



Skills Development of American Workers in the Post Pandemic Era using Employee Resource Groups

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American employers made significant changes to their workplaces to maintain the workforce as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among them were greater flexibility in work schedules, increased telework, and pay improvements. Now that we are in a post-pandemic era, it is worthwhile to consider how organizations will continue to sustain their workforce to meet their needs now and into the future, especially considering the lack of labor being experienced by employers (Quinn, Ulrich, & Colavito, 2023, March). Due to the double disruption of the economic impacts of the pandemic as well as job transformation due to increasing automation, as of 2020, half of the workforce will need to reskill in the next five years (Whiting, 2020). Individuals as well as companies should commit to reskilling and upskilling as industry adopts new technologies, methods, and markets. Making learning opportunities accessible, available, and affordable to the workforce should be highly considered (Li, 2022). By providing employees with opportunities to develop skills needed to engage fully in the future workplace, we can develop more inclusive and sustainable economies and communities.

Retaining employees is a major challenge for employers (Kumar, 2022). Keeping employees by providing skills development, either reskilling to take on new roles as organizations apply digital transformation to their services and product delivery, or upskilling to provide career advancement opportunities, is a benefit to employers (Career Optimism Index, 2023, March). The 2023 Career Optimism Index® found that, of those considering a job change, 68% of employees would consider staying with their current employer if something changed. And, if there were more opportunities to apply new skills, 70% of employees say that they would consider staying with their employer throughout their career.

A lack of well qualified applicants for open positions (of which 46% of employers indicating that this is their greatest challenge) suggests that developing talent in-house may be

the most viable option for employers (Career Optimism Index, 2023). And, for their current workforce, 74% of employers say that their workers need to learn new skills within the next year to continue their current jobs.

So, how do workers go about obtaining these competencies for either reskilling or upskilling? Employers and workers have vastly different perceptions of the opportunities provided for skills development. The researchers found that only 15% of employers say they never provide reskilling opportunities (which is up 10% from 2022), yet 40% of workers indicate they have never been provided those opportunities (up 18% from 2022). Similarly, consider that 9% of companies report they have never provided upskilling opportunities to their employees, while 32% of workers indicate they have never been provided those opportunities. These have also increased from 2022, which were at 3% and 18% respectively. Further, the lack of opportunities also seem to affect worker mental health, as 42% of those who never have reskilling or upskilling opportunities report a negative impact on their mental health, compared to only 26% who are provided these opportunities at least monthly (Career Optimism Index, 2023, March).

Most workers say they need support learning new skills as well as programs to grow professionally. Black, Latinx, and Asian groups indicate they need more support than their White counterparts, and more women than men are seeking the learning of more skills and growth opportunities. More Blue-collar workers than White-collar workers (53% to 49%) need support seeking out education programs (Career Optimism Index, 2023).

However, not all employers are keen to provide reskilling or upskilling opportunities. The 2023 Career Optimism Index found that 29% of employers do not invest in these opportunities because of limited employee interest or lacking the time or resources to provide hands-on

training. Also questioned is how effectively the benefits of reskilling or upskilling are communicated to employees. While 75% of workers report they are seeking skills development, 58% indicate that their employers do not make it clear how obtaining new skills can lead to growth and/or rewards for the worker, while 84% of companies report they do clearly communicate these benefits.

Reskilling and upskilling attitudes, perceptions, and opportunities do vary somewhat across the country, as the Designated Metropolitan Areas were not uniform in the study results (Career Optimism Index, 2023, March). While most areas had employees indicating the need for support for learning new skills as near 50%, which is below the average total workforce at 62%, Washington, D.C. reported six points over the average percentage of employees believing they need such support. In contrast, those employees who say that their employer never provides skill development opportunities were at least ten points higher than the average of 32% in Boston, Chicago, Denver, and New York City, while it was reported to be at least five points lower in Miami and Washington, D.C. These variations among areas, and likely employers, makes for challenges in engaging employees in reskilling and upskilling.

Overall, the Career Optimism Index (2023, March) results suggest there is clearly some misalignment of the workforce and the organizations for whom they work, and given the imperative to engage in reskilling or upskilling, a new paradigm is suggested in the form of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). Employee Resource Groups are voluntary, formalized groups with executive leadership backing that encourage belonging and camaraderie, coming together for a shared cause. These groups can be a powerful tool by fostering an inclusive environment, giving employees official input, and granting more access to professional development (Boatman, n.d.). ERGs are based on the need and desire of humans to develop and

maintain social connections. These may be established for social causes (such as environmental cleanup or cancer research), based on attributes (such as race, gender, or other identity groups), by profession (such as engineering, administration, or programming) to provide social, professional, or learning support and information sharing (Welbourne, Rolf, & Schlachter, 2017). As such, Employee Resource Groups can leverage the social connections to promote skill development, thereby using this conduit to both communicate the availability of identified learning opportunities as well as organize the learning programs themselves. By taking an active role in the development of the program, ERG members will be more likely to participate due to their investment in the group.

The development of Employee Resource Groups is based on the Social Identity Theory, in that social categorization, social comparison and social identification results in a strong social identity that complements individual identity. As organizational identity increases, there is greater overlap with individual identity within the organizational sense of self (Welbourne, et al, 2017). This strong attachment benefits both the organization and the self in terms of employee self-esteem, mental health and job satisfaction. Employee Resource Group creation requires interest by the employees to join a group, executive sponsorship and commitment, a leadership structure and guidelines, goals and a mission statement aligned with the organization's vision, measurement of progress and effectiveness, and a system for recognition and reward (Trujillo Limón, 2022). In addition to the practical aspects of greater employee engagement in skills development, the building of a trust relationship between the ERG and the organization can have lasting benefit, serving as a voice of the workforce to top management.

Employee Resource Groups can provide the foundational career support that employees are seeking, with employers investing in their own talent and developing a means for mentorship,

skills development, and a conduit for communication in both directions (employee to employer and vice versa). ERGs can be that mechanism that enlivens workers' desires to be challenged with learning new skills and taking on new roles within their organization, strengthening organizations' potential to overcome the industry challenges and take advantage of opportunities for future growth, productivity, and enhancement.

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