Unlocking Employee-led Growth

An L&D Strategy

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Introduction

The concept of Employee-led Growth isn't new to L&D professionals and people leaders. But, in a post-pandemic business world, Employee-led Growth has evolved from a progressive idea to a strategic imperative for organizations. This white paper delves into the relevance and potential of Employee-led Growth in the current context.

We explain what Employee-led Growth means and why we should be talking about it and implementing it. We also explain the benefits of an Employee-led Growth strategy, the role of leadership in supporting this strategy, and bring you key insights from L&D experts to give you actionable takeaways for your organization.

Let’s dive in!

What Is Employee-Led Growth?

Employee-led Growth, also known as Employee-driven development, is an approach to **personal and professional development** that empowers employees to take ownership of their learning journey. It recognizes that employees have unique aspirations, interests, and learning styles.

Instead of prescribing a fixed curriculum, Employee-led Growth provides individuals with the autonomy to **choose their learning paths,** aligning them with both their personal goals and the organization’s objectives. It is a shift from a top-down, passive learning model to a bottom-up, active, and personalized one.

As Marzia Edwards, Manager, Talent and Leadership Development at Phrase, points out, “Employee-led Growth is where colleagues take ownership of their own development and of the **career conversations** that underpin it. While managers have a responsibility to ensure these conversations take place, each individual should also take part actively and if necessary initiate them.”

Why Is Employee-Led Growth Relevant Today?

Traditional L&D methods are struggling to remain relevant and effective. When was the last time you enjoyed sitting in a training session for a one-way streaming of information?

Modern learners prefer learning in the flow of work, and learning what they can immediately apply to their roles and be more productive. They know it’s a surefire way to accelerate their development. Whether it’s through bite-sized videos, a Google search, or a discussion with a colleague, employees like to be in the driver’s seat to find their answers in a way that helps them learn best.

Marta Budny & Katarzyna Wilk, Senior Training Consultants at getvibe.io, say that managers have expressed the need for employees to take a primary role in their own development for quite some time.

> “It has become even more pressing because of the complex, often digitally demanding and remote working environments. Digital workplaces require new cross-functional skills like setting goals, efficient facilitation of meetings, problem-solving and so on.
>
> Companies need to answer the question: How to promote and foster an employee-led learning environment, design the right solutions, and communicate them well within the organization?”

In particular, Employee-led Growth is relevant today because of its potential for outsized impact.

1. **Customization:** Every employee is different, and their learning needs vary. Employee-led Growth allows organizations to tailor development plans to individual needs, maximizing the relevance and impact of training.
2. **Agility:** With the ability to adapt quickly, employees can acquire the skills and knowledge required to stay ahead of industry shifts and market demands.
3. **Engagement:** Empowering employees to take control of their development fosters a sense of ownership and motivation, leading to higher engagement and retention rates.
4. **Competitive Advantage:** Organizations that embrace Employee-led Growth can develop a more adaptable and skilled workforce, giving them a competitive edge in the market.

The 4 Pillars Of Employee-Led Growth

Employee-led Growth is built on four fundamental pillars of practice that work together to fuel this strategy.

Autonomy

Employees are given the freedom to choose their learning paths, resources, and goals, allowing for a more personalized learning experience.

Access

Organizations provide a wide range of learning resources, from traditional courses to online platforms, mentors, and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing.

Accountability

Employees are responsible for setting and achieving their learning objectives, promoting a sense of ownership and commitment.

Adaptability

The approach acknowledges that learning is an ongoing process and adapts to changes in employee interests, goals, and market dynamics.

Real-Life Examples Of Employee-Led Growth

Several leading companies have adopted Employee-led Growth by baking the strategy into team operations and organizational culture.

Let's see how this concept works in practice and why it can be a game-changer in the world of employee development.

