



As middle management thins, L&D must evolve

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Now more than ever, business leaders and employees are feeling pressure to make the right decisions at the right time for their teams and overall organization. However, **Gartner predicts** that 20% of organizations will use AI to flatten leadership structures by the end of 2026, eliminating more than half of existing middle management positions. This is causing companies to do more with less and is shifting the traditional responsibilities of these mid-level roles onto earlier-career employees.

The mid-level manager has long played the role of mentor and mentee to its teams across the organization. For early-career employees, this manager is someone who typically offers hands-on coaching and guidance as they begin their careers. And for those that the mid-level manager reports into, it helps them gain experience to further develop their leadership with more tenured employees before transitioning to more senior leadership roles.

While this restructuring may help businesses make more agile decisions and contribute to their safety net during uncertain times, it may have unexpected consequences for current and future business leaders.

Recent college graduates are already struggling to adapt to the workforce. APA's "Work in America" survey found that 42% of employees aged 18-25 feel lonely on the job. This could be due to an increasing age gap between junior team members and senior leaders to whom they now report, contributing to younger employees feeling disconnected from their teams and growth opportunities.

In the absence of middle management, HR teams have a unique opportunity to create mentorship moments and help employees thrive, all while ensuring their approach reflects what early career employees value in the workplace. Consider these alternatives to traditional middle-management learning opportunities for all employees.

Rethink what a "mentor" looks like"

With any large organizational or workforce shift, it presents an opportunity for employees to pursue horizontal growth. Rather than siloing junior staff to one function, such as marketing, companies can engage in early-career cross-functional exposure, allowing them to gain experience supporting additional departments such as communications or sales. This opens the door for new mentorship opportunities in more than one discipline and builds more agile employees.

In fact, younger employees are embracing multifaceted roles. **A Deloitte** survey found that seven in 10 Gen Z employees are developing a new skill to advance their career at least once per week, suggesting an interest in cross-functional training. As leadership restructurings change the way departments collaborate, HR leaders are in a unique position to meet young employees where they're at by promoting horizontal growth.

Mentor databases are another powerful tool that HR leaders can harness to empower employees to build relationships. Early career employees can sign up for mentorship sessions on various topics with a senior leader, offering exposure to other roles without requiring significant time investment on the leader's part. For learning opportunities that require deeper instruction, such as coding, small group sessions can be held over weeks or months. This flexible mentorship strategy creates a win-win situation for employees, leaders and the bottom line. It allows senior leadership to maximize mentorship opportunities while providing junior team members with personalized training.

Offer benefits that promote belonging

To some, the thinning of mid-level management roles can be viewed as a streamlined pipeline for early-career employees to progress into senior-level leadership roles. However, a [Deloitte](#) study found that only 6% of Gen Z see these types of positions as their primary career goal.

Understanding this perspective is key for HR and team leaders as they begin to mentor and build their internal pipeline of future leaders. From day one, HR teams have an opportunity to understand the personal and professional goals of early-career employees and structure the benefits program accordingly. Doing this creates a win-win for both parties—helping early-career employees succeed while supporting the long-term talent pipeline for the organization.

Additionally, the onboarding process should be strategized to make sure that all learning and development opportunities are clear from the beginning, and new hires feel comfortable reaching out to leadership. Further, integrating mental health support programs into benefits plans can help ground junior staff as they adjust to their new role.

For example, subsidizing external growth opportunities, such as paying for employees to join industry associations or covering the costs of them attending industry events, is a two-fold benefit: Employees grow their networks while bringing new learnings back to the team. Additionally, providing financial wellness benefits can help increase employee loyalty by demonstrating the employer's care for the team's holistic wellbeing, supporting young team members as they enter a new chapter in uncertain economic conditions.

Transform your management

Leadership structures are evolving as rapidly as the world around us, and businesses should be careful not to leave tomorrow's leaders behind due to the growing middle-management gap. HR should seize this opportunity to strengthen professional development programs to the younger generation's preferences and needs. By promoting a variety of learning opportunities, both internal and external, HR can help new employees gain the leadership skills they need for tomorrow while meeting their desire for self-improvement and belonging today.

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Debra Fiori is a seasoned Chief People Officer with over 20 years of global experience driving organizational and business transformation across diverse industries. She has a proven track record in leading pre-IPO and public companies in functions associated with the employee life cycle, cultural empowerment and internal communication. Currently serving as the Chief People Officer at PROG Holdings, Inc., Debra is a trusted advisor to the CEO, playing a pivotal role in driving growth and high performance. Her extensive experience includes previous roles at Parsons Corporation and RTKL Associates, Inc., where she led HR functions for global teams. Debra holds advanced degrees in communications and human resources.