Preparing Today’s Youths for Tomorrow’s Workplace

By Ann Pace

Young people bring a variety of strengths to the workforce, including creativity, adaptability, technology savvy, and global awareness. Today’s leadership and job skills development programs offer opportunities across the pipeline to cultivate these competencies in tomorrow’s talent.
ASTD’s 2012 skills gap white-paper, *Help Wanted, Skills Lacking: Why the Mismatch in Today’s Economy?* defines a skills gap as a “significant gap between an organization’s current abilities and the skills it needs to achieve its goals. It is the point at which an organization can no longer grow or remain competitive because it cannot fill critical jobs with employees who have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities.”

In an August 2012 ASTD member survey, 84 percent of respondents indicate that there is a skills gap in their organizations. Industry-specific middle- and high-skills gaps are prevalent, specifically in manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields. Additionally, employers are observing a lack of critical soft skills such as communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. More than half (54 percent) of survey respondents rank leadership or executive-level skills as the number one soft skills gap in their organizations.

**Leadership competencies for the future workforce**

Leadership development is a standing priority on organizations’ human capital agendas, and these growing skills concerns only compound the need to find and prepare talent sooner than later. According to the report *Expanding the Leadership Equation: Developing Next-Generation Leaders*—based on a survey of business, government, not-for-profit, and education leaders by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)—90 percent of the 462 global respondents believe...
that leadership development should start before age 18, with 50 percent choosing elementary school age or earlier. Nearly all respondents (97 percent) think development should begin by age 21.

The study identifies the competencies that are most important now and compares them with those revered 20 years ago and those seen as critical in the next decade. Self-motivation and discipline, effective communication, learning agility, self-awareness, and adaptability are the top five competencies that employers look for in youths entering the workforce today. Two decades ago, technical mastery, self-motivation and discipline, confidence, effective communication, and resourcefulness topped the list.

As for the future? Adaptability, effective communication, learning agility, multicultural awareness, self-motivation and discipline, and collaboration will be in high demand. Joel Wright, director of early leadership development for CCL’s Leadership Beyond Boundaries team, believes these competencies speak to today’s increasingly interdependent, global, and diverse workforce. “The list for the future points to the much more adaptive skills that cross all disciplines,” he says.

The survey also asked respondents what excites them about the generation entering the workforce. Employers most appreciate young employees’ comfort with technology and social networks for information and connectivity; creativity, openness, and fresh ideas; and multicultural and global awareness.

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In the global mindset workshop, participants learned strategies to develop global awareness, broaden their perspective of other cultures, and explore ways to operate effectively in a global work environment. Students brought the results of their GlobeSmart assessments—a web tool that provides information on how to do business effectively in countries around the world—which they completed prior to attending ELS.

They discussed in small groups what it might be like to do business in other nations and the top considerations one should possess when developing a relationship with someone in another country. Summit leaders encouraged students to practically implement the ideas they learned to develop their global mindset—by joining an international organization, reading *The Economist*, or applying for a passport, for example.

“A key initiative of our early identification strategy is to provide lifelong skills to future leaders,” says Laurie Brady, Ernst & Young’s Americas campus recruiting leader, assurance, and global strategy. “We believe having a global mindset is critical to being successful in today’s inclusive workforce. ... If we can provide our students with those skills early in the game, we’re providing them with a strong foundation and setting them up for success.”

In its second year, ELS introduces students to Ernst & Young’s culture, people, and practices while providing development opportunities in critical leadership skills. The firm’s top leaders across the world support, attend, and even present at the summit, and it views the program as a means to fill its pipeline of interns and, subsequently, its future hires. Many participants receive internship offers for the following summer.

ELS exists to help cultivate prospective young leaders’ interest in the profession, and in Ernst & Young in general, and to establish long-lasting relationships with the youths early on. “This generation is tech-savvy,” Brady observes. “They have an amazing ability to multitask. They bring new ideas, are willing to try new things, and are globally open. It’s refreshing to Ernst & Young to have these students attend ELS each year.”

Such leadership development programs are not uncommon in large global organizations such as the “Big Four” international accounting and professional services firms (Ernst & Young, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, and KPMG). The content and focus, however, are what differentiate these leading programs.

Brady explains that ELS’s curriculum and agenda have helped to foster a globally inclusive mindset. She adds: “If other organizations want to win the war for top talent, they need to get in the game early in the students’ academic lifestyle.”

Certainly this assertion corroborates CCL’s recent research. However, Ellen Van Velsor, senior fellow at CCL, says that employers are concerned that many young people in the workforce today aren’t getting the kind of development they need within their organizations as they enter the workforce. “The youth leadership development programs in high school and college are only affecting a small percentage of the entire young workforce; it’s not happening for the wide portion of youths.”

Perhaps this explains why 84 percent of respondents to CCL’s survey say that all youths—not just high potentials—should be receiving leadership development in high school and college. “This shows a shift in how people think about leadership—how it’s going from a positional and hierarchical-based model to a much
more collaborative model that requires many people to contribute,” Wright says. “I like to think of the data as a signal that there’s a huge opportunity for corporations to partner with educational institutions for a mutually beneficial effort.”

The role of the pipeline
Collaboration between business and higher education is essential to effective talent development that also targets current workforce needs. “It is incumbent upon the entire pipeline to identify job openings and skills needs and work together to meet these deficiencies,” according to ASTD’s recent skills gap report. The whitepaper identifies four stakeholders that comprise this pipeline: government, private sector businesses and industry associations, educational and training institutions, and not-for-profit intermediaries.

