

Going Back To School On Your Company's Dime

Corporate Tuition Assistance Programs Are Growing In Popularity.

How To Capitalize On The Trend And Find The Right Program For You.

(NAPSA)—What is it like to be a hot commodity? American workers should know. With a jobless rate at a near-record low, companies are competing for highly skilled employees. At the same time, a Deloitte study predicts that by 2020, the skills we use at work will have just a five-year shelf life.

That puts employees in the driver's seat. And that's why one of the biggest shifts in 2018 in corporate benefits is leaning toward continuing education. Making education available to employees positively affects a company's bottom line, and has a great impact on employees through performance, job satisfaction and advancement opportunities. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers 2011 Student Survey, employees report that tuition reimbursement is one of the top three most desirable corporate benefits.

Now is the time to explore opportunities with your employer to obtain new certifications, a first-time degree or advanced degree.

That's what Alex Myers from Portland, Oregon did. Myers is a human resources professional with Quality Custom Distribution, a division of Golden State Foods that provides distribution services to customers across the U.S. In her company's HR generalist role, she's tasked with ensuring the employees in her division are a happy and healthy extension of the company through stellar customer service. She'll willingly admit that prior to taking advantage of her company's education benefit to go back to school, she lacked the education she saw in the junior employees around her.

"I knew personally that I had a younger crowd coming up behind me, and I didn't have any qualifications, and it felt really odd," Myers says. As an HR professional who is tasked with nurturing a positive workplace culture and developing employee skill sets, she knew she needed to take her own advice.

"I was terrified. Going back to school was one of the hardest decisions I've made in my adult life," Myers explains, especially as she now splits her time between being a full-time professional and mom.

A solution for students like Myers who balance a career, family responsibilities and other life commitments while pursuing a degree is Competency-Based Education, also known as CBE



Many firms find it pays to invest in re-educating their employees.

programs. CBE is a growing method of education that allows students to move at their own pace through curriculum, taking advantage of existing work experience and knowledge to advance more quickly—only spending time learning what they don't yet know.

Because of its direct ability to bridge the skills gap and provide busy adults with a program uniquely tailored to them, CBE has exploded in popularity. Today, there are more than 500 CBE programs nationwide and many are tapped by companies as part of corporate benefit programs providing tuition assistance, including the Brandman MyPath program that Myers enrolled in through Brandman University. The Brandman MyPath curriculum has attracted partnerships with more than 100 corporate partners, including Discover Financial Services, The Walt Disney Company and Walmart, because the curriculum is representative of real-world knowledge, skills and abilities, not just theory.

"I looked at the Brandman MyPath" program...and found it was designed for those of us who work 40 hours a week and then some, who are raising families, and want the flexibility and the control that it gives you," says Myers. She is pursuing her bachelor's degree in Business Administration. "When we can tie our learning to our reality and what we live each day it becomes something tangible. You can appreciate it more and realize the depth and value you are gaining from your growth and development through knowledge."

The return on investment came pretty early in Myers' education, when her manager recognized her new skill sets and promoted her to a larger facility in Portland. There, Myers puts her learning into practice at the "bigger location with more associates to take care of. I pounced on the opportunity to make a move."

"I've seen her develop from being someone who's really passionate about the business—that's just innate and who she is—but once coupled with the education, it's just taken her to another place," says Melissa Vieira, senior regional human resources manager for Quality Custom Distribution and Myers' manager.

And Myers agrees. "Continuing my education and quest to obtain a degree has opened up new opportunities through making me a more valued intellectual asset to my company and probably adding to my future career opportunities that not even I am aware of yet."

The environment for corporate "retraining" or "uptraining" is ripe. A 2016 Lumina Foundation study found that for every dollar the participating companies invested into its education reimbursement program, it generated an estimated \$1.44 in additional savings.

Now is the time for employees to explore opportunities and talk with their employer. Here are three suggested steps:

- 1. Identify your benefits with your HR Department representative.** Do some investigative work to uncover if your company has an established education program and what tuition assistance benefits are offered.

- 2. Determine your personal goals.** How do your personal educational goals benefit your employer, now and in the long term? Ensuring your goals are aligned with company goals can help you feel comfortable approaching your manager, and also allow you to clearly lay out how your education can benefit the company.

- 3. Research educational programs that will help you accomplish your goals.** Work with your company to find a degree program that provides you learning outcomes relevant to your job. Also consider the modalities—can you make it to a physical classroom at designated days and times? Do you need to attend remotely, with the pace set by the professor? Or would an online, self-paced, competency-based education program that meets the needs of working professionals who need to juggle work/life balance suit your needs? CBE can be a thoughtful and responsible option that won't take you away from your responsibilities as a full-time employee.