
USING MICROLEARNING MODULES IN AN INTEGRATED TALENT ACQUISITION FRAMEWORK TO ENHANCE CORPORATE TALENT MANAGEMENT PROCESS

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Introduction – the changing nature of work sets new challenges for learning

The constant change and diversification of modern society are shaping demand for products and services, and the expectations of clients in many businesses/fields. Many traditional jobs and work functions either disappear or change in nature (often to more complex). In many operational positions employees must manage a wider range of issues and responsibilities. For example, gas stations are transforming into integrated energy markets where petrol sales only represent a part of the whole offer. The station's function might include a full range of food products, catering, postal services, energy solutions (e.g. solar panels), car repair and maintenance services – all under the responsibility of customer service staff. Such new work roles require a wide range of knowledge and expertise (e.g. everything from car-related technical issues to customer service and cleaning) that job seekers seldom have. This change raises the bar for employers to find suitable employees with the required skills who are also motivated and committed to work in the longer term. Employees seldom have a realistic picture about positions they apply for, which may lead to disappointment or even inability to perform all the required work tasks.

In a wider socio-economic perspective, the changing labour market faces a challenge of how to match available jobs with suitable workers. It also needs to discover how to fill in knowledge and skill gaps that prevent individuals from performing well in available jobs. Employers try to manage this by implementing various talent management practices and tools. *Talent acquisition* is a term used to define processes that “aim to assess critical talent needs, determine performance profiles, source and screen candidates, and then hire and onboard people” (Bersin, 2010). Despite many efforts to make the process more efficient and smooth, companies often have to invest massive amounts of time and resources to fill available jobs with suitable employees. One Nordic energy company receives about 10,000 applications every year to fill 750 positions that become available. Very few employees stay in their position for long periods. Employee turn-over is high, causing a lot of extra work for employers in recruitment and causing many employees to end their work contract sooner than they had planned.

Globalized engagement can affect highly skilled and low-skilled workers differently. Changes in demand then have an impact on the wages of high- and low-skilled workers (as well as the

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ratio between the two). In this respect, globalization affects workers differently based on their skill endowment (Feenstra & Hanson, 1995). Upgrading towards technologically and skill-intensive jobs may be the preferred option in the long run to address skills gaps and the impact of vocational change and transformation. But whether or not this is feasible will depend on the productive capacity of an economy or sector. In this respect, policies to enhance technological capabilities, technology transfer and the development of skills, including on-the-job training, are essential (ILO, 2013). This in itself challenges traditional models of learning and educational provision.

Context Learning (Context) is Finland's leading company focusing on Learning Experience Design, Development of Digital Learning Solutions, E-learning Content Development and Digital Curriculum Design. Since 2006, Context has designed and developed educational solutions and digital learning programs, and provided consultancy services in digital learning projects for more than 200 client organizations in private and public sectors. ChangeLearning is an alliance founded by Context and its Irish partner Universal Learning Systems. The alliance provides added value to quality training and strategic organizational development consultancy services in diversity management, health, inclusion and organizational transformation. Context and its alliance partners work on the global scale to provide workplace organizations with solutions and insights to help them excel in the rapidly changing business environment.

Further exploration of the problem and potential solutions

Within Context's corporate client base the increasing challenges of finding a suitable workforce with required skills and competences was identified some years ago. It is well known among HR professionals that in most cases the first few months of new employment define to large extent how successful and committed new employees will be in their new work (Hogan, 2015). After discussing potential reasons and solutions, Context established a project with its corporate clients and alliance partners to design a framework that provides solutions for HR professionals to enhance the acquisition process of talents and supports in the first months of employment.

So far, the process had been managed mostly manually. There had been significant mismatch between the recruitment process for new employees and how well they engage with their new work. With the large volumes of applicants and open positions the coordination of the process has been very labour intensive. One of the most critical problems to be solved was how to extend the time new employees stayed in their new position. This is one of the root causes why companies spend so much effort and resources on talent acquisition. It was discovered that the problem had to do with candidates' lack of understanding about the work tasks they were applying to. Training would therefore play a key role in addressing this challenge.

