

COMMENTARY



How Small Businesses Can Develop Employees Like Big Corporations

In a rapidly changing work environment, employee development is not merely an added benefit—it is an essential investment. Large corporations often have the advantage of dedicated human resources teams, extensive training programs and substantial budgets to support workforce growth. However, for small businesses operating with limited resources, the challenge lies in implementing effective development strategies without incurring significant costs.

The good news: Employee development is attainable for businesses of all sizes. With strategic planning and intentional execution, small businesses can foster a culture of continuous learning, skill enhancement and professional growth—without exceeding their financial constraints.

Cultivating a culture of continuous learning

A comprehensive training department is not a prerequisite for fostering employee development. Instead, small businesses can embed learning into daily operations by:

- Encouraging peer mentorship and knowledge-sharing initiatives.
- Leveraging accessible, cost-effective online learning platforms.

- Allocating a modest budget for employee training opportunities.

By prioritizing professional growth as a core value, businesses can empower employees to take ownership of their development and remain engaged in their roles.

Emphasizing skill development over job titles

Large corporations often provide employees with predefined career trajectories. In contrast, small businesses possess the flexibility to tailor growth opportunities based on evolving business needs and the unique skills of employees. By focusing on skill development rather than rigid promotional paths, companies can:

- Offer cross-training opportunities to enhance employees' capabilities.
- Strengthen resilience against turnover and unexpected operational shifts.
- Provide employees with a sense of progression and value within the organization.

This approach not only benefits individual career growth but also enhances overall business agility and sustainability.

Leveraging technology for scalable learning

The digital age has revolutionized professional development, making high-quality learning resources accessible at minimal cost. Small businesses can utilize platforms such as LinkedIn Learning to provide employees with courses in leadership, technical skills and industry-specific knowledge. They can also utilize grants and low-cost learning often offered by local colleges and cities.

By integrating these digital tools into their training strategies, small businesses can facilitate employee development without the need for an internal training department, allowing the focus to be on guiding employees toward relevant learning opportunities.

Implementing incremental and actionable development strategies

A common misconception about employee training is that it requires substantial time and financial investment. Small businesses can incorporate development initiatives into their daily workflow through:

- Micro-learning—brief, focused lessons integrated into team meetings.
- Lunch and learn sessions—informal discussions where employees share insights from books, courses, or personal experiences.
- Project-based learning—assigning employees stretch projects that challenge them to develop new skills in live business situations.

These approaches ensure that learning remains efficient, relevant and directly applicable to employees' roles.

Aligning employee development with business objectives

For small businesses, every investment must yield tangible returns—including employee training. Unlike large corporations that may offer broad, generalized programs, small businesses can ensure every training dollar is tied directly to a specific business goal, making the investment easier to justify and measure. Leaders should consider:

- Which skills are critical for business growth?
- Where do skill gaps exist within the current workforce?
- How can training initiatives directly contribute to revenue generation and operational efficiency?

By aligning development initiatives with overarching business priorities, small businesses can ensure that employee training investments drive measurable impact and long-term success.

Employee development as a competitive advantage

Employee development is not exclusive to large corporations with extensive budgets. With strategic focus and innovative approaches, small businesses can establish a learning-driven culture that enhances employee engagement, improves retention and fuels business growth—without incurring excessive costs.

For small business owners seeking to enhance their teams' capabilities, the key lies in starting small, being intentional and scaling development efforts as the business grows. By investing in employees, businesses not only nurture a motivated and skilled workforce but also position themselves for long-term sustainability and success.

About Aaron Brown

Aaron Brown is the vice president of talent development at Mountain America Credit Union, where he leads the strategic evolution of talent development initiatives focused on innovation, growth leadership pipelines. He brings 15 years of

experience across tech and manufacturing, with companies including Novell, Philips Electronics, Bosch, eBay and NICE InContact, and has spent the past 14 years in senior talent and organizational development roles, including head of learning and organizational development for the Americas at Uber. Brown holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration with an emphasis in organizational development from Brigham Young University.

