

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK: EMPLOYEE PRACTICES

**Nano Tools for Leaders®** are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes—with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

### THE GOAL

Identify and close skills gaps and improve retention by encouraging your talent to grow their competencies.

### NANO TOOL

Accelerated digital transformation and the shift to remote work have widened the gap between the skills your workers currently have and the ones they will need in the future. Companies often end up with an either/or approach: it's either all on employers to provide training, or employees must figure out which skills they will need and how to build those skills themselves. A more effective solution for both sides involves a collaborative approach, where leaders empower, encourage, and enable talent to close anticipated gaps and take control of their own future.



### ACTION STEPS

Leaders can inspire the mindset shift needed to encourage skill development and lifelong learning by adopting one or more of the following five practices:

**1. Skills Inventory:** Create a skills heatmap, in which the skills your talent has today and their interest level on what skills they also want to develop for tomorrow are represented graphically and in color (such as the one described by McKinsey [here](#)). This will enable you to triangulate gaps between the organizational need, the interest of the talent, and the talent's current skill inventory. Rather than sending a survey tool, take the opportunity to talk with your talent, which may provide deeper insight into their skills and interests, enabling you to co-create short-term development plans to close skill gaps.

**2. Stretch Assignments:** Provide opportunities to learn and grow beyond the comfort zone, challenging talent without pushing so far that it creates stress and burn out. These opportunities should not be part of a merit system; instead, they encourage "fast fails" and learning from the experience in a safe environment. Examples include: managing an intern or volunteer, organizing and leading an event or meeting, getting involved in a new project outside of their department, and leading a new initiative not within the comfort zone.

**3. External Developmental Opportunities:** In response to identified skills gaps, some organizations turn to new hires. Instead, consider giving current talent the opportunity to develop the skills and bring them back to the organization. While

this process takes a little longer, the overall cost benefit may be lower by advancing those with an existing depth and breadth of experience within the organization. Ideas include:

- partnering with trade organizations to create internship programs
- creating “job swap” opportunities with partner organizations
- creating apprenticeship programs within the organization to create opportunities within other lines of business

**4. Digital Skills-Exchange Platform:** Skill-development opportunities should be easy to access by the workforce. A digital skills-exchange platform can house stretch assignments and other skill-development opportunities. The platform does not need to be technologically complicated. It could be a SharePoint site, an internal social media site, or an intranet page. It provides visibility into where opportunities exist within the organization (or outside) and can also serve as a mechanism to uncover where skills already exist. The platform offers three key benefits: it creates two-way skill visibility between managers and employees, offers best-fit development by illuminating opportunities in unexpected places that meet their specific development needs, and makes manager benefit clearer by illustrating the skills the team can expand on as part of the experience and by identifying non-traditional candidates to consider that the manager may not have otherwise had access to.

The platform consists of four components:

- database of all possible professions or occupations within the organization or more broadly within the industry
- course calendar showing when, where, and how the skills needed are delivered
- index of the employability associated with each occupation
- skills required to work in the profession

**5. Create a Skills Advisory Board:** Bring together a group of leaders, employees, business partners, consultants, and HR to proactively and jointly explore today’s skill gaps and those that may arise in three to five years. Meeting once every three to six months, the board should address these gaps and identify evolving changes from the point of view of talent, the business, competitors, and the industry. Using industry research from reputable sources such as the World Economic Forum or McKinsey Global Institute on skill gaps can help guide discussions.

## HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:

At General Motors, one stretch assignment involves encouraging team members to establish a point of view on a predetermined topic relevant to their line of work and following a framework similar to a literature review. For example, every six months a team member picks a topic with their manager and then reviews a set of 10 journal articles. They write a paragraph summary of each, identify any gaps, identify further areas of research, and then describe their point of view on the topic.

At Intel, managers can post short-term development prospects on its Development Opportunity Tool (DOT) platform. Accessible to every employee, it includes opportunities for supplementing career development plans, building skills, expanding business acumen, and broadening networks of colleagues.

Procter & Gamble and Google created a digital marketing talent exchange to upskill employees. Benefits of the month-long job swap were described by *The Wall Street Journal*: “Closer ties are crucial to both sides. P&G, the biggest advertising spender in the world, is waking up to the reality that the next generation of laundry-detergent, toilet-paper and skin-cream buyers now spends more time online than watching TV. Google craves a bigger slice of P&G’s \$8.7 billion annual ad pie as its own revenue growth slows.”

In response to changes in the global financial sector, Citi launched an internal development campaign designed to build a new culture of continuous learning to “future-proof Citi to meet the changing nature of work.” #BeMore empowers people to take control of their own development, accessing the resources they need when they need them to better do their jobs and enhance their personal development. The campaign leverages social-learning techniques, on-the-job learning, and personal challenges, increasing participation in development activities, raising engagement and employee satisfaction levels, and embedding continuous development into everyday activities.

## **CONTRIBUTOR TO THIS NANO TOOL**

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## **KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION: RELATED EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

Human resource management is taught by Wharton professor Matthew Bidwell in [\*People Analytics: HR Transformation through Data\*](#), [\*The Adaptable Leader: Leading in a Virtual World\*](#), [\*Business Essentials for Executives\*](#), and [\*Effective Execution of Organizational Strategy\*](#).

## **ABOUT NANO TOOLS**

*Nano Tools for Leaders®* was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director is Professor John Paul MacDuffie, Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Program on Vehicle and Mobility Innovation (PVMI) at Wharton’s Mack Institute for Innovation Management.