

Continuing education in the 21st century: expanding career horizons

Editorial

Fifty years ago it was not uncommon to work for the same employer for an entire career. Technological advances, corporate consolidation and the global economy have, for the most part, made career-long employment at one employer a thing of the past. Technological advances are destroying some jobs, creating new ones and changing job descriptions at a rapid pace. Not everyone will end up working in the field or specialty that he or she majored in while in school. In some respects, the educational process is becoming more of a chance to build and fill a “toolbox” of skills. Courses taken in one’s major field allow the learner to stock this “toolbox” with a certain set of skills. Employment requires these and other abilities. Adaptability is a skill that isn’t always taught, but is becoming more vital in career progression and survival. Continuing educations (sometimes referred to as “professional development”) is one way increase adaptability and close the potential knowledge gaps created with changing job responsibilities. While continuing education is mandated for pharmacists in 49 states, there are no requirements for those working in the pharmaceutical industry.

Continuing education offers many benefits for the learner. Some of these are increased knowledge, exposure to current trends and best practices and presumably enhanced confidence. If the program is live and held at a particular location there is also the chance to network with colleagues. However, as the workforce has been downsized it may be difficult for an organization to spare the employee from the lab if nobody else is around to perform experiments while the student is away attending courses. There are many distance learning options that save time and travel dollars and allow the learner to remain at work while still obtaining continuing education. Advances in technology allow for greater interaction between students while online, though currently it is not possible to completely replicate a traditional classroom environment virtually. There are also asynchronous options that are popular because of their inherent flexibility due to their portability and availability on-demand. However, asynchronous courses do not offer the same level of interactivity with other learners that are possible with live formats.

Employers are tasked with maximizing employee output while minimizing cost and turnover. Travel and the associated continuing education budget line items may not always be of highest priority. However, education is an important investment. Employees who are consistently in the process of professional development will help

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ensure that an organization has a dynamic workforce. As mentioned earlier, employees may not remain with an organization long-term and the employer may feel that the resources spent on continuing education are wasted if an employee isn’t going to be around to contribute. This is misguided; however, as continuing education can pay immediate benefits when the employee returns to work with more knowledge and with added or freshened skills. The investment in the employee may also translate to stronger loyalty as the employee who is “worth educating” feels valued by his or her employer. An organization that constrains its employees, either actively or through neglect is not as likely to succeed as one who actively nurtures employee growth.

Rapidly changing technologies, a global economy and evolving job requirements make it even more important for employees to have a well-stocked skills “toolbox”. It is vital for scientists, clinicians and technicians to maintain and expand their skills and career flexibility. Continuing education is one means to help one learn new skills, stay current and advance one’s career. There are many effective educational formats designed to meet time and/or budgetary constraints. It is crucial that employers realize that well educated employees are not only productive, but they are also better suited to help organizations navigate the challenging and quickly changing future economic currents.

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Conflict of interest

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