

Individual development plans bond employees and their organization as they pursue mutual goals.



podcast

IDPs: Talent Development's SUPERGLUE

BY PAULA ASINOF

A friend of mine recently told me that a large, well-known company gives each employee a development budget, and employees can mostly spend it on whatever they want. I wonder—does that work well? How does the company gauge the effectiveness of the significant amount of money that it is spending in this fashion? Maybe company executives don't care. Even if employees love it, it doesn't seem like an effective way for the company to accomplish talent development goals that are aligned with its long-term needs and strategies.

Instead, adding a straightforward process for creating individual development plans (IDPs) provides a framework to ensure that employee satisfaction and long-term business plans are both achieved. A comprehensive system of IDPs is like superglue—it can hold people and organizations together securely in pursuit of common goals for engagement, development, and retention.

IDPS ARE USEFUL REGARDLESS OF THE ENTERPRISE'S APPROACH AND SYSTEMS FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT.

A vehicle for career management

There are three primary goals of an IDP. The first is to ensure an employee maintains the current level of job proficiency through continued talent development activities. The second is to chart a career path by identifying new knowledge, skills, and abilities to pursue, as well as learning activities to reach goals. The third is to support the organization's goals and talent requirements.

In the evolution of building strong contributors to organizations, approaches that blend individual responsibility for careers with company needs and interests become paramount. Using the IDP as a foundation, organizations with a commitment to leadership development and team performance can create a process that is meaningful to employees, encourages support from management, and drives implementation. In addition, a comprehensive model can incorporate facilitated group sessions conducted by professionals who conduct training, train-the-trainer programs, program rollouts, or career coaching.

A tool for creating internal bench strength

Job-by-job replacement planning for long-term talent needs is dead. Creating a list of employees for each specific job is out of date. It has been supplanted by the development of talent pools that create internal bench

strength aligned with anticipated company, industry, and market drivers. This approach acknowledges the uncertainty of future organizational needs and the availability of specific human resources.

Organizations have been investing in employee development for most of recorded history. In recent years, employee development often has failed to deliver on its promise. The initiatives that thrive, however, are those that focus on an actionable outcome rather than purely intellectual pursuits, take into account a full range of learning styles, and embed learning directly into individuals' day-to-day job responsibilities.

The IDP development process

There are four steps in an effective IDP process, resulting in an approved, actionable plan:

1. Align individual goals with the organization's business drivers and best leadership practices.
2. Evaluate those goals from the perspective of three major categories: business management, professional, and technical.
3. Identify specific development opportunities for focus during the year and the specific steps to accomplish them.
4. Obtain "next-level" buy-in and approval, as well as executive concurrence.

It is usually advantageous to have a program manager oversee the entire process to ensure that plans are completed and approved according to an agreed schedule. This individual also can serve as a point person for the leadership team, monitoring individual progress on plans and providing periodic reporting, perhaps quarterly, over the program timeframe, which is often one year.

At the end of the timeframe, the process is repeated, and plans are updated for the next cycle.

A successful approach combines front-end instruction about how to create a solid IDP, followed by facilitated small working groups. The efficiency built into this design is both cost effective and productive.

The program often can be conducted over a few days for a functional workgroup. The

targeted goal is for all program participants to have their IDP 80 percent complete when the session concludes. The remaining work on the plan includes only those things that cannot be completed during the working sessions.

For example, an individual may need to research specific development options to determine his specific applicability, cost, time, and availability. Another development activity, such as a rotational assignment, probably requires discussion and agreement by others. The plan then needs to be finalized and approved by management.

There are three additional benefits to this approach. First, using facilitated group sessions brings a trained facilitator or coach into the process. This person can guide the participants in their thinking, keep the momentum going so that the plans get substantial during the working sessions, and encourage collaboration and mutual support within the group. Second, small-group collaboration improves the quality of the individual plans. Participants receive real-time feedback from others who (usually) know them and their work environments. Finally, it provides a venue for