The University of California-Washington Center (UCDC) is a multicampus residential, instructional, and research center in Washington, D.C., that works with the local marketplace to provide leadership, job, and life skills opportunities for students attending the University of California. Each semester, approximately 270 students from nine of the university’s 10 campuses live and take classes at the UCDC facility while interning at local organizations. Students undergo a rigorous interview process before being selected for the 11- to 14-week program, and then attend further orientation sessions on résumé and cover letter creation, personal branding, and interview skills.

“For about 25 percent of the students, this is the first time they are applying for a professional opportunity,” says Chantal Quintero, a program administrator and senior summer session administrator at UCDC. “Getting all of their personal documents in order is a challenging experience, but rewarding.”

In addition to career development skills, students gain awareness of general workplace skills—such as building interpersonal relationships with colleagues and the dynamics of working with a manager—as well as job-specific considerations. About half of the students who attend UCDC have a background in political science. Other popular areas of study include history, economics, international relations, communications, and environmental studies.

The internship component comprises 50 percent of the program. UCDC works closely with many federal agencies and U.S. Congress, and some students work at not-for-profits and think tanks.

The academic component of UCDC’s program takes place at the center. Students attend small, discussion-oriented classes taught by University of California faculty and local subject matter experts. All students are required to attend a mandatory weekly research seminar; themes include the presidency, research methodology, media and communications, and Congress.

Of course UCDC is not the only institution of its kind in Washington, D.C. For example, New York University recently opened a facility in the nation’s capital. The Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars acts as a clearinghouse of sorts that serves hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States and other countries by providing opportunities for students to work and learn in Washington, D.C., and London for academic credit.

“We estimate there are 40 to 50 programs similar to ours in the city that are being run from universities across the nation,” Quintero explains. “We’re all driven by the same mission: to offer experiential learning and help students develop skills to be productive workers and successful adults.”

Development for the disadvantaged
Many of the existing leadership development, career advancement, and learning opportunities offered by corporations such as Ernst & Young and higher education institutions such as UCDC focus on advantaged, high-potential youths. In an effort to target less advantaged young people, some not-for-profit organizations cater their programs to the needs of this population.

CCL’s Leadership Beyond Boundaries

What excites leaders most about the next generation?

- Their comfort and skill with technology and social networks for information or connectivity
- They are creative, open, and bring fresh ideas
- Their multicultural and global awareness and tolerance of difference
- They are adaptable, learning-oriented, and used to the pace of change
- Their confidence and willingness to take a stand and challenge the status quo
- Their energy, enthusiasm, dedication, and work ethic
- They are collaborative and team-oriented, and work across boundaries
- Their strong sense of ethics, service-oriented leadership, and desire to make a difference

Source: Expanding the Leadership Equation: Developing Next-Generation Leaders, Center for Creative Leadership, 2012
initiative, launched in 2006, is one of those programs. It works to make high-quality leadership development affordable and accessible to all people around the globe by creating lower cost leadership development programs, tools, and models that can be offered via non-government organizations, educational agencies, community and government organizations, and programs designed explicitly to serve youths.

One of these programs serves students from rural North Carolina, many of whom are first-generation college students. The program is supported by North Carolina’s Golden LEAF Foundation, which promotes economic development in rural, economically distressed, and tobacco-dependent regions of the state. Students attend colleges across the state and, in cohorts, participate in a leadership development program delivered by CCL. The program includes leadership training and stipend support for summer internships, and local jobs for the young people who live in economically indigent areas. “These students really benefit from leadership development and feel empowered that they can do more than they believed there were capable of,” Wright says.

What about the workplace?
Every organization, regardless of size, industry, or position in the workplace can get involved in developing its young leaders today. Cross-generational mentoring and coaching are practical and inexpensive development approaches that are gaining increasing popularity in many organizations.

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What concerns leaders most about the next generation?

- Their unjustified or unrealistic sense of entitlement, and need for instant gratification and affirmation
- They lack the ability to communicate effectively face-to-face, and are overdependent on technology
- They lack a strong work ethic; focus, commitment, and drive; and self-motivation
- They lack learning opportunities (for example, mentoring, positive role models, and training) adequate to the future challenges they will face
- They need decision-making skills, long-term perspective, and the ability to understand complexity
- They lack a strong sense of values, ethics, and social responsibility
- They lack reflection, self-awareness, and maturity
- They are overconfident and not open to input or feedback—their view is the only view

Source: Expanding the Leadership Equation: Developing Next-Generation Leaders, Center for Creative Leadership, 2012

The technology-savvy, adaptable, and globally aware generation entering the workforce has much to teach its more experienced colleagues—and even managers. On the other hand, older generations in the workforce can share a great deal with younger workers as far as career direction, life skills, performance feedback, and ethical leadership.

While most organizations are using mentorship practices, Wright explains that they’re not being used as much to increase the future talent pipeline. “For example, there’s a rich opportunity for young workers to mentor those in high school or college,” he says.

According to Expanding the Leadership Equation, “Mentor training can help people gain self-awareness and skills to be effective, regardless of whether they are a young person mentoring an older person or vice versa. Our suggestion is that each individual in such a partnership see him or herself as the learner—in both mentor and mentee roles at various times in the relationship.”

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