A NEW APPROACH TO STAFF TRAINING BASED ON CLOUD PLATFORMS

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In this article the authors describe the newest trends in staff training within today’s digital environment. The suggested here model is based on the use of learning platforms and corporate social networks by not large companies. This approach would allow abandoning the traditional training methods for sake of life long independent learning, and at the same time this approach allows reducing company’s costs spent on training while increasing its quality and efficiency. The aim of our study is to present practical recommendation concerning the use of cloud platforms for personnel trainings and learning, specifically for medium-sized and small companies.

Keywords: digital learning platform; staff training; cloud services; corporate social network.

Introduction

Internet has radically changes our lives and our lifestyle. Today we are surrounded by hyper-connected environment, each of us is an active user of various mobile devices which make it possible to connect and stay in touch with literary anybody in no time. Gradually, we also are turning to the next generation of technologies’ use, known today as the Internet of things. Larger share of our devices are so smart that they know (sometimes even better than we do) where we are and thus they are able to give us advice on what to do next.

These radical technological changes have also influenced the field of personnel/staff management. Under conditions of globalization and fast growing business there is an obvious

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necessity to apply more efficient and up to date strategies of staff management and staff development management. Several important factors are impacting today all staff-related activities.

First of all, composition of staff inside any company is today much more diverse than ever: today we have a larger share of youth inside companies, and at the same time a larger share of the elderly. More than half of personnel today belongs to the so-called generation Y, or the Millenials. The representatives of this generation (or maybe even social group) are characterized by extremely high requirement which they move forward to the job itself, including the opportunities for further development and growth, and also clear career growth prospects (Ushakov, 2016). Thus, in this context, a new digital approach to human resource management is not merely a tool to be applied, but a brand new method/style of interaction with personnel inside a company. Staff today in literary plunged into the digital world, and thus HR and L&D (Learning & Development) specialists must comply to this new context, they must quickly learn how to develop mobile application, for example, so that staff can operation within the environment to which they are already accustomed.

Secondly, the very speed of changes and innovations has changed. New innovative decisions show up nearly every day, and most of them are easily implemented, thus companies are forced to change their market strategies so that to adapt to fast changing conditions and environment. A good example in this regard is the world famous taxi service Uber operating online. All procedures and operations inside Uber companies are digital, automated and online only. Uber application is developing on the global level already, and it has managed to become so client-oriented that now it is actually changing the consumer preferences of its own target audience. New services, based on Uber technology, now form the basis for other business models: meals delivery from restaurants (UberEATS) or good delivery (UberRUSH) etc.

Thirdly, digital technologies and social networks today create new approaches to enterprise management. These newer technologies include mobile applications, 3D printing, cloud services etc. They change the organizational structure of many companies along with their production methods, services delivery styles and core business processes.

Another important factor influencing staff performance today is companies’ orientation on the market and on the efficiency. Enterprises today pay more and more attention to efficiency management based on their own development of internal work standards, specific procedures and policies of performance evaluation which include, inter alia, training and motivation of staff.

All of the mentioned above factors emphasize the importance of staff development function for each company, because in today’s context staff development becomes the tool of human capital quality increase. And if staff policy is developed in full accordance with company’s core strategy, then corporate training would become the major source of company’s dynamic development at all levels of management.
A NEW APPROACH TO STAFF TRAINING

Recent Research Publications Analysis

Learning and development today are closely than ever related to business strategy. According to the data provided by BuroAkzent and Trainings.ru (as of 2015), 69% of all companies think that learning and development of their staff are closely related to business strategy development and its further success. Thus, there is a logical necessity to measure the efficiency of the related programmes. For example, for a teaching/learning programme related to sales such an efficiency indicator would be the reduced number of unclosed deals.

Digital world today changes all the approaches to staff training and development. For trainings and learning companies more and more often opt for online or e-learning. According to the research carried out by (HeadHunter, 2015), in which 139 HR specialists participated representing various sectors and cities of Russian Federation, nearly half of the companies consider themselves to be digital companies when it comes to human resource management.

Russian specialists from the (The elearning centre, 2015) have also carried out a research at the enterprises of academic (45,2%) and corporate (52,2%) sectors. This research was carried out by the following directions:

- budget assigned on e-learning;
- activities in the field of e-learning;
- quality of e-learning;
- the share of e-learning in trainings overall;
- instrument applied for e-learning;
- tasks to solve which e-learning is applied.

The major goals in e-learning, according to the results of the mentioned above research, are engaging the maximum possible quantity of personnel into the system of corporate learning (48,3%); speeding up learning and trainings as such (58,6%) and reducing the related costs (79,3%).

The survey results have also demonstrated that despite the crisis phenomena in the economy, the share of companies increasing the allocations on e-learning is significantly higher than the share of companies which have been forced to cut these budgets. More than half of all surveyed companies have increased their online learning and online trainings three- or even fourfold as compared to the year 2014. Some of these companies have also initiated the process of e-learning reorganization by means of wide use of webinars. Both approaches and tools applied in e-learning have changed significantly (Figure 1).