Google

Google's "20% Time"

Google's famed "20% time" policy is a great example of Employee-led Growth. This initiative allows employees to dedicate 20% of their workweek to pursue projects of their choice, unrelated to their primary job responsibilities. This freedom to explore personal interests has led to groundbreaking innovations, such as Gmail, Google News, and Google Maps. Employee-led Growth at Google not only fosters creativity but also aligns individual passions with the company's mission.

ATLASSIAN

Atlassian's "ShipIt Days"

Atlassian, the software company behind products like Jira and Confluence, organizes "ShipIt Days," where employees are given 24 hours to work on any project they choose. It's open to everyone – from new hires to senior executives and top leadership. As a result, these events encourage cross-functional collaboration and empower employees to develop new features, improve existing products, and explore innovative ideas. This form of Employee-led Growth at Atlassian has led to numerous product enhancements and improved team dynamics. In fact, the Jira Service Desk was born from a ShipIt Day event.

From their first event, which included 14 developers in one location, Atlassian's ShipIt Days now attracts 4,000 employees across 20 global locations.

Spotify's "Guilds and Chapters"

Spotify, the popular music streaming company, organizes its engineering teams into "Guilds and Chapters." Guilds are communities of interest where employees can explore topics outside their regular job scope, while Chapters focus on specific skills or competencies. This structure allows employees to shape their learning journey and encourages knowledge-sharing across the organization.

Benefits Of An Employee-Led Growth Strategy

Employee-led Growth isn't just a buzzword; it has real implications in the workplace. When employees are not constrained to a fixed set of rules for growth, but can take charge of their own development, it has a ripple effect that has benefits not just at the individual level but for the entire organization.

Enhanced Employee Retention

Organizations that invest in Employee-led Growth are more likely to retain top talent.

When employees see a clear path for their development within the company, they are less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Improved Performance

Employees who actively engage in their own learning tend to perform better in their roles.

They acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to excel, contributing to overall organizational success.

Agility and Adaptability

In rapidly changing industries, agility is crucial. Employee-led Growth allows organizations to quickly respond to emerging trends and technologies by enabling employees to acquire new skills and knowledge as needed.

Better Cost-Efficiency

Traditional, one-size-fits-all training programs can be costly and may not always align with individual learning needs.

Employee-led Growth optimizes resource allocation by tailoring learning experiences to each employee, reducing wasted time and resources.

Long-term Sustainability

By nurturing a culture of learning and adaptability, Employee-led Growth contributes to an organization's long-term sustainability and ability to thrive in a constantly changing environment.

Leadership Development

Employee-led Growth also benefits leadership development. As employees take on more responsibility for their growth, they develop leadership skills, such as self-motivation, decision-making, and the ability to guide others.

Higher Employee Engagement

Employees who have control over their learning experience are more engaged and motivated. They take ownership of their personal and professional growth, leading to increased job satisfaction and commitment to the organization.

Training consultants Marta Budny & Katarzyna Wilk say that Employee-led Growth creates a high level of engagement, which means they participate and drive other initiatives within the organization.

> “Companies need involved and aware employees. Let us look at DEIB initiatives as an example. Think of generational diversity training programs. The employees who understand generational dynamics create an inclusive and diverse workplace, generate better ideas, collaborate more efficiently and in result the company gains competitive advantage on the market.”

Tailored Skill Development and Training

Employee-led Growth allows individuals to acquire skills directly relevant to their roles and career aspirations. This ensures that the workforce remains highly skilled and adaptable to evolving job requirements.

April Petrey, Principal Consultant at Allonsy Innovation, was leading L&D initiatives at ShipHawk, and used Employee-led Growth as a strategy to create onboarding content and uncover institutional knowledge.

> “I leaned into the experience across the company to guide and create the onboarding content that was desperately needed. I provided brief workshops on learning theory and then worked with SMEs, leadership, management, and individual contributors to create and deploy the learning. It was my favourite experience as an L&D professional.”

