Unlocking Employee Potential: Training & Development Best Practices

Intro:	Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. Now here's Brad.
Brad Smith:	Hello and welcome to the Strategic Insights Podcast, brought to you by PrideStaff. Today we have the pleasure of speaking with Carolyn Harris, PrideStaff's internal expert in training and development. Carolyn, thank you so much for joining us.
Carolyn Harris:	Thank you for having me, Brad. I'm excited to be here.
Brad Smith:	So are we, but before we start, I want to share some interesting statistics that I think underscore the importance of training and development. So recent studies by Deloitte and Devlin Peck show that the skill sets required for jobs have changed significantly. If we look back to 2015, those skill sets have changed by 25%, which is a big change. But that change is going to accelerate here over the next few years. We're expected to see a change of 50% by 2027. This rapid evolution is continuous, and training and upskilling are essential for keeping employee skills relevant. Another survey from Xavi found that 68% of employees consider training essential to their job satisfaction, and 70% said that they would leave their current job for one that invests in more employee development and learning opportunities. So, it's important for retention. Finally, a report from Shortlister found that companies that invest in comprehensive training programs see over 200% higher income per employee and a 24% higher profit margin compared to those that do not invest heavily in employee development.

So, we need to change because our jobs are changing, the skills required are changing. We need training and development because employees look at it as essential, and it's essential to their job satisfaction and our retention. From a business standpoint, investing in employee development can have an amazing impact on productivity and overall revenue generation. So, Carolyn, those stats obviously outline the value and need for training and development, but where I want to talk with you about is, where do you actually get started? So, we know we have to invest in training and development. What do we do to kickstart that? |
| Carolyn Harris: | That's a great question, Brad, and I would start with onboarding and your new hire. So, let's face it, it's very expensive to replace employees. We want to avoid |

that. Effective learning and development programs are going to help in retention, motivation, engagement, and productivity. That's what we want. So, when I think about learning and development, whether it's a new hire or even somebody who's experienced, I start with Gallup's 12 levels of engagement. I'm not going to go through all 12 levels, but the first two are really important. So, to be productive and be engaged, an individual needs to understand what's expected of them. I need to know what's expected of me, and that needs to be very clear.

Then I have to have the tools to be able to do what's expected and be successful. So, aligning those tools, aligning the training with what's expected, and that what's expected will vary from someone who's a new hire versus someone who's been in the position 1 year, 5 years, 10 years, and onwards. So, then you can also align your training and learning goals with your organizational goals. I can see directly what I do on a daily basis, how that impacts the organization and the company, and the value that I'm bringing there. In addition to those learning opportunities, I think they need to be supported by continuing having coaching conversations. Those come in various ways, but continuous learning, coaching, and support is very important.

Brad Smith:

I love that Gallup framework that you mentioned, and you spoke a few times about aligning, alignment. So, talk to me a little bit more about that. How do you identify what those training needs are? How do you align them to business outcomes? How do you really put that all together?

Carolyn Harris:

For, let's say, a new hire, you're going to start with, that job description is going to align with the department needs and the organization needs. So, everything trickles down. Everything trickles from what the organization needs to the department, that job description that goes to the employee. And then that is reflected in the learning and development opportunities that they have. So, we can also look at what is the need or the gap between their productivity. So, if I have somebody there a year, five years, what am I seeing in productivity that's working? That's not working through those coaching conversations. This goes back to the coaching conversations, because when you have those on a regular basis, nothing should be a surprise if you're having those honest conversations. So, you can then identify those gaps with your more experienced employees. What sometimes we find is, leaders will want to train on a particular skillset or a new tool because it's a shiny object.

They'll say, "We need training on AI." Let's say AI. That's popular today. My first question always is, "What is it that you need them to do? What is it that they're not doing that you would like them to do?" And so, we start from a needs assessment first before we prescribe the type of training that they need. It could be, I get a lot of, "We need to find courses for this. We need to find courses for that." But it might not be a course. It might be on-the-job, an observation and immediate feedback, or it could be a course. It really all depends on the situation.

