**How to Incentivize Learning in the Workplace**

Here’s a scenario you may be facing as an executive or HR professional: You want to establish a learning culture within your company. You encourage employees to spend part of their working hours learning something new. A new skill, some new knowledge, take webinars or longer courses. And nothing. Nada. Few to no employees take advantage of the learning opportunities being provided.

So you throw an incentive in there: Complete a training course, get a Starbucks gift card. There’s a slight uptick in takers, but still not the stampede you expected.

What do you do now? Start with one key thing: Find out whether your company’s work culture actually supports employees’ learning and growth.

## **Employees Overwhelmingly Want to Learn**

A [2015 Deloitte study](https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/deloitte-review/issue-16/employee-engagement-strategies.html) found that two-thirds of Millennial-aged employees expected management to provide them with accelerated development opportunities in order for them to stay with a company. Further, 70 percent of this group wanted to be more creative at work. Growth opportunities, including “training and support on the job,” were a top request of respondents.

The benefits of establishing a learning culture are a two-way street. Deloitte, in the same report, noted that: “Organizations with a strong learning culture are 92 percent more likely to develop novel products and processes, 52 percent more productive, 56 percent more likely to be the first to market with their products and services, and 17 percent more profitable than their peers. Their engagement and retention rates are also 30–50 percent higher.”

Your employees want those growth opportunities and they want to contribute to the company’s success. It’s time to connect that desire to the right learning opportunities.

## **Creating a True Learning Culture**

A 2018 [Harvard Business Review article](https://hbr.org/2018/07/4-ways-to-create-a-learning-culture-on-your-team) quoting CEB, Inc., pointed out that a true learning culture not only supports an individual’s quest for knowledge but is also directed toward the organization’s mission and goals.

A company also has to cultivate effective learning behaviors. Research in 2015 by [SHRM found that](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-magazine/pages/0515-learning-culture.aspx) only 20 percent, or just one-fifth, of employees, had developed truly effective learning behaviors. When companies are spending, on average, over $1,200 per employee each year on training and development, they have got to get employees excited about learning to realize a return on that investment.

So, before you start handing out gift cards, find out why your employees aren’t taking advantage of the educational programs you’ve implemented and what it will take to get them excited about learning.

## **Understand the Two Kinds of Incentives**

There are two types of incentive rewards that employees respond to: primary and secondary.

Primary rewards are tangible. They are the gift cards, the shiny award plaques, the bonuses, and the fast-tracking to promotions. You can see and feel these rewards. You can show them off. You can put them on your LinkedIn profile.

Secondary rewards are intangible. They are the verbal recognition of a job well done during the weekly standup meeting. They are an increased sense of accomplishment when their learning is validated by meaningful improvements in how they do their work. They are the increased belief that they are being treated as true professionals. In many ways, secondary rewards are far more important and impactful than primary rewards. A gift card is nice, but knowing that they’ve gained a skill that they can carry with them throughout their career? That’s a huge morale booster for an employee.

## **Take A Combined Approach**

Although reward systems go all the way back to the 1890s when Ivan Pavlov was doing experiments with dogs, many people make the mistake of assuming that humans will respond to rewards the same way. But when only a fifth of your employees are reward-driven, a combined approach is needed.

Adrian Gostick and Chester Elton are thought leaders in the arena of employee learning. For [their book](https://www.thecultureworks.com/books/), “What Motivates Me? Put Your Passions to Work,” the duo surveyed 850,000 employees at various companies and asked a simple question: What motivated them? The results were game-changing. Gostick and Elton identified 23 “motivation drivers” and five “motivation identities” among the survey respondents. While status, social approval and promotion topped the list, fairness, challenge and validation were also important factors.

Take a look at [Thomson Reuters’ careers page](https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/careers/careers-blog/20-ways-employees-are-motivated-by-work.html), which includes a post listing 20 ways its employees are motivated by their work. A positive work culture, a clear career path and a sense of belonging rank on the list right next to the ability to innovate, to share ideas and to learn something new.

To foster a learning culture with that kind of complexity among employees, a company must get creative and incorporate a variety of both primary and secondary incentives. A reward system can include awards, promotions and career incentives. But it should also include recognition, validation of skills learned and a sense of fairness among teams and individuals.

## **Change Learning Culture From the Top Down**

When I ask employees why they aren’t taking the time to learn, especially when the company gives them that time, they answer that they’re afraid they will miss deadlines and get dinged on their evaluations. Even worse, some say their manager isn’t happy when they stop work to do company-sponsored learning.

A learning incentive doesn’t feel like an incentive to an employee when the working environment fails to support them in taking that time.

“The entire company, including managers, must support learning incentives.”

Make the workload manageable so that employees feel they can take the time to learn without any repercussions. Remind managers that employees are due those learning hours and make sure employees know their avenue to HR if a manager isn’t supportive of that learning time. This is a huge step in fostering a learning culture and creating a sense of fairness.

## **Prioritize and Validate Learning**

This is an important final step in making the cultural shift to learning. Employees want to be able to apply what they’ve learned to the work they’re doing. Otherwise, why bother learning something new when they never get the opportunity to use that expertise?

Deloitte recommends providing a mix of formal and informal learning opportunities as well as making sure employees can take on developmental assignments that build their skills on the job. That kind of assignment provides fast validation that what they’ve learned is truly useful and it gives them practical experience that they can bring to the team.

Managers, listen to employees who are bringing that new knowledge to the table and help them find ways to apply it. Provide constructive feedback as they integrate that knowledge into their skillset.

To truly create a culture of learning, develop a positive attitude toward learning from executives on down, provide support when an employee needs it, and give employees time to learn.

Another factor to consider is that employees have their own set of priorities when it comes to learning. The Deloitte study above noted that younger employees, aged 25 to 35, are much more focused on professional development and upward career progression, while employees older than 35 are focused on long-term career goals.

Often, companies force specific learning systems onto employees because they think that’s what the employees need to learn. There’s some validity in this approach. However, allowing employees to choose the classes, lessons or webinars they want to take will engage them and get them more excited about enhancing their knowledge base and ultimately, their career.

The most meaningful reward that an employer can put in place is not expensive. Rather, affirming an employee’s worth and valuing their newly acquired knowledge is a huge boost to their morale, enthusiasm and engagement.

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