As we can see in Fig. 1, according to the results of this survey, many companies are inclined to abandon simple linear courses of the sake of more interactive one, often with the elements of gamification. Mobile learning is also gaining popularity and is today among the most actively growing trends.

This and other studies (Global Assessment Trends Report 2015, Summit HR Digital 2015) have already demonstrated that top managers in many companies are already aware of the necessity for continuing education through various innovations and taking into account
the individual working schedules of their employees. Companies today turn away from traditional trainings and tend to apply more informal types of independent learning. Informal education allows staff fully controls the very process of learning. Under these conditions the key task for HR and L&D departments would be to manage the related content and to provide constant access to both internal teaching materials and also to external sources of information, like MOOCs, for example.

For many large Russian companies the processes of training and staff development are declared to be top priority, and thus, their efficiency is constantly growing (International research trends in the field of personnel management, 2016). While at the majority of medium-sized and small companies the processes of training and staff development are if automated then to a very minor extent. Training and other forms of learning inside such companies, as a rule, are carried out by invited experts, are organized as lecturing according to strictly set in advance programme. Thus, employees get special knowledge and skills through instructions mostly, just following the programme predetermined by experts. Therefore, the structure of such type of corporate learning is basically some sort of catalogue of courses and trainings. And since today learning and training of personnel should be tightly related to company’s strategy, studies as per predetermined long in advance programmes cannot be called truly efficient.

Social learning

Today’s realities of corporate learning system obviously require new theoretical grounding and searching for new approaches to learning environment, oriented at the
changes necessities of business and on solving highly specific business tasks. Besides that, it is important to take into account the requirement of this new generation of employees themselves who are always and deeply engages in the Internet life and social networking especially. The key demands of this new generation to the learning environment thus would be: small portions of content; videocontent preferably; strong practicality of the suggested material; options of information exchange and feedback with colleagues etc. Thus, a new form of corporate training which actually fulfills all these requirements is the so-called social learning, covering both formal and informal elements of education process.

Contemporary technologies provide companies an opportunity to create this sort of environment. Today the leading trend in trainings is creating a digital learning platform which would ease the access to useful contents and to expert knowledge, and in many cases it could be accessible from mobile devices as well. Informal activity in this context is provided by means of joint studies. Ideally, this would be the variant when formal education lasts around 3-4 hours a week, in a convenient format, on-work, while the rest of the time provides additional opportunities for informal learning.

Formal training at this requires this digital platform since it contains the developed courses and sets the timing of learning for various categories of employees, it also enables schedules and off-schedule tests and checks, thus guaranteeing some sort of automated control over the whole process of learning.

At the same time informal education is also provided via the same platform, since it also contains various tools for informal exchange of knowledge between employees. Most of teaching documents, materials, reports on the implemented projects are provided in open access regime, besides, there is an option of content upload by participants, and a space for additional Q&As and extra information exchange.

The authors of this article have carried out a research on the available digital platforms at Russian market. And thus, we were able to develop and present here the model of staff training which can be used specifically by not large enterprises.

Today there is a wide range of platforms available for various sorts of social learning. Among them we can differentiate between Russian and foreign platforms with Russian localization, platforms with open code (that is, free of charge) and commercial ones (prepaid). We can also differentiate between two types of teaching: “light” versions with minimum functionality and full-scale LMS (learning management system).

Russian companies for training and development of their personnel mostly use full-scale LMSes. One of the most widely spread system of this category is WebTutor developed by Russian company “Websoft”. WebTutor is a system with complex automation of all business processes related to staff management. One of the modules within this system is “Distance learning”, it can be used for staff trainings online. The system also has a course editor through which new courses can be created and introduced into the system as well as chats and blogs providing communication between the participants of the learning process.
Platforms for social learning

For not large enterprises which as a rule do not have enough experience in the field of e-learning and usually do not require full integration with their inside IT environment, cloud solutions are more preferable. Platforms based on cloud solutions enable the creation of e-courses with literary any content: texts, presentations, audio and video files as well as video content for YouTube. For knowledge control there is also an option to set tests with various types of questions, and also add cases and their further analysis. Overall, all teaching materials and control resources can be easily adjusted by separate categories of staff. Today’s platforms are also often used for various webinars and tutorials for which experts are invited. An important feature of such platforms is also their mobile-friendly mode. Each employee of a company has his/her own profile on which various materials are accumulated: teaching notes, an archive of webinars, tests, videos etc. Thus, each “student” can easily access these materials 24/7, whenever necessary, and in this way the continuity of teaching process is achieved.

A good example of such a platform is Teachbase (http://teachbase.ru) launched several years ago by the Russian company “Internet Shkola” (Internet school). As of today this service is being used by over 45 thousands employees of various companies monthly. Among the first companies to test this platform in their staff training was: “Invitro” (independent medical lab, https://www.invitro.ru/), corporation “Siberian Health” (https://ru.siberianhealth.com/ru), footwear company “Mascotte” (https://www.mascotte.ru/).

