

CPD for competitive advantage

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Organisations are constantly seeking cost effective and significant sources of competitive advantage. I am rarely impressed with signs of actual activity that put easily crafted words into difficult practice, but let's leave that for now.

I believe that a clear and committed strategy for the development of professionals of whatever field can be a low cost, and very high value route to genuine competitive advantage.

Many organisations, particularly large and complex, employ professionally qualified people, often in very large numbers. It is my view that this group if recruited, developed and deployed in a managed and planned way can create a very significantly greater, financially measured return than they typically do under present less structured conditions.

Recruitment should be about best-fit, and not seeking the most or best qualified. I want to hit those that select professionals that tell me 's/he looked great on paper, but they didn't interview at all well'. This of course would be an excellent reason to decline professionals whose role consisted of being recruitment interviewed a lot. So few recruiters go through the apparent agonies of doing things properly – of creating a genuine summary of the qualities sought, and of all things evidence, even in such unreal conditions, of them actually doing relevant tasks. Would you employ a footballer without seeing them play?

A tangible way to show professionals are valued is to pay the annual fees for at least one relevant Professional Body. Not to do so gives an equally clear, and negative signal. When, some time ago I asked a Head of function in a utilities company often in the news for reasons it would rather not be, why it did not pay such fees I was told that 'individuals must carry the burden'. That same organisation has a serious retention issues amongst capable, mobile professionals.

Then we hit CPD head on. If professionals are recruited with the explicit expectation that at the very least the organisation expects them to comply with the minimum CPD requirements of their professional bodies then this will in itself have a positive impact on the quality of intake.

Professionals employed should then be expected to show tangible evidence of planning their development in a tangible, flexible, structured way, and that they record that learning. In addition, CPD should be seen as a broad-based activity, and that expensive, non needs-focused training courses often incurring considerable time off and costs are rarely the most directly valuable means to enhance professional competencies post-qualification.

Organisations that pay for such events should design processes and documentation that clarify anticipated learning outcomes in advance, and on return, seek clear indications of the plan to apply the learning that resulted. The generic 'happy sheet' alone will not achieve this.

Once an organisation gets serious about CPD, it will swiftly identify those who, let's be kind, would prefer not to engage, the passive professionals, that, often in positions of significance, see themselves as lifelong members of a club, the price of entry to which was passing exams,

often decades ago. Such people are poor examples to others, and frankly may require strong encouragement to apply themselves more enthusiastically to a practice others with commitment find positive and directly beneficial.

The likely difficulty of confronting such issues will be beyond most organisations – which is great news for the very few who do so and gain serious advantage over those that appease or accommodate those that want kudos without any personal effort.

Being realistic, it's not likely that the professional dead or dying wood can be culled using the sharp stick of CPD to scare them out and be replaced by those for whom truly managing your own learning is a positive challenge that directly builds careers. Over a longer period than most senior managements seem to want to look, it can have a very significant impact. Once again it is only the very few that will do this, so serious advantage to be gained.

I have long held the view – so long in fact we are talking 1980s – that CPD can only have real impact if employers take the lead. Professional Bodies can publish all the codes of practice they want – and have – to encourage CPD, and threaten sanctions for non compliance...but individual members will only see value in engagement beyond compulsion if they feel their careers are dependent on this and that employers will favour those with tangible evidence of meaningful CPD over those that just can't be bothered.

Thus CPD can provide a significant competitive advantage in recruitment, reward, career progression and performance management. The good news is most of the competition won't be prepared to make the effort – nor will they reap the rewards of getting the most from their professionals.

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