

Special Delivery: Learning at UPS

BY DANIEL MARGOLIS

Anne Schwartz delivers a workforce that is the complete package via a philosophy of experiential rotation and a strong emphasis on simulations.

Across the globe, they're ubiquitous — those classically styled brown trucks with drivers hopping in and out, getting packages to the right place on time. Delivering to over 220 countries, UPS covers a lot of ground, and it takes a lot of employees to do it — more than 415,000 in total, 44,000 of those managerial.

UPS boasts that it has been a learning organization for all of its 103-year history. Formal learning for the company, however, began in 1925, facilitated by one of its founders, Evert McCabe.

"He basically talked about self-leadership and how important it is to self-develop," said Anne Schwartz, vice president of global learning and development at UPS. "From that philosophy our entire leadership development goals and mission just flows."

It's a philosophy that stresses development through experiential rotation, and Schwartz is a prime example of that. Schwartz, who holds a bachelor's degree in social studies from Michigan

State University, started with UPS as a package driver in Detroit. "I drove a brown truck just like everybody else when they started," she said. "I didn't think when I came here 22 years ago that I was actually going to end up where I am today. That's a testimony to how we develop our people."

From that brown truck, Schwartz moved on to a position as an HR supervisor. From there, she moved to her first international assignment, working in Ontario, Canada, to help startup operations. Then she was on to HR manager positions in South Carolina, Kansas and Ohio, and then rotated to Atlanta in 2001, working with UPS' engineering, corporate

strategies, and mergers and acquisitions groups. In 2004, Schwartz moved to Asia with UPS' supply chain solutions business unit. She then moved back to Atlanta, where she's been in learning for more than two years.

According to Schwartz, it was this range of experience within the company that led her into learning — the plan was for her to take learning at UPS to an international level. "When I received the position, they told me, 'You've had rotations around the world, and you understand what happens in the international rotations and certainly the other business units. We'd like you to turn it into a global learning and development function, as opposed to a domestic one.'"

Amy Whitley, UPS' vice president of human resources, noted that such explanation of the end result of rotational development is crucial to learning at UPS. "We do believe strongly that there [are] huge benefits to having new experiences in a different country [or] a different location," she said. "But in the past, I don't know that we did the best job in explaining to people, 'OK, we're going to transfer you from New York to Arkansas, and here's what we want you to focus on and here's what we expect you to get out of this assignment; here's the duration of the assignment.' What we're going to have to do going forward is help people to understand and have greater visibility to career opportunities."

Get on the Truck

UPS developed a supervisor basic training school in 1962 and in 1968 followed up with a leadership development program, "where we take senior leadership and embed them in communities to learn about diversity and put them outside their comfort zone," Schwartz said.

DATA POINT

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In the 1990s, UPS shifted its supervisor basic training school from being job-specific to more skills-based and behavioral in focus. This proved so successful that it launched similarly modeled manager and executive leadership seminars.

In 2004, UPS began working on the Integrad training center. It wrote a grant proposal to the High Growth Job Training Initiative, operated by the U.S. Department of Labor, and was awarded a \$1.7 million grant in November 2005 to evaluate and redesign

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the training program for its drivers, with a focus on generational learning. What UPS learned during this process was surprising.

“We thought those younger generations wanted to learn everything on the computer,” Schwartz said. “What we actually found out is that they prefer to learn hands-on.”

So, working with a number of knowledge experts from universities such as Virginia Tech, Georgia Tech and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, UPS developed Integrad, a hands-on learning lab in Maryland, to train its drivers.

“[Integrad has] actual physical trucks in the building,” said Elizabeth Raspberry, public relations manager at UPS. “They’re not moving — they’re stationary; their engines have been stripped out.” But drivers are physically doing what they’ll later do on the job, “instead of in a classroom where it says, ‘Remember to hold the hand rail or remember to do this with this shelf or when you put the key in the ignition the next step is to do this.’ They’re actually physically on the truck, learning to do the seat belt, getting the hand rail, so they’re experiencing it and doing it.”

This means that UPS is able to start quantifying the effectiveness of its training immediately. “When the drivers use the technology that’s in the facility, it gives them real-time feedback,” Schwartz said.

This allows UPS to deploy drivers with full faith in their abilities and productivity. “One of the reasons we put in Integrad was we wanted drivers to fail earlier in the process rather than later when they were on the job,” Schwartz said. “And so we measured the turnover impact for that, the productivity of the drivers and how many stops per hour they were able to deliver as compared to the people who did not attend Integrad. Were they able to reduce injuries and accidents more often? And how much money would that save us [overall].”

According to Whitley, Integrad also demonstrated to UPS that it shouldn’t limit its experimental learning development in its application to specific age groups. “It’s not just the younger generation that learns best from hands-on experiential learning; it’s [everyone],” she said. “While people have different learning styles and preferences, everyone learns best if they can have a hands-on experience and then demonstrate it and go back and apply it and have that memorization.”