Increased Innovation and Creativity

Empowered employees are more likely to bring fresh ideas and innovative solutions to the workplace. They feel encouraged to experiment, take risks, and think creatively, which can lead to significant advancements within the organization.

In fact, even in the absence of a huge budget for learning, L&D manager Marzia Edwards, says

> “Employee-led Growth encourages a can-do attitude. If someone is in the driving seat of their own development they will be more inclined to find alternative solutions if budget is not available or only limited.”

The Role Of Leadership In Enabling Employee-Led Growth

Leadership's role in enabling Employee-led Growth goes beyond just saying, **"We support it."** It's about actively participating, allocating resources, actively building a culture of feedback, and empowering employees to drive their own learning journeys. Here are some actionable ways to truly enable Employee-led Growth.

✓ Lead by Learning

The most effective way to encourage Employee-led Growth is by leading through example. Show your team that **learning never stops** and that you're right there with them on this journey.

For example, share a book or an insightful article you've recently read with your team, and encourage them to do the same. Discuss how these insights can be applied to your projects and processes.

✓ Allocate Resources

Dedicate a portion of your budget specifically for employee development. Whether it's for courses, workshops, online resources, or mentorship programs, this allocation ensures that your team has access to the tools and opportunities they need for their growth.

By earmarking resources for Employee-led Growth, you send a clear message to your team that learning, and development are not just buzzwords but core values within the organization. This financial commitment underscores your dedication to helping employees reach their full potential.

✓ Recognize and Celebrate Growth

Employees naturally want to share what they've learned.

When you recognize and celebrate milestones in your team's learning journey, you are validating their efforts and commitment. It also reinforces the idea that learning is valued and appreciated within the organization.

Plus, recognition is a powerful motivator to unlock knowledge-sharing and mentoring opportunities. Team members might set up lunch-and-learns or organize a skill-sharing workshop, leading to the spread of knowledge throughout the organization.

When individuals see that their accomplishments are celebrated, they are inspired to set higher goals for themselves. They may aim for more significant milestones, take on more complex projects, or pursue additional learning opportunities. This intrinsic motivation drives continuous improvement.

6 Tips To Keep Employee-Led Growth At The Core Of Your L&D Strategy

Implementing and sustaining Employee-led Growth within your organization requires a thoughtful and proactive approach. Here are seven key tips to ensure that Employee-led Growth remains a central focus of your Learning and Development (L&D) strategy:

1 Cultivate a Learning Culture

A **learning culture** isn't built overnight. It needs to be baked into organizational dialogue and processes in a way that encourages open communication, curiosity, and the sharing of knowledge.

When you let employees know that learning is perceived as an essential part of daily work, employees feel safe to experiment and learn from failures. Empower employees to detect their own learning gaps and support them in finding ways to fill those gaps.

For example, implement a 'Learning Friday' where employees dedicate the last two hours of their workweek to explore new skills or knowledge areas of their choice. This can be done through online courses, internal workshops, or group discussions. This practice not only encourages continuous learning but also fosters a culture where knowledge sharing and curiosity are valued.

2 Set Clear Learning Objectives

Allow employees to take the lead in defining their learning objectives and creating individual development plans. Encourage them to align their goals with both personal aspirations and organizational needs. Regularly revisit and revise these objectives to ensure they remain relevant and achievable.

Conduct quarterly learning objective-setting workshops, where employees can outline their personal and professional learning goals for the quarter. The HR team can provide templates and guidance to ensure these objectives are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) and aligned with the company's broader goals.

3 Implement Employee-led Mentorship Programs

Mentorship programs are a great way to sustain Employee-led Growth. Instead of assigning mentors, allow employees to play an active role in mentee-led matching. Encourage them to identify their own learning needs and objectives, and then choose mentors who can best help them achieve those goals. These programs provide valuable opportunities for employees to learn from one another and gain insights from more experienced colleagues and peers while giving mentees the autonomy to shape their learning journey.

