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Saturday, 26 March 2011

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Continuous Learning: Keep Abreast or Get Left Behind

Fact (as clichéd as it may sound) in today's business environment change is the only constant. The nature of the work we do changes, the needs of our customers' change, the way we get the job done changes- and the pace at which change is taking place is only getting faster.

How do we cope? As a business we cope by being aware of the changes taking place, having flexible systems in place and most importantly having people with the skills and knowledge to adapt at breakneck pace.

Understanding that having people with the requisite skills and knowledge, is critical to a business surviving in an ever-changing environment, the question then becomes how does one, as a business manager, ensure that the people in your business have those requisite skills and knowledge?

One of the answers is continuous learning! The business dictionary defines Continuous Learning as the process that seeks to incorporate the lessons learnt (from the results of already implemented changes) into a continuous improvement program.

It's not just about attending a course in a formalised classroom environment, completing the course, going back to work for a while, finding another course to attend and then going on that course; in an ever repeating cycle. Continuous Learning is about understanding the challenges the business is faced with, understanding the challenges the individual him/herself is faced with and devising a staff development strategy to overcome those challenges.

What should this strategy look like at a very high level?

1. **Assess the competency of your staff:** Does your staff have the technical subject matter knowledge to perform their functions. Technical ability covers both the knowledge of the work they do as well as knowledge of the tools they use.
2. **Determine if you hire someone new or train the person you have:** Based on step one, you now need to determine if the people evaluated require training, are trainable, want to actually be trained or whether you need to hire someone from outside the firm to perform the job.
3. **Getting People Trained:** Once you have determined if the people on your team should be trained as well as the type of training needed, you then need to get them trained.
4. **On-going development:** Once your people have been given the formal training needed, they then need to be continuously assessed to ensure that the training has

been beneficial. You should also implement a requirement that all staff are members of a professional body and they be active members of that body.

As an example, when a firm's bookkeeper resigns, the receptionist (or legal secretary) is asked to do the bookkeeping to fill the gap until they find a replacement or that person is capable of being the replacement. The first problem is that, usually, the receptionist has no formal training in accounting or real experience in bookkeeping and has to learn what to do from the outgoing bookkeeper. What happens is the receptionist is overwhelmed by having to learn the accounting, how to use the software package. He /she does so from the outgoing bookkeeper who him / herself is probably under time pressures to complete what needs to be done before he / she leaves the firm. Due to the fact that the receptionist has had no formal training and has to learn on the fly he/she is already at a disadvantage. This disadvantage is exacerbated by the fact the bookkeeper passes on bad habits picked up over time; and he /she has in all likelihood not kept up to date with changes in the industry- the knowledge imparted to the receptionist is incorrect and/or out of date and will lead to the receptionist doing things incorrectly. Furthermore, due to the fact that the receptionist had to learn so much in a short space of time he/she would not have properly learnt what to do- this further compounds the errors that will be made. Also in most instances, the outgoing bookkeeper has functioned as a data capturer instead of a true bookkeeper and the receptionist will continue to function as a data capturer at most (because of the training received and hand-over) thereby continuing the low value add to the business by the finance function.

Whilst this example may seem extremely farfetched, it does happen far more frequently than we as an industry would like to admit. If the strategy presented above was implemented in the firm:

1. The firm would have known the short-comings of the outgoing bookkeeper
2. The firm would have been able to ensure that the short-comings were rectified
3. The firm would have known if the receptionist was best placed to take-over
4. The firm would have known who in the firm was ideally suited to take-over from the bookkeeper if not the receptionist
5. The firm would have known the extent of training required to get the internal replacement up to speed
6. The firm would have known if they should hire someone external
7. The firm would have access to a professional body who could assist them fill the gap though the outgoing bookkeeper
8. The firm would have known which third party providers were best placed to assist them with training.

Talking about training- where should you go to get the best possible training for your people. From a software perspective (tools), you should get the training from your software vendor. After all who knows the tool better than the people who created it (This is one of the reasons GhostPractice provides clients unlimited access to end-user training at no additional cost)? With subject matter training where should one get it- again from the subject matter experts (GhostPractice, again, provides legal accounting training for your firm to take advantage of- if we were not experts in legal accounting we would not have been able to build the best legal accounting system in the market).

As mentioned at the beginning, continuous education is not about training course after training course, despite the fact it would seem so from this article. It is however the first step in



ensuring your people are equipped to perform their functions. It's also a critical step in laying the groundwork for a competent employee.

What should be done after a person in your firm successfully navigates formal training- they should be measured. If the formal training was successful, at a minimum, a staff members number of errors (credit notes, debit notes, audit queries, etc) should reduce, their productivity should increase (doing the same amount of work in less time) and as a result the staff member's efficiency should improve- more work in less time with fewer errors.

Beyond this your people should be encouraged (forced) to become a member of a professional body- these bodies provide a great service in keeping its members up-to-date with changes in the industry and their fields of expertise in particular. Any professional body worth its salt should be finding new and innovative ways to perform work that its members do. And your staff member being a member will get access to this information enabling them to keep abreast of changes and bring those changes into your business. Another great advantage of having your people belonging to a professional body, apart from the golf days and lunches at nice conferences centres, is the opportunity to meet with peers- from this they can understand the issues faced by other firms and the work around solutions implemented at these firms.

Subscriptions to journals and industry publications are another invaluable source of learning. With the advent of the internet, reading and learning material for your people to keep up-to-date is just a click away.

Learning is necessary for self and organisational development and for us knowledge workers it's a no brainer to ensure we don't get left behind- as individuals and the organisations we represent. Continuous Learning should be a part of the culture of your business- and it doesn't have to be expensive or days/weeks away from the office. And the fact that it can be measured means you can quantify the benefits long before you are left behind or out of business.

If you would like to learn more about how your firm can benefit from continuous learning, and the strides GhostPractice has made in helping the legal industry achieve this, feel free to call Kuben Naidoo on 084 586 6789 or email me on kubenn@korbitec.com.

Yours in Law

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