauptmann, Yves Van Durme, Brad Denny, and Josh Bersin, *Learning in the flow of life*. 2019 Global Human Capital Trends, Deloitte 2019.

² Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Little, Brown and Company, 2008.

³ Carlo Dweck, "Managing Yourself," *Harvard Business Review*, January 13, 2016.

⁴ Heidi Grant, Mary Slaughter, Andrea Derler, "5 Mistakes Companies Make About Growth Mindsets," *Harvard Business Review*, July 23, 2018.

⁵ Bogdan Zlatkov, 2019 Workplace Learning Report: Why 2019 is the breakout year for the talent developer, LinkedIn Learning, February 25, 2019.

⁶ Josh Bersin, A New Paradigm for Corporate Training: Learning in The Flow of Work, Published June 3, 2018, Updated July 8, 2018. <https://joshbersin.com/2018/06/a-new-paradigm-for-corporate-training-learning-in-the-flow-of-work/>

⁷ Heidi Grant Halvorson, Christine Cox, and David Rock, "Organizational Growth Mindset," *NeuroLeadership Journal*, May 2015.

develop, and are acknowledged and rewarded for improvement.³ (The institute notes that this concept is about individual growth, not profit growth.) Rather, a growth mindset is the "continuous belief that improvement is possible and that failures are opportunities to learn."⁴

The opposite is a fixed mindset: the employee arrives at work fully formed and is unlikely to learn or change. Stereotypes come into play: the person is too old; she can't learn new technology; the person did not attend an Ivy school – he can't be too smart; the new hire is from a non-English speaking background, he isn't too bright; she's clearly female, she can't drive a forklift. There are many biases that can influence a manager's view of an employee's ability to learn and bloom on the job. These managers are the dried-up loofa people.

Why a Growth Mindset Matters at Work

Managers are the foremost influences on an employee's life at work; they can make or break a new hire's career in an organization. We know that managers are an effective

way to reach learners: 75 percent of employees would take a course assigned by their manager.⁵ But we also know that the nature of learning at work is changing – essential is the on-the-job, just-in-time, just-enough ability to learn how to do something right when it is needed – "microlearnings," as Josh Bersin calls them.⁶ And consider the YouTube factor: it's one of the foremost ways people are learning information – especially "how to" information – today. Mentoring and learning within teams are other ways people can learn at work.

It is generally not that the workplace lacks the tools to learn that concerns us here (although sometimes it does – another problem altogether), it is that leadership may lack the belief that people can continually grow (the fixed mindset) and does not encourage or allow time for employees to learn at work.⁷ Given rapidly changing technologies, increased business competition on and offshore, and talent shortages, management cannot be complacent. Fostering learning at work, experimenting, time to practice new skills – and yes, failure – are all critical for today's organizations to have the workforce they need tomorrow.

About the Author

Dr. Katherine Jones, veteran high-tech market analyst, is an independent thought leader in all areas of human capital management and the technologies that support it. She has been an analyst at Aberdeen Group, Bersin by Deloitte, and Mercer following a career that includes marketing in high-tech companies such as NetSuite and academic administration in higher education. Her master's and doctorate degrees are from Cornell University. She can be reached at katherine_ics@msn.com or [@katherine_jones](https://twitter.com/katherine_jones).