A mentorship platform with a pairing algorithm is a great tool for employees to list their areas of expertise and areas where they seek guidance. Allow employees to freely connect with each other based on these listings.

4 Measure and Track Progress

Implement metrics and key performance indicators (KPIs) to track individual and organizational learning progress. Regularly assess the impact of Employee-led Growth initiatives. Analyze the data to identify areas for improvement and celebrate successes.

Introduce a digital learning portfolio for each employee where they can log their learning activities, progress, and reflections. This portfolio can be reviewed during performance evaluations to assess personal growth and how it contributes to team and organizational goals.

5 Build Feedback Loops

Establish feedback mechanisms that allow employees to provide input on the effectiveness of learning resources and programs. Act upon this feedback to refine and enhance the Employee-led Growth experience. Recognize and reward employees who contribute valuable insights.

Implement a monthly feedback survey specifically focused on learning and development initiatives. Questions can range from the effectiveness of resources provided to suggestions for new learning opportunities. Ensure that the feedback collected leads to tangible changes or enhancements in the L&D strategy.

6 Prepare for Flexibility and Adaptability

Acknowledge that learning needs and interests evolve over time. Be prepared to adapt your L&D strategy accordingly. Create room for employees to explore new areas of interest and adjust their learning paths. Embrace emerging technologies and methodologies to stay ahead of the curve.

Establish an 'Innovation Lab' where employees can work on projects outside their regular responsibilities. This lab should allow them to explore new technologies, methodologies, or even start cross-departmental collaborations. This initiative not only promotes flexibility in learning but also helps in uncovering hidden talents and interests within the workforce.

Make Employee-Led Growth A Continuous Process

Let's conclude with the idea that by putting the power of learning and development into the hands of your employees, you're not just investing in their skills; you're investing in the future of your organization. You're nurturing a culture of innovation, adaptability, and continuous improvement.

Employee-led Growth isn't a one-time project; it's an ongoing commitment. Embrace it, and you'll find that your organization becomes more agile, competitive, and better equipped to face whatever challenges lie ahead. Your employees will thank you, and so will your bottom line.

Further reading

🧠 Enjoying the handbook and want to keep unpacking more? Here are more resources to keep you going:

What is Job Satisfaction? Meaning, Importance and Examples

Why Work Friends Matter + 12 Tips to Foster Work Friendships

People Strategy: What It Is and Why You Need One

Additional Resources

We hope this resource has helped you learn more about how Together can be your partner in your mentorship journey. Take a deeper dive through our webinars, customer success stories, and blog content below:

Webinars

together
mci group
Customer Panel: Mentorship Program Managers Share Best Practices
FIRST HORIZON

Together Customer Panel: How First Horizon and MCI Group Run Mentorship Programs

EXPERT INTERVIEW
What Separates Successful Mentoring Programs From Those That Flop?
Watch now
Dr. Wendy Axelrod
Executive Coach, author, speaker, and renowned "Mentorship Guru."

What Separates Successful Mentoring Programs From Those That Flop?

together + HR.com
Return on Investment:
The Impact of Internal Mentorship Programs
Watch Now

How to Calculate the ROI of Mentoring

Customer Success Stories

CUSTOMER CASE STUDY
Accelerating employee learning and development through mentorship
together cruise
togetherplatform.com

How Cruise quickly trained their engineers by pairing them with seasoned employees as mentors.

CUSTOMER CASE STUDY
Using Together's mentoring platform to scale mentorship while minimizing administrative workload
together THE Forum
togetherplatform.com

How The Forum helped more female entrepreneurs grow by streamlining the matching process.

CUSTOMER CASE STUDY
Strengthening diversity and inclusion by connecting ERG members with relevant mentors
together AVISON YOUNG
togetherplatform.com

Avison Young: How a global real estate firm uses mentoring to grow their talent.

Blog Content

10+ Examples of successful mentoring programs

What Makes an Effective Mentoring Program? Key Features and Best Practices

Mentorship program template: [Download 6 key steps]