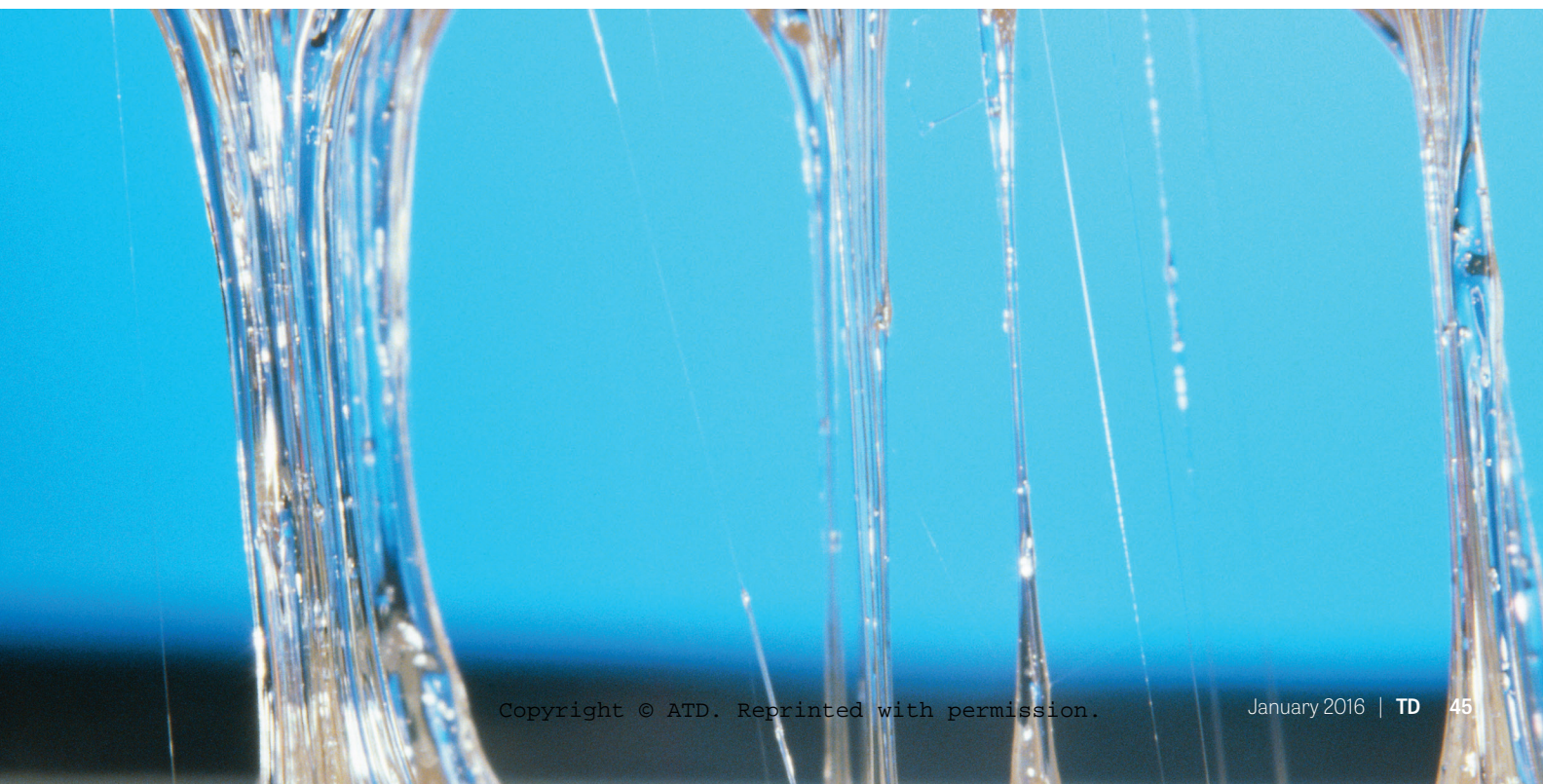
experiential learning and engagement that makes the learning personal rather than purely intellectual.

IDPs are useful regardless of the enterprise's approach and systems for talent management. They can be developed or maintained in several contexts:

- developed by an individual working personally with either an internal or external coach
- sponsored by the leader of a stand-alone workgroup or function
- complementary to, but not fully integrated with, existing talent management or performance appraisal systems—the resulting information may feed into the enterprise-level systems
- fully integrated with enterprise-wide talent management systems.

What makes a good IDP?

Three characteristics of an effective IDP are simplicity, clarity, and realism. Some IDP initiatives get derailed despite best intentioned efforts. Less successful programs are commonly characterized by:



THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT ARE LIMITLESS, BOUNDED ONLY BY IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY.

