



Why Workforce Development Matters More Than Ever

A GAME PLAN FOR FIELDING YOUR DREAM TEAM FOR 2022 AND BEYOND

As a former athlete who played basketball and softball, active SIIA member Kari Niblack can't help but make a sports analogy when explaining the growing importance of workforce development. In a business world that has undergone seismic change from Covid-19, the CEO of ACS Benefit Services says it's now more important than ever to field the right team of employees, managers and executives.

This is especially true as organizations head into the 2022 season with uncertainty about when the pandemic and supply chain difficulties finally will end, as well as how the Great Resignation will affect their talent-management efforts.

Companies in the self-insurance and alternative risk-transfer space aren't immune to these challenges during an unprecedented time. There isn't a playbook for dealing with fallout from the pandemic; rather, strategies are unfolding in real time. And those who win the talent war obviously will see that victory translate into lasting success.

Written By Bruce Shutan



Kari Niblack

“You need to know who are your starting five are and have a great bench,” says Niblack, a point guard in her youth who learned how to see the entire floor of a basketball court and line up teammates in the right position before each play. She parlayed that skill into running her own company, a leading third-party administrator that she founded in 1982. “Those lessons as an athlete very much parlay into my coaching and mentoring philosophy as a CEO. Great

leadership requires action. It’s an opportunity to lead by example and commit to that dual partnership.”

Niblack presents on this hot topic at an early December gathering of industry leaders and innovators. Her talk is one in a series of informal discussions that SIIA produced for a unique crowdsourcing event where attendees are encouraged to share their ideas, commentary and potential solutions for top-of-mind challenges.

Apart from assembling the best possible mix of talent, she’s adamant about the need for versatile star players who not only understand the company playbook, but also can play multiple positions and avoid operating in silos. On a gridiron, she says it would translate into an ability to simultaneously run and throw a touchdown, as well as kick a field goal.

HOW TO MOTIVATE TEAMMATES

Corporate leaders, however, will not taste success without finding a way to motivate their people on an individual basis and collectively as a team. To keep employees motivated, leaders must involve them in the company’s innovation. Niblack shares company wins early and often via a “Ring the Bell” forum where a momentum shift and heightened energy can be felt across the organization. Individual success is also shared.

“I passionately believe that culture drives workforce development,” she explains. “Those two are not mutually exclusive, especially with all of the things that are triggering worker burnout, employer resentment and career re-evaluation that we are seeing in real time across our industry.”

She likens culture to a contact sport that’s mission critical for attracting and retaining top-notch talent. When the culture conversation first started decades ago, it was about making healthy snacks and food choices available at work, setting up a game room or offering glitzy swag.

“That doesn’t cut it anymore,” she warns, noting that it should be visible at all levels, and openly shared with clients and partners. “There is so much more that we have to do to cultivate an environment that promotes employee engagement. It is a 24/7 commitment.”

Today, she notes that it’s about implementing much larger strategies. They include anything from setting a theme and detailing how to win over clients, to sharing vision and passion and establishing key performance indices. The effort trickles down from the top to bottom with a need for teaching employees the basic level of their business, and giving them an opportunity to learn, give back and have an open dialogue about what they’re needing.

But mentoring also can have a reciprocal effect. Athletes and coaches, for example, can make one another better by having an open dialogue, listening to constructive feedback and sharing expectations of what’s needed on a particular game day. And that makes the team more successful, Niblack says.

It’s the same for corporate leaders.

“There should be a give-and-take, where both people are expanding their knowledge of each other and whatever

the business topic is,” she notes, “whether that is a particular team-based issue that the mentoring is addressing, broader life skills or how to network.”

DIVERSITY’S DIVIDEND

If done right, mentoring can be priceless and lead to new ideas, which she says is where the diversity element comes into play. When people from different backgrounds and career levels are brought together and empowered, she believes it will create a meaningful teaching environment that heightens and escalates innovation. Whether it’s in-person, remote, or hybrid, she says that type of setting within the workplace must feel like everyone has an equal stake.

At the same time, Niblack believes it’s imperative for leaders to protect the health and wellbeing of their employees both in and outside of the workplace. Another key ingredient to successful workforce development is developing a culture that places a premium on giving back to the local community.

For example, her firm sponsored during the pandemic a virtual Toys for Tots campaign with the United States Marine Corps. “It’s fun to get the Santa list from the kids,” she reports, adding that providing these opportunities fosters a sense of corporate pride.

Niblack has made an effort to informally enhance her level of candor with employees in building a culture of caring, which sometimes includes showing vulnerability. This has enabled her to build on trust and strengthen workplace bonds, which ties into recruiting, mentoring and succession planning. With regard to the last point, she says investing in youth will keep succession pathways clear and establish leadership pipelines.

“We have had to treat this as a business issue that needs a lot of attention and resolution, and love and care,” she explains.

MATCH-BASED RECRUITING

Developing the best possible workforce pre-dates any hiring. Match-based recruiting that spells out in great detail what’s required in a specific position is

essential for business success, according to Niblack. It’s also critical that leaders secure employee buy-in by learning what makes the workforce happy and drives motivation at both the individual and group level. In addition, expectations for successful performance must be set – a conversation that should come easy for leaders who are committed to being more responsive to the needs of their employees.





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“The more I share at the very beginning with a prospective candidate, the better they serve us,” she says,

adding that connecting with employees on an emotional level allows for a more personal touch that will improve productivity and retention.

Niblack passionately believes that a diverse team with broader life experiences help companies seed new ideas, execute their strategy and better serve customers. Leaders who demonstrate compassion, empathy and equity will be the beneficiaries of a more inclusive and resilient workforce, she points out. More diverse input from an inclusive workforce also fosters cross-collaboration, drives communication and a higher level of product or service innovation. Another discovery of hers is that it drives operational efficiency, which may appear to be contrary to what people thought in the past.

Gathering together 10 people from different departments to solve a particular business issue never would have happened earlier in her career. And yet today she finds herself consistently pursuing that approach, whether it's in-person or remote, and the end results are dynamic. “Technology allows us to do that anywhere in

the country,” she says.

Noting how Corporate America has experienced a complete rebirth during the pandemic, Niblack says extreme flexibility and heightened responsiveness are required in an increasingly competitive marketplace as leaders strive to understand an evolving economy. She notes that strong connectivity across all stakeholders is necessary as organizations use data and evidence-based practices to gain efficiency and remove barriers to professional development.

With as many as 41% of employees nationwide seeking new employment opportunities, according to Microsoft's 2021 Work Trend Index, Niblack believes

that employee turnover has affected everyone in the self-insurance community.

“As the Great Resignation continues to impact the labor market, particularly the health care industry, it is imperative that leaders adapt to facilitate positive change within their organizations,” she suggests.

Ms. Niblack will be moderating the workforce development session at the SIIA Crowdsourcing Forum Dec 6-8th. Please visit www.siiia.org for more information and registration. ■

Bruce Shutan is a Portland, Oregon-based freelance writer who has closely covered the employee benefits industry for more than 30 years.