Defining the framework

The framework design was to provide a means for job seekers to learn about the company, the work in general and about work task related skills and required competences. Another aim was to find ways to automate those parts of the process not requiring manual administration. The

motivation, readiness and suitability of candidates was to be assessed during the process. The framework would provide efficient and easy to use ways for HR managers and those responsible for recruitment. The whole process needed to be as transparent as possible to applicants. Discussions with employers revealed that job seekers value fast recruitment processes. The aim was to complete the whole process from first contact until recruitment decision in 7 days.

Talent acquisition is an enormously complex and interconnected part of talent management, consisting of the following elements:

- Sourcing (of potential workforce);
- Candidate pools;
- Assessment (of work candidates, their capabilities and quality);
- Employer brand;
- Recruiting;
- Selection;
- Onboarding;
- Talent mobility (Bersin, 2010; Hogan, 2015).

The needs identified among Context clients pinpointed the importance of candidate assessment against performance measures to help improve sourcing of employees, the recruitment phase and to support early stages of employment. The role of training in its many purposes and forms (induction, role/function-specific, on-the-job, recurrent, face-to-face, blended, online etc.) was considered critical. It was included as an integrated component in the framework. Due to large numbers of users and the many benefits of well-designed e-learning modules, microlearning modules (micromodules) were applied as the primary learning instrument.

As Cable, Gino, and Staats (2013) state, studies on employee engagement demonstrate that encouraging new employees to apply their personal strengths increases their commitment levels towards the employer and increase the likelihood that they commit to working longer in the company. To allow this, it was necessary to foster dialog between job candidates and the employers throughout the process. In this dialog, employers needed not only to be open to candidates' expression of personal interests and strengths, but to encourage them to state how they feel they can best contribute in their desired work role.

The Talent Acquisition Funnel

The funnel model can be used to describe a process where large masses are targeted with a message to raise their interest and then attracted towards a specific goal or decision. The purchase funnel is a typical example – it “describes the theoretical customer journey from the moment of first contact with your brand to the ultimate goal of a purchase” (Marketing-made-simple.com, 2009). Eventually, the aim is to close sales with customers. We are using the funnel model to define the process of acquiring suitable employees from a mass of potential candidates which may be interested to work in the company (Figure 1).

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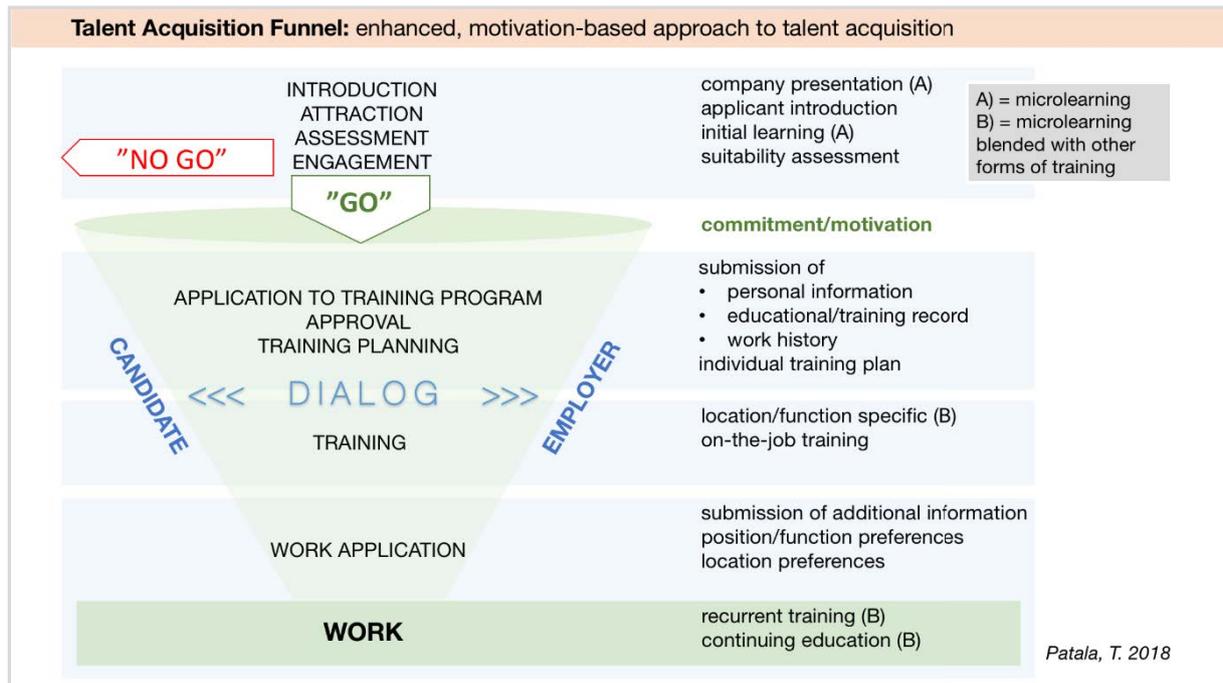


