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10 Tips to Education Assistance Program Excellence

White Paper

by

Heidi Milberg

Director of Business Development
General Physics Corporation

www.gpworldwide.com

10 Tips to Education Assistance Program Excellence

As with many business functions, learning and development (L&D) has gone through profound changes over the last decade, impacting not only internal training programs, but also corporate education assistance programs. The following are just a few examples of changes that have had major repercussions throughout our industry in recent years:

- Employee development has become critical to long-term business success and is now viewed as a strategic investment.
- Technology integration has changed the way companies manage and deliver learning to their employees.
- Broad acceptance of e-Learning and migration to virtual delivery methods has increased the speed of delivery and provided a more cost-effective way to deliver learning to a geographically disbursed audience.

With one in five college students receiving some form of tuition support from their employers, organizations recognize that educating their employees is a way to mine the talent within their company. It wasn't too long ago that corporate spending for training and education was the first thing to be cut in a downturn. Today, in many companies, education has become a strategic function that is demonstrating bottom-line results.

In fact, 94 percent of employers offer some form of tuition assistance to their employees, according to a study conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity in conjunction with the Human Resources Institute. Given well-defined career paths and development opportunities, employees are less likely to leave for another employer, which helps to increase employee retention. Education can also have an impact on the capabilities of the company. Organizations that know they have a broadly educated employee base can capitalize on these skills and capabilities, and are more willing to enter new product areas and expand their business to new geographies. In short, corporate education can not only have a profound impact on employee retention and overall productivity, but also on the quality of both individual and corporate deliverables.

Why do so many companies invest in education assistance programs?

The reasons for implementing education assistance programs can be as different as the programs themselves. Most companies will indicate that their education assistance programs are used as a recruiting tool. They promote them as part of the recruiting process, which helps to attract employees who value continuous learning. To prospective employees, an education assistance program demonstrates that the company is interested in their long-term growth and development. Employees who increase their skills and broaden their capabilities can usually find career growth opportunities with their existing employer and are then more likely to stay with the company longer.

Another reason education assistance programs are playing a bigger role is the emphasis on integration and alignment of employee development programs with corporate L&D initiatives. This, in turn, is in response to the trend towards taking a holistic approach to managing talent. Talent management as a strategy encompasses the oversight and integration of all employee development activities, including both internal and external education, from the time the employee is hired to the time he or she retires. With this greater emphasis on corporate talent management initiatives, now more than ever, there is a spotlight on education assistance programs and the contribution they make to overall employee development and talent management strategy.

To better prepare for this shift—whether you are considering changes to your existing education assistance program or implementing a new one—the following ten tips will help ensure your program brings the most value to your organization and enhances its ability to manage your strategic investment in talent.

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TIP ONE – Know your organization and its talent

As a leader responsible for employee education, whether through internal training and development or education assistance programs, it is important for you to have a good understanding of your organization's short- and long-term business goals and objectives. You should also know how these goals and objectives are influenced by changes in the economy and the availability and preparedness of your organization's talent.

The larger the organization, the more challenging it becomes to have a good understanding of its talent. Understanding your company's talent includes determining whether there are defined job roles, documented skill requirements, and defined and documented career paths. With this information, you can get a clear picture of the education requirements to fill the positions within your organization.

In addition to understanding the various employee roles within the organization, it is useful to learn about the areas where job turnover is high and where it has been challenging to recruit and hire resources. Knowing where the organization has resource gaps and understanding the educational requirements needed to fill those gaps are key elements to gaining the most value from your education assistance program.



TIP TWO – Build/strengthen relationships within the organization

The second tip to achieving education assistance program excellence is often overlooked. As a human resources employee, you are fortunate to have a broad view of the organization and access to information and people who can significantly improve the value and effectiveness of your tuition program. There are several key organizations/business functions that you should build or strengthen your relationship with, including recruiting and L&D. Several other internal organizations can also contribute significantly to education assistance program excellence. Creating seamless and efficient program management processes will typically involve support and collaboration from your information systems group, payroll, and even corporate communications.

Recruiting

Many organizations maintain that their education assistance program improves their ability to recruit employees. However, most companies are only capitalizing on a fraction of the value that a tuition program can bring in regards to recruitment. The recruiting organization has the best knowledge of the organization's immediate talent requirements, and a recruiter's primary responsibility is to match resources to the organization's needs. For example, in a common scenario, the