Brad Smith:	So, what I'm hearing is that alignment might even start before that person is hired. So, you're looking at that job description, you're making sure that aligns with organizational goals. We need to make sure that onboarding is aligned. We need to have those coaching conversations so that we continue to stay aligned. As organizational goals change, objectives change, our training and alignment might need to change too, right?
Carolyn Harris:	Exactly.
Brad Smith:	Terrific. Now I want to talk about those coaching conversations that you mentioned. I can know from personal experience how valuable those conversations can be. Talk to us a little bit about those conversations, how you structure them, what role they play in employee development.
Carolyn Harris:	To simplify this, I think of two different types of conversations. You have development conversations, developmental. If somebody needs to get from point A to point B and they're not quite making it and you need to help them or reinforcement coaching conversations, things are going really well, and you want to reinforce those positive behaviors. So, you want to make sure that coaching is more than just those developmental conversations. But also, the conversations and they're personalized. I personally have coaching conversations on a regular basis. Just did that today. Every Monday, one-on-ones is a coaching opportunity. What's working, what's not working, and getting their feedback on what's working, what's not working, and how can this be fixed?
	Because most often they know the answer of how to fix it, but also an opportunity to say, "Hey, you did a phenomenal job with this project." And asking them what was it that helped you get that project done? What helped you be successful to identify what you can reinforce to do that? The other is on-the-job coaching. There are situations where you need to step in right away. Maybe they're meeting with a client, with a customer, and that there's a risk if, perhaps, they continue a conversation or continue with the process that would be detrimental to the business. Those are opportunities where you do need to step in and do some immediate coaching. It's those learning opportunities on the spot.
Brad Smith:	Carolyn, I think that makes a lot of sense. So, when you're looking at organizationally, do you have these conversations with every single employee? And how individualized do you make these conversations? Do you tailor them to individual roles, specific aspirations of each employee? How do you address that at scale?
Carolyn Harris:	I do have individual conversations with my team. Even at times when I've had larger teams, I would always find time, even if it's 15 minutes, to have those conversations, to ask three simple questions. What's working? Where are you getting stuck? And what can we do to remove those obstacles or overcome those obstacles? Really simple questions to ask. That goes for someone who is

new to the role to... I had somebody who retired, and so we had those conversations about what things were going to look like, realizing that we had to train other folks, we had to plan for replacement and what that would look like, and having those conversations, which was unique for me.

I've never had that happen before. So that was a nice challenge to have to realize that there were things that they needed to know and understand through that process so they have a positive experience. So yes, it is individualized, and I know it can be a challenge when you have a large team, but if you can even find 10 to 15 minutes every other week, if you have a larger team, to ask those questions, they'll feel like someone actually cares. That's also one of Gallup's pieces of engagement, is that someone in this organization cares, and they care about my development.

Brad Smith: I think if you can do that, you're going to have much higher employee retention, higher satisfaction levels, and increased productivity.

Carolyn Harris: Yep, absolutely.

Brad Smith: Carolyn, switching gears a little bit. Over the last year or two years, we've seen rapid evolution in technology. How are technology changes? How is AI shaping the landscape of training and development today?

Carolyn Harris: Several ways. It's huge in the learning field. One would be to be able to tailor the delivery of learning so that it's specialized to that learning, understanding. There are tools out there that can assess a phone call, a sales phone call, and tell you how well that phone call went. Can give their supervisor information about what coaching that person might need or how well they did. Here's a best practice and push that best practice off to other team members. It also pushes data to your learning management system that could tell you what courses need to automatically get pushed out to that individual. So that's on the LMS admin tech side, but also in the courses themselves. We want engagement. We want to be entertained. We want to learn, and we want to be entertained.

So, when you have the avatars and you have the opportunity to for gamification and those types of things within the course, you're going to have a higher level of engagement within that course. If you have instructional designers that are working in-house, you can develop those courses much quickly, much more quickly. We used to do them where I was doing the voices. Other colleagues were doing the voices. That's a lot of editing. So, with AI, it has allowed us to develop courses, more engaging quicker, and it also helps collect data so that that learner is getting content that is relevant to them in real time.

Brad Smith: So, building on that, you want that feedback, that engagement real time. How do you look at your overall training and development initiatives and say, "You know what? This was a very successful, effective training program." What

methods do you use to look at the effectiveness and the impact that training and development is having on productivity?

Carolyn Harris: So, there's two types of assessment. One is, you want to know the learner's feedback on, did the course work? Was it engaging? Did you like it? The other part is knowing from the learner prior to taking this course, how much did you know about the topic? Now that you took the course, what do you know about the topic? Do you feel that you could use this information? We asked those questions within our learning management system, within those courses, and we even asked what challenges or obstacles might get in the way of implementing what you've just learned. So, we do those immediately following the course. If we have a course that's part of a larger program, blended learning, where you're engaging in online courses and virtually, we send out effectiveness surveys depending on the length of the program that will... Sometimes it's just three simple questions.

Again, you're going to hear me say this, "What worked? What didn't work? What can we do differently?" We'll ask those. If it's a, say, five-day program, at the end of each day and then at the end of the fifth day, we collect comprehensive information on the entire program. So, getting that I think quickly as possible is really helpful in assessing those programs. Looking at performance down the road, two weeks from now, a month from now, how are they performing? And the other piece that we're seeing with some of our folks who are engaged in the learning program is their continuous engagement. When we offer programs in the future, you see, those folks, their engagement in future learning opportunities continues and it increases.