Figure 1. The Talent Acquisition Funnel

During the first phase, employers introduced to the objective of raising the interest of candidate employees. The candidates are provided with information about the company and they access initial training modules (micromodules) that teach basics about the business and operations of the company and about possible work roles. Their capabilities to relate with this information and motivation to learn are being assessed as well as their suitability for available work position(s). The primary aim of this phase is to create engagement towards the employer and the work in question within those candidates considered suitable and capable for working in the company in specific positions. At this stage, it is important to give a realistic picture of the future work to the applicant to prevent candidates from applying to a job that does not meet their expectations. Through these steps undertaken by candidates, greater levels of commitment and motivation can be achieved and demonstrated.

Candidates who have passed the first stage are provided with an opportunity to participate in further trainings where more personalized training plans are designed for them. These are based on the information candidates have submitted regarding their personal competences, experience (work/study) and preferences.

Once candidates engage with the training program they are given the opportunity to apply to work positions/functions they desire and they can choose locations (e.g. department/division, office, geographic region), where they want to work. Work applications are processed transparently – persons in charge of recruitment are allowed to book candidates for interview and the status of each applicant is visible to all until a work contract is signed. Once the work-relationship has been formed a range of activities will follow based on the company's talent management strategy to ensure a successful and long-lasting career in the company and to support the employee's personal development.

Benefits and added value of using micromodules

There are several reasons why micromodules are used as an integrated part of the talent acquisition funnel. Selection of appropriate learning methods should be based on understanding about learning objectives, expected levels of motivation within the target group and understanding about learners’ learning preferences and readiness to learn the topics in question.

We have implemented a model to align the Types of Learning Interventions with Desired Learning Outcomes (Figure 2). The model is based on Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956).

