Rana Florida
CEO, The Creative Class Group & Author, Upgrade

10 Simple Ways to Upgrade Your Workforce

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Many employers spend millions of dollars to upgrade their technology and software but skimp when it comes to providing their employees with formal skills development, apprenticeships, on-the-job learning, ongoing education, and other programs. They're making a big mistake. Employees are the lifeblood of any organization -- and the skills they need are constantly changing. Low employee engagement not only hurts an organization from a customer service standpoint; it increases the likelihood of turnover, which levies steep costs in both time and money.

Even service organizations can benefit from having a well-trained, well-informed workforce. Tapping and harnessing the creative inputs of every worker -- not just sales people but cashiers, not just waiters but busboys and dishwashers -- is key. You're already paying them to do a job. Why not educate them so they can do it better? It doesn't have to cost you a lot of money -- and the dividends you'll gain are incalculable.

Here are some easy low cost initiatives that any employer can put into practice immediately.

1. Start a Library: Books not only encourage professional development but spark debate and dialogue. A book sharing program is a great way to recommend readings for your team--or perhaps you should think about building a library of books that motivate, inspire, engage, and inform. Zappos promotes growth and learning through the "family library" located in its front lobby; employees can check out all books for free.

2. Listen to Experts: From TED talks which have featured author Dan Pink on motivation to Sir Ken Robinson on education and creativity, these 18 minute lecture performances on "ideas worth spreading" have attracted global audiences in the millions; to clips from SXSW or IDEO, all can easily be found online. Hook up a big screen TV in a gathering area or break room and feature a new talk daily. The top 20 Ted talks can be found here.

3. Job Shadowing: Pick at least one day a year when associates can choose who they'd like to shadow for the day. Getting a new perspective can be an eye opening experience. Suggest cross-discipline shadowing.

4. Professional Development/Ongoing Education: From major conferences to community engagement events, association guest speakers, and town halls, professional development events are everywhere. Suggest that each employee select and attend one of them each quarter. Offer

tuition reimbursement for courses or applicable degrees.

5. Encourage Information Flow: Share information, case studies and articles about innovation, creativity and leadership. Some great websites include *[Quartz](#)*, *[Business Insider](#)*, *[The Atlantic](#)*, *The New York Times Corner Office*, *[Fast Company Co. Exist](#)*, *[Big Think](#)*. Encourage social media. If your business is in food preparation, encourage your associates to get on [Twitter](#) and start following top chefs, culinary experts, food bloggers and more. If your business is healthcare, encourage them to follow Twitter streams from doctors, practitioners, and newsletters. The more information they have coming at them, the more they'll learn.

6. Peer-to-Peer Problem Resolution: Too often employees just 'report in' their problems. Encourage them to consult with each other rather than kick all their problems upstairs. After they've met, they should present their managers with a list of potential solutions.

7. Empower Ideas: Make everyone a marketer and encourage new sales approaches and tactics. Offer a small incentive -- perhaps a gift certificate to a new restaurant -- to encourage group feedback and new ideas.

8. Assess the Competition: Encourage employees to research, visit and tour competing organizations wherever possible. After each visit, have the associate report on what the competition does better and how they can improve.

9. Make a Leader out of a Follower: Make everyone boss for a day. Set priorities in advance and set them free to deliver results.

10. Set Dream Projects: Encourage each employee to devise a dream project--and then deliver on it, from stage A through Z. They should involve the entire organization, then report back the results. This promotes strategic thinking and long term results.

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