Brad Smith: So, Carolyn, what are some of the common challenges or obstacles you face in training and development? What do you see when you're rolling out programs, and what can organizations do to overcome those challenges?

Carolyn Harris: A common challenge is resistance to change. We mentioned AI earlier, and AI is kind of changing the face of learning. When individuals sometimes know that it's AI, they might be uncomfortable with that. They know it's not a real person. Some folks are resistant to that, and some are like, "Okay, I know this isn't real, but I'm going to go with it." And it's still very engaging. So as our tools are becoming better and better, we're seeing, it is more difficult to tell if it's a real person or not. So, I see that continually improving as time goes by.

The other is budget constraints, having the resources in order to purchase those tools and utilize those tools. The other is time limitations. So, we want as many folks engaged in learning opportunities as possible, but it can be perceived as a time constraint that I have to take these courses or I have to stop and do this coaching. What we try to do is focus on microlearning as much as possible. How can we do this lesson in three minutes or less, 10 minutes or less? A coaching opportunity could be 10 minutes or less. So, figuring out how to put those into realistic chunks of time.

Brad Smith:	I love that concept. I love the concept of microlearning. So, it's not distracting from your core function, but then also getting back to making sure that everything is aligned in your training program. If you can make sure that your training program is aligned with the business and financial outcomes that your organization wants, then the constraints on budget and time become less prevalent because you know that the time that you're investing in that training and development is leading to a positive financial outcome.
Carolyn Harris:	Yes. Sometimes, just like marketing, Brad, it takes time.
Brad Smith:	It does.
Carolyn Harris:	It takes time to see the outcomes.
Brad Smith:	It does, and things begin to snowball. As you invest more and more in this, you're going to see improved retention. You're going to see less loss of thought leadership with people leaving. You're going to see more productivity, improved morale. You're going to be able to recruit a higher-level person because the people at your organization are going to be much more fulfilled and happier.
Carolyn Harris:	We're hearing that from the field, from some of our offices, when they have new hires and they engage in our new hire pathway, is that these folks are saying, "I have never seen a program so organized and engaging as this at any other place."
Brad Smith:	Yeah, okay.
Carolyn Harris:	That makes them feel important, and that motivates them, and they have the tools to do their job well.
Brad Smith:	Yeah, and we started with that survey data for a reason. The data supports that this is what employees want, this is where the future is headed, and we need to invest in these programs. So, speaking of where the future is headed, Carolyn, what do you see the future of training and development, especially with these technology advancements that we just chatted about? What can we expect to see?
Carolyn Harris:	It's definitely moving towards customized learning, on-the-job learning supported by technology. So, if I'm working on a project, I'm in my operating system, and I'm stuck, I can access microlearning right away. So that on-the-job learning, real-time feedback, personalized development opportunities, when you're talking about career pathing and I can see that what I'm being asked to do today relates to a future goal, I'm going to be more motivated to do that. I know we keep saying this, but technology is just continually going to expand our ability to reach out to learners, provide that immediate feedback, support a large population of employees, and it's going to enhance the learning experience. It's going to make it more fun. Learning should be fun, right?

Brad Smith:	It sure should. Yeah. Carolyn, thank you so much for your time today. This was fantastic. As we wrap up, any final advice or words of wisdom you'd give to organizations that are looking to enhance their training and development programs?
Carolyn Harris:	Going back to the beginning of our talk today is, that learning and development isn't limited just to onboarding. It's a continuous improvement and ongoing process that requires aligning that learning experience with their role, with their expectations, and future goals that they may have within the organization to move ahead within those pathways. As well as aligning with your mission and the values of your organization, your strategic goals that you have that is going to engage them so they can see what they're doing on a daily basis, how that impacts the bigger picture.
Brad Smith:	Wonderful. Carolyn, thank you so much. I think that's terrific advice. I really appreciate you sharing all of your insights with us today. It's been an absolute pleasure to have you on.
Carolyn Harris:	Thank you, Brad, and it's been great talking with you today.
Brad Smith:	Thank you. For those that are listening, if you have any training or development challenges, if you have retention issues that are causing problems in your business, if you're looking to recruit people with a very specific skill set, with a strong background in a specific area, reach out to your local PrideStaff office. They can work with you to develop a strategic recruiting plan and sourcing plan to help identify people that would be a perfect fit for your organization and get them right into your learning and development programs. So, thank you all so much for listening. We greatly appreciate it. Take care.
Closing:	Thank you for listening to Strategic Insights brought to you by PrideStaff. Whether you're looking for high-level workforce consulting or staffing help to meet demands, PrideStaff is here to help.