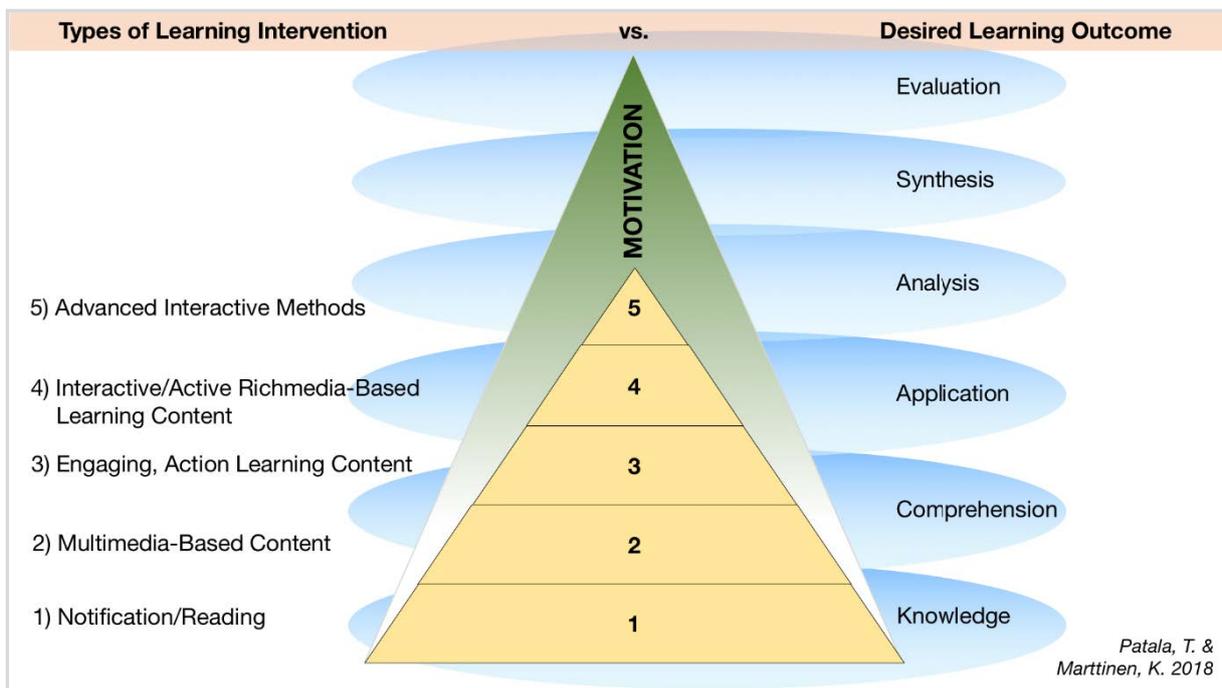


Figure 2. Types of Learning Intervention vs. Desired Learning Outcome

The model is useful for learning designers to choose the appropriate level of intervention for each learning challenge and further define methodologies to be used. Learner engagement, interest and motivation have been pointed out in educational research as the key drivers for efficient learning (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Mikkonen et al., 2009; Mäkinen et al., 2004). If the initial motivation to achieve the learning objectives is high and “internal” we can expect better learning outcomes with less intervention. When designing learning for larger groups we should, however, expect that not all learners are self-motivated, and apply interventions that also address their motivation. Considering the challenge employers face with high levels of employee turnover, motivational issues are considered critical for the whole initiative. The process aims to establishing realistic pictures about the nature and variety of work tasks open for candidates and to provide new employees with concrete supports to acquire missing skills and capacities.

The decision to use online micromodules as the primary training instrument was based on the fact that, as Hogle (2018) states, micromodules have been found extremely useful “in giving workers easy-to-digest topic skills that they can immediately apply and change behaviors”. In

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this increasingly complicated employment setting, the provision of precise learning modules that establish understanding on the essentials of new work and provide skills that can be applied immediately, was considered critical. Microlearning is also known to create about 50% more engagement than traditional online learning among employees that participate in corporate training programs (Westfall, 2016).

As studies prove that a simulated environment can be highly engaging for students (Bulger et al. 2008; pp.138-140), a simulative approach to multimedia presentation is applied when learning these skills. According to Smith (2003) learning for the workplace is best facilitated when it is designed in the context of actual workplace problems. We use interactive/active methods such as simulations that take place in the actual working environment and situations (illustrated by video and photo-based animation) to enable a contextual learning experience. To maximize engagement, it is essential provide a personalized experience. Micromodules are extremely useful in this regard. By mapping the required skills and capabilities per work task and matching them with candidate profiles, candidates are guided through micromodules that complement their existing skills and capabilities. “Unnecessary learning” of topics that candidates already master is not required.

Conclusions

During the writing on this paper, one of Context’s clients, a Nordic provider of energy services and solutions, is piloting a talent acquisition program which based on the framework described earlier. The first observations made based on the pilot, raise the issues of improved efficiency of scanning, identifying and selecting of potential new employees for the company. The initial process from raising attention among potential candidates until the “GO” decision is semi-automated - meaning that full manual review of applications and applicant information is not needed. While both manual and automated methods are combined to make the matching process (employee candidate vs. open position) as smooth and efficient as possible, we should expect more precise outcomes and more committed employees who prefer to remain in the position for longer. The old model of recruitment did not give applicants sufficient understanding about the work tasks they were to apply, so many decisions were made based on inadequate information.

In the wider employment context, the experiences gained from the pilot will be very interesting. As the whole, work life and careers are changing the same challenges we are addressing now are faced in many companies and fields. Challenged by the early success of this initiative, Context is examining the potential of extending the initiative to address talent acquisition challenges in cluster-specific and national contexts. The role of advanced technological tools and e-learning has also become a key focus in the literature and research undertaken internationally. The use of advanced technologies powerfully reinforces learning for adults and provides a rich resource in terms of techniques and methodologies for teaching staff and facilitators. Parallel to this macro-economic context is the growing impact of the emerging digital world and the contours of employment it is shaping. This new, emerging digital world has created a range of new

professions and skillsets, which are literally and figuratively unprecedented. In other words, these new professions cannot be studied in advance. But they represent a range of professional skills, behaviours and attitudes that professionals are obliged to learn in a hands-on manner, in dynamic and evolving job configurations.

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