



Accelerated change?

The response is accelerated learning

Introduction

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Almost all of us remember at least one disruptive child in our elementary school class that stormed out of the room because he or she didn't want to learn. But, do you ever remember seeing someone storm out of the room because they weren't learning fast enough? Today's businesses are under pressure. The Big Shift, fueled by ongoing advances in core digital technologies (computing, storage, and bandwidth) and the general trend toward public policy liberalization, consistently increases the power of individuals and intensifies performance pressures for companies.¹ In this constantly changing business landscape, learning becomes an imperative to keep up and move forward.

Workers are beginning to sense the mounting pressure to develop more rapidly and efficiently, and the best among them are looking for accelerated learning opportunities both at work and beyond. In this new business environment, standard company-provided training is not enough. Workers will increasingly look for opportunities to learn by doing while on the job—not just to remain employable but to feel fulfilled. We've seen leading indicators of this trend in Silicon Valley and in employees, across geographies and industries, who have the "passion of the Explorer." To keep up with this mounting shift in employee expectations and performance pressures, organizations will need to create an environment that fosters and allows for accelerated learning across all business functions.

Silicon Valley has been at the cutting edge of business and technology for decades, spawning deep technical innovation and creating a competitive environment for attracting top tech talent. Everyone has heard about the free meals and countless other amenities available at the

Valley's largest tech companies. So how is it that, despite a wealth of perks, many tech industry leaders show some of the country's highest turnover rates, with a median employee tenure of approximately one year?²

To explore this question, we interviewed high-performing professionals in multiple industries, targeting those with a high degree of commitment to their fields of focus, and asked what drives them to stay with their current roles or companies. While we recognize that this group is not reflective of the entire workforce, its changing needs serve as a leading indicator of widespread changes across all industries and sectors. Overwhelmingly, what the interviewees had in common was that they were constantly looking for ways to accelerate their learning. When they did make career shifts, it was because a new role or employer offered opportunities for fast growth and learning.

Ashlee Adams, for example, started her career after college in health care consulting. She found herself seeking out opportunities to learn more about the industry, and soon realized that health care was her passion. Eventually she decided to work with digital health startup incubator Rock Health, and later enrolled in a leading MBA/MPH program. While she enjoyed gaining knowledge and experience, the educational setting didn't provide the level of exposure and hands-on learning she'd found in the startup world. Between her first and second year of graduate school, Ashlee interned with a digital health startup that provides online personal health assistants to patients. The company, Better, offered direct access to the CEO and an open, collaborative work environment. Realizing that she was learning more rapidly than ever, Ashlee decided to leave

her graduate program to pursue her work with Better full time.

While most people we spoke with were aligned with an industry or specific area of expertise, one of our interviewees had a broader goal. Rather than allowing industry lines to dictate his path, he sought out opportunities to maximize his positive impact on others and accelerate his learning. After studying computer science in college, Chase Hensel started his career designing cardiac lab robotics systems. After working for a few companies, he decided to forgo pursuing a PhD in bioinformatics to work as a product manager at a leading tech firm, where he led a team of approximately 50 engineers. But despite many opportunities to work with intelligent, talented people, the flat structure of the business left Chase with few opportunities to learn and stretch beyond his current role. After three years, he left the company and founded Welkin Health, a digital health startup focused on providing a case management software platform for interacting with and caring for patients through a variety of mediums. The industry comes with a host of obstacles, including regulatory environment, changing attitudes toward digital health, slow adoption of technology, and insurance complexities. Chase sees these difficulties as opportunities rather than hurdles. His new role as CEO in this highly complex space has given him the challenge he sought for and kept him learning at the accelerated pace he craves.

Maria Ogneva developed her passion for communities after moving to New York City without an established network or support system. Connecting with the startup community through Meetup, she realized the collective power of communities, eventually turning passion into career. After holding several positions in facilitating and developing community, Maria briefly shifted into a role that reduced her direct community involvement. However, she quickly realized that, despite its associated difficulties, the community role offered accelerated learning opportunities

beyond what any other role could provide. After this realization, she returned to the community space and continued her quest to highlight the importance of community and elevate the Head of Community position to the executive level. As a passionate worker, Maria continuously sought out opportunities to maximize her impact and accelerate her learning.

These stories offer an insight into employee needs and expectations emerging in the post-Big Shift world. While their paths differ, the underlying motivation is the same: In a rapidly changing world where knowledge flows hold the key to value and differentiation, high performers are pursuing opportunities to learn in more rapid and dynamic ways.

Through our interviews, we identified several early indicators that accelerated learning is unlocking value in the workplace. In preparation for the Big Shift, companies must create an environment that fosters accelerated learning—not just to keep employees from leaving but also to speed performance in the face of constant change. It is important to note that the solution here lies not in formalized training and development, but rather in organizational and individual role design. Interviewees happy with their current jobs worked in open, collaborative environments that allowed them to take on many roles, own their work, learn new skills, and challenge themselves and their colleagues in new ways. Early-stage startups are giving employees the opportunity to learn rapidly through such diverse, dynamic roles; however, the complexity and excitement can fade as companies scale and mature. Often, as companies grow, they standardize activities, reduce employee freedom, and limit employees' ability to work faster. As the visionary startups of today grow into the multinational companies of tomorrow, they will be challenged to scale operations without “operationalizing” employee roles. Successful organizations will differentiate themselves by developing scalable solutions that keep strong employees learning and contributing at a rapid pace.

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