

Time to Step Up

Learning's role during layoffs • BY ELLIOTT MASIE



Elliott Masie is the chair and CLO of The MASIE Center's Learning Consortium and the host of Learning Systems '08. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

What are the roles of the learning department during layoffs? As downsizing, restructuring and economic uncertainty impact the employment rolls of our organizations, it is important to explore the roles, responsibilities and opportunities for the learning function.

Skill documentation upon departure: When we terminate an employee due to economic changes, learning and HR have a responsibility to assist the departing individual in securing his or her next job. While many organizations provide forms of outsourced support or counseling, there is an area in which we can be even more helpful: providing a skills and training summary.

I can already hear you quoting the legal department about liability and getting sued. We have to get over it and find a way to provide learners with documentation that illustrates and even validates their training, learning, experience and skills. We have much of this information in our LMSs and other talent systems; yet, many organizations will only confirm information such as, "Pat Browne worked in manufacturing from 1992 to 2009 in the role of floor coordinator and did not kill anyone."

Imagine if the legal department could be appropriately sedated and we could provide Pat with a portfolio that would illustrate:

- Classes she took and passed while on the job.
- Edited performance reviews that illustrate her accomplishments and highlight her ability to learn and improve.
- Skills and competency maps that graphically list her demonstrated skills.
- Assessment and certification summaries.
- A learning profile.
- Stretch assignment summaries.

Helping employees document their skills and learning histories will dramatically improve their chances of finding their next jobs.

Organizations also stand to gain by helping departing employees. Such efforts illustrate to remaining staff the goodwill and practical approach of their employers, which strengthens talent retention at a time of uncertainty. Those efforts also demonstrate the value of engaging in learning activities as both personal and organizational investments.

Internal reskilling: As workers watch the workforce downsize, they continually ask three questions:

- Am I next?
- If I am laid off, will I be able to find another job?
- What can I do now to keep my job, evolve to a new one or be in a better position to get hired by my next employer?

While it is difficult, awkward and sometimes impossible to answer the first question, the other two can be addressed by learning departments.

Why not start an internal reskilling initiative? Imagine offering your employees the ability to learn about topics unrelated to their current jobs that will either prepare them to transfer to new, emerging roles or better help them with re-employment opportunities.

How do you pay for this? Imagine a trilateral relationship among the employee, the learning department and external workforce development organizations:

- High emphasis on e-learning, reducing the need for instructors, travel and classrooms.
- Employees donate their time and reskill on their own time, without a wage cost.
- Leverage retirees and external resources to volunteer as mentors and coaches to provide feedback and supplement e-learning.
- Partner with workforce development groups, such as community colleges, departments of labor and other government and community resources for resources, access to content and even funding.
- Involve your industry trade associations to build cooperative efforts.

Decisions and reassignments: When a layoff is anticipated, the learning department can play a key role in helping to shape decision making. It has the information and context to better understand the learning/reskilling costs of eliminating certain employees and their roles. It needs to be able to articulate the economic costs of shifting work roles, and it should start building reassignment reskilling plans prior to layoffs.

Learning needs to demonstrate its strategic importance during layoffs. It is time for learning to be front and center. We can help our organizations act more humanely, assist our colleagues as they move forward and contribute to the continued competence of the organization. Take a breath and step up. **CLO**