

GUEST COLUMN: Know your development priorities before launching training programs



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Each month, Toronto Business Times solicits opinions from four experts on a question of relevance to the small business community. This month's question is: In a small business, where time and money are key factors to consider, what steps would you take to establish an employee training program?

One of the many challenges small business owners have is developing and training employees.

When considering the most effective ways to train employees, it is important to understand what your objectives are for the training. Too many organizations offer training that does not provide additional value to the organization or its employees. Here are a few questions to ask:

- What are the skills or competencies that would help improve the performance of the company and those within it?
- Which of those skills are currently most lacking?
- What are the topics or skills that are of most interest to employees?
- Do those employee interests align with the strategic direction of the business?

It is important that any training and development program aligns with your corporate objectives and not only with what your employees want. A company that I worked with had a leadership gap, but was offering employees training on social media. Although the social media training may have been interesting, a higher priority for the company was developing new leaders to help meet customers needs.

Know what your training priorities are before embarking on any program.

Once you have established what skills need to be enhanced, identify some free or low-cost ways to move forward, such as:

- Internal mentoring: Are there employees in the company (including the business owner) who can provide mentoring to other employees? This not only provides new skills to your employees, but also creates a culture of learning and collaboration.

- Cross training: This is where you train employees on each other's accountabilities and positions. This helps increase the employees' skill levels in various areas as they see other areas of the business. It also provides some back-up if an employee gets sick or leaves the organization.

- Information sharing: Most organizations have success stories they are happy to share with investors, bankers, customers, etc., but don't always share with employees. When you have a success story, allow the person(s) responsible for the success to share how that success was achieved. This can also be done with mistakes that the company makes. Share this information so employees can see what to do, and what not to do, in order to be successful.

There will always be cases where external expertise is required. When hiring someone to come and train your employees, be very clear on what your desired outcomes and objectives are. How will the company or individual be different? What additional value is being derived?

Ensure there are hands-on learning experiences with exercises and examples, since this tends to improve retention of the key information.

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