In “Siberian Health” and “Invitro” the use of this platform started with an adaptation course for new employees. The office of these companies are situated in various regions of Russian Federation, and the introduction of this course allowed reducing the costs related to mentoring systems. For professional knowledge assessment and evaluation of internal performance standards they also used the instruments of testing available. The course called “Technology of Sales” is among the most actively used too. “Mascotte” as a network of footwear shops has started using this programme with organization of its inside webiners on merchandise, presentation of new collection of footwear and their new loyalty programme.

Top management of both of these companies have noted the significant time savings on the project launch and that now there is no necessity for additional retraining of staff. Helpful tools of this system are also the opportunity to check the statistics of trainings and getting feedback on the quality of teaching and training. Many users also mention that this platform has a very user friendly interface and most of its tools are intuitively easy in use (from the blog on: http://teachbase.ru/blog/).

Thus, we can summarize that the platform “Teachbase” enables the organization of the full-scale process of nearly formal education for all employees of any company.

To guarantee the efficient interaction between employees in the process of production tasks solving a reasonable option can be also to use a corporate portal developed and operating as a social network. Such portals can easily transfer this light and simple communication style, so common for social networks, into professional on-work relations.
By their functional content, such portals combine the features of messengers, emails, file-sharing service and an application for joint work on various projects. Besides that, having all the features of a standard social network, corporate portal also helps establish and maintain rather informal communication, and thus, well-tuned relations help solve many business issues.

The first Russian cloud service combining the instruments for joint work with social networking among colleagues became “Bitrix24” (www.bitrix24.ru). This programme would be easy to start for any employee already having an account on “Vkontakte” or “Odnoklassniki” (both are Russian analogues to “Facebook”, with a slightly different interface and a different set of additional tools). Besides that, this programme can actually become a useful substitute to the mentioned above social networks as such. The programme was launched and now supported by Russian company “1C-Bitrix”.

“Bitrix24” essentially is a singly point of access to a range of classical working instruments like: databases, calendars, tasks managers, file operations and a reporting system. It also has installed its own client relations system (CRM) which easily sorts out all information about clients and deals. Swift communication between employees inside this system becomes possible by means of chat and also sound and video calls.

Both “Teachbase” and “Bitrix24” are cloud solutions with comparatively low costs, thus, they both can be rather easily used by not big companies in their implementation of both formal and informal education for staff. For example, for companies which have not more than 500 employees the monthly payment for using “Teachbase” is 18 ths RUB only (as of date of this article’s submission for review, this was almost 297 USD). “Bitrix24” has several tariff plans to suggest. Their tariff plan “The Project” is totally free of charge but it can cover only really small companies, up to 12 employees. Besides, under this general tariff the free of charge space “in the cloud” is limited to 5 Gb only. Other tariff plans, “The Team” and “The Company” are commercial ones already, they do not have limitations as per number of employees and they also have some additional opportunities. The monthly payment for “The Team” would be 4990 RUB (or 82 USD), and the same for “The Team” would be 9990 RUB (almost 165 USD).

Discussion and Conclusion

Thus, the results of our research and of studying the experience of both foreign and Russian companies allowed us to develop and present here the model of social continuous learning, designed specifically for not big companies (see Fig. 2).

The suggested here model enables creating the adequate environment for continuous learning which has both formal and informal components. Formal components of the suggested model are provided via the Learning Platform, while informal ones – via the Enterprise Platform. The Learning Platform of the model has as the key aim to teach and train new employees, and also to raise the qualification level, to carry out the attestation etc.
It also has the option of performing webinars with experts concerning the most important issues for a particular company. Low costs of using such a platform allow reducing the overall spending on personnel and at the same time increase its quality and efficiency.

While corporate portal (aka Enterprise Platform) by means of its numerous services (email, forums, chats etc.) is able to maintain employees’ communication for further problem solving and also for informal exchange of knowledge and experience. Communication between all employees using the tools of such portals can be both business and/or informal. This would ease the overall communication freedom between the employees of all levels, and in such a way both vertical and horizontal ties within an organization would be strengthened.

Evaluation of the efficiency of such informal learning platforms must be connected with such indicators that would correctly reveal not only employees’ engagement into the related processes but also the overall organizational efficiency. Measuring the latter can be rather direct, by means of simple questionnaires, or it can be indirect – be detecting which feedback mechanisms which are used by employees most often.

**Recommendations**

For successful introduction of social learning tools a company must be ready from the standpoint of corporate culture. Company’s top management must be interested and motivated enough to use open communications for knowledge exchange between employees
and also for joint work on various projects. For efficient use of such portals it would be necessary that all employees know about their potential use for business problems solving. Also important is proper positioning of these portals: employees as the bearers of the most important information of a company must be ready and motivated to use such systems nearly every day, and gradually their loyalty to such systems and portals must be formed. Contents and capacities of a corporate information system must be expanding all the time and employees should be timely informed about such changes, so that they can use new functions and new information as soon as possible.

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