

Close Skill Gaps Through Personalized Learning

By Cheryl Lasse

A competency-based, self-directed skills management system enables employees to create personalized learning plans to develop the skills necessary to achieve corporate goals.



Many organizations miss business targets because they are unable to effectively link the skills that employees have to corporate strategy. Employees are asked to follow a prescribed curriculum that may not be relevant to their individual requirements, leading to no positive change in behavior, training waste, and loss of employee engagement. Edutainment Media believes this can be overcome by providing them with personalized, self-directed learning that results from empowering employees to self-assess against the skills defined by the company as necessary to efficiently perform their respective role.



What it is

Taking a skill-based approach to competencies is effective because it focuses on specific skills needed to support the corporate strategy instead of general competencies alone. A digital self-directed skills management system dynamically maps critical skills to development activities. This system enables employees to develop personalized development plans, which creates alignment between the training needed and the training provided.



Why it works

A self-directed skills management system answers the question, “How do I get the job done?” Because this answer varies widely by function or department (for example, sales, engineering, or finance), each group focuses only on closing the skills gaps of its respective team members, driving excellence at the functional level and ensuring their contribution to executing corporate strategy (linking skills to strategy).



Guidelines

Using a competency model accelerates the process of identifying the skills most critical to success in organizations and helps to determine what training exists or should

be created to develop these skills proficiently.

Here are guidelines for creating personalized learning that links skills to corporate strategy. This is based on the six-step process Edutainment Media used to create a digitized self-directed learning program for sales assessment and training based on the ASTD Sales Competency Model.

Step 1. Select sales competencies and sales skills most closely linked to achieving corporate strategy and tailor them as necessary to your tools and processes. For example, the competency might be “building a business case,” and a skill might be “quantify the solution benefits in financial terms with documented assumptions using the business case template.” Ask high performers what they do that sets them apart.

Step 2. For each skill, develop behavioral examples. These provide your team with examples of what the various behaviors look like at different proficiency levels. These examples serve as an excellent means to communicate and iterate best practices. You can then customize them with your team’s tools, processes, and best practices to ensure consistent and objective assessment can occur.

Using our previous skill, someone at a “general awareness” level could communicate solution features and benefits while someone at “applied knowledge”

level can consistently use the existing business case template to prepare and explain the impact of the company's solution in dollars, with documented assumptions.

Step 3. Identify the minimum performance standard for this role and skill, so you know when a gap exists. Using the quantify benefits example, an account executive probably has to be at the applied knowledge level; a presales specialist may only need to be at a general awareness level; and a sales manager would need to be at a skilled level.

Step 4. Analyze the current training activity inventory and identify any applicable training activities as well as tools, template, and job aids, both formal and informal. For each training activity identified, list or refine a set of properly defined learning objectives to be instructionally sound and to include the proficiency level a participant would achieve after completing it. For example, "Demonstrate the financial impact of your solutions." Using the previous example, you would select the business case template and a job aid on how to use it.

Step 5. Map each skill to the properly defined learning objective of a training activity or resource. In our case, we mapped training activities to the competency model's sales skills. For those places where no training activity exists, you can create a logical grouping of gaps that might form a training activity, identifying the learning objectives they should cover, for example, a group of presentation skills.

Step 6. Empower employees to self-assess. Until the employees—in this case, the salesforce—assess themselves against the competency-based skills of high performers, they don't know what they don't know. We upload into our learning program what is needed to be successful. Employees can then assess themselves on the skills and instantly generate a personalized learning plan they can begin executing immediately.



Results

Your competency model becomes immediately actionable by each employee at

Checklist:

How to Create Personalized Learning

- ✓ Identify the skills and tasks most critical to success. If you have a competency model, select the skills within it or use a one-day rapid job-task analysis workshop to identify them.
- ✓ Identify behavioral examples for each skill or task.
- ✓ Perform task proficiency analysis—what is the minimum performance standard for this task and this role?
- ✓ Perform curriculum analysis—what related training and tools do we have?
- ✓ Perform task to training mapping and gap analysis—what are we missing?
- ✓ Allow employees to self-assess against the skills, generating a personalized learning plan—what do I personally need to do to close my self-identified skill gaps?
- ✓ Aggregate assessment data to identify training development and delivery needs and drive training budgets.

a personalized level. All employees are empowered to identify and close their own skill gaps with a plan that is relevant to them, and for which there is buy in. With awareness of specific skills gaps, managers can better provide relevant coaching and the learning and development team knows exactly what type of training is needed throughout the organization.

One commercial learning leader was able to use the data to identify individuals in his organization who excelled in specific sales skills despite an initial perception that the technical salesforce had minimal sales skills. The leader leverages those high-skilled individuals to mentor others in their region, and to participate in training their less skilled peers. This was an agile and low cost way to develop others, while improving the coaching skills of the mentors.

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Resources:

Chris Musselwhite, Creating a Culture of Motivation. *T+D*, September 2011.

Daniel Pink, The Puzzle of Motivation. TED Conference, June 2009. www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrkrvAUbU9Y

Mark K. Smith, Malcolm Knowles, Informal Adult Education, Self-Direction, and Andragogy. *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2002. www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm#Self-direction

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