- too many areas of attention
- ambiguous language
- impractical activities (too expensive, too difficult, too time consuming, resources not available)
- no real engagement by the employee in the plan or the outcome
- no next-level buy-in and management engagement.

Development Options

Education and training

- Classroom training
- Degree or certification program
- Conferences and professional meetings
- Self-study
- Computer-based instruction
- Reviewing and analyzing examples
- Structured interviews with experts
- Reading or research

On-the-job experiences

- On-the-job training
- Shadowing
- Rotational assignments

Coaching

- Internal mentoring by manager, peers, or trained coaches
- External coaching

Development-focused work assignments

- Special projects
- Targeted assignments
- Taskforce participation
- Internship/Apprenticeship

Just do it

In building, rolling out, and fully implementing a simple, clear, and realistic IDP process, there is a dramatically higher probability of success.

The success of the IDP lies not only in the design of content, but also in the design of the form itself. If the form, which provides the foundation for an individual putting “pen to paper,” is challenging or overly complicated, it will create a large barrier to effective execution.

In addition, if the structure of the information ultimately displayed is confusing or difficult to follow, participants can become frustrated and abandon the process. Certainly that would limit the benefits to the company. The more the form facilitates good thinking, the more likely individuals will engage in developing their IDPs and successfully follow their plans. These guidelines will help keep the process on track:

- The IDP should be the result of thoughtful consideration. It is not a clerical form-completion exercise—more thinking and less writing.
- There is a limit to the number of meaningful development goals one person can handle at any given time—usually one to three significant items are sufficient and reasonable.
- Goals should be clearly summarized for easy reference.
- Details are relegated to a project plan broken down into meaningful chunks with milestones only at the level of detail required for accomplishing the goal.
- Clearly defined commitments from all parties, documented by signatures on the plan, reinforce the importance of development plans, support the individuals’ efforts, and help keep the momentum going.

Selecting development areas

The opportunities for development are limitless, bounded only by imagination and creativity. Opportunities span traditional education and training, on-the-job experiences,

coaching, and development-focused work assignments. And then there is “just do it”—much of the best learning comes from diving in and taking on a challenge.

The first step in selecting development areas is to brainstorm potential opportunities. It’s possible that there will be more than one activity to support a single development area—or that one activity will support more than one development area. It is worthwhile to consider both corporately mandated programs and training, as well as departmentally sponsored ones in making the selection.

Organizations, managers, and even individuals sometimes have a knee-jerk reaction that pursuing development options, no matter how attractive in theory, come with an unacceptable price tag. Fortunately, whatever an organization’s budget or available time for pursuing development activities, there are many options that are inexpensive and others that can be embedded with an individual’s normal responsibilities, limiting perceived nonproductive time.

Most businesspeople are familiar with the concept of gap analysis, which is a technique that identifies what steps need to be taken to move from the current state to the desired, future state. For the IDP, gap analysis provides a simple yet powerful way to determine meaningful and productive development activities. The key questions in an IDP gap analysis are:

- Where am I now?
- Where do I want to go? Who do I want to be?
- How will I get there?

Well-formed outcomes

There are several conditions that contribute to successfully achieving a goal. Together, they create what are called well-formed outcomes and provide an easy way to test a goal for its likelihood of being realized. With well-formed outcomes, the goal is stated in positive terms. Additional components include outcomes that:

- are initiated and maintained by the individual
- are testable with clear evidence of achievement

- preserve the positive aspects of the current situation
- are ecological, meaning they fit with other organizational and personal environments/systems.

Once the IDP has been developed, it can be evaluated by considering the conditions for a good plan:

- robustness—current, complete, substantive, congruency with career paths
- variety—multiple types of learning, address strengths as well as weaknesses, challenge, creativity
- accelerated development—timeframes for success
- clarity—specific, concrete
- consistent with business and future talent needs—human capital plans, business objectives, future roles.

An integral force

The emerging paradigm for developing talent is the blending of individual responsibility for careers with organization support for development. This is widely reflected in the business and academic literature, as well as the practices of leading organizations.

By creating internal bench strength through well-developed talent pools, companies are able to prepare for an uncertain future. With an actionable and repeatable IDP process that glues together individual development targets with organization goals, talent management can become an even more integral force in maintaining a competitive and robust business.

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