Same-Day Learning Delivery

A cornerstone of UPS’ development strategy is to promote from within, something Schwartz understandably champions. “That promotion from within policy allows UPSers like me to have this fabulous career and development opportunities around the globe,” she said.

But Whitley points out there may be drawbacks to this approach going forward. “While promotion from within is still our philosophy and will be the main driver of how we develop people, we’ll have to modify that as time goes on because of the demands of the marketplace and of the younger generation and dual-income earners,” she said.

To do so, Schwartz believes learning and development at UPS must stay relevant to the business itself.

“We have to be able to create learning and development programs that drive strategy execution, and

A cornerstone of UPS’ development strategy is to promote from within.


even after we develop the programs that do that, we have to measure the business impact of the development programs,” she said. “If you’re not really, as a function or as a profession, tied to that business strategy and delivering results, you risk becoming a commodity where you can outsource training. Because if you’re not really staying tied and you don’t know where the business is headed and you can’t measure that impact, then I might as well hire somebody

off the street who can come in and create training products and launch them.”

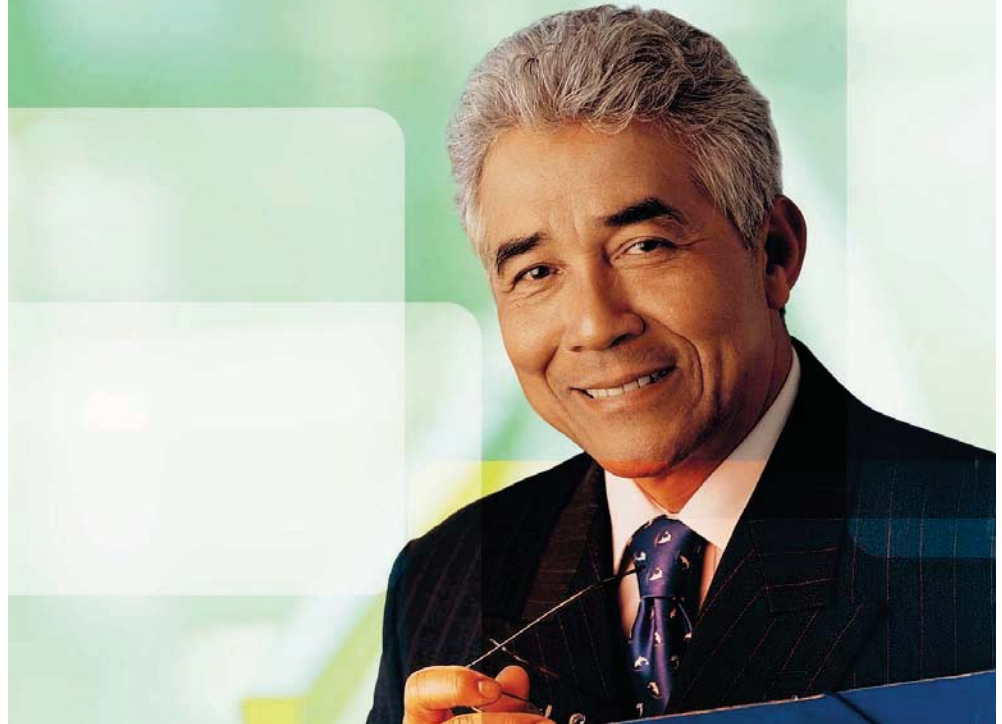
Whitley echoes this concern, reporting that in 2008, the company realized it was only getting 20 percent of its people through its instructor-led training. “We decided to change our whole model and move away from instructor-led training, which had been the cornerstone, and move more to just-in-time, on-demand learning utilizing technology,” she said.

This was misinterpreted by some within UPS. “It really was not correlated at all with the economy, but in 2009 the economy went south and people made that direct connection. So we worked very hard to help them understand we were not retrenching [or] retracting our efforts around learning — that we have a strong philosophy and believe in the importance of learning,” Whitley said.

Schwartz stressed the importance of making this clear, as well as the importance of continuing to ensure learning via human connection has a strong presence in the company, even if it doesn't necessarily lend itself to the bells and whistles of e-learning.

“Because of the shift away from the instructor-led training and how much technology is really being leveraged today, not only at UPS but everywhere, [we need] to make sure that our culture stays intact on the philosophy of how we develop our leaders through this legacy of partnership and mentorship,” she said. “That to me is one of the biggest things that we have to be careful about as we move toward the future and we leverage all these technologies. You can never get rid of that face-to-face, ‘let me tuck you under my arm and coach you and council you and develop you along the way’ [approach]. After 22 years, I'm really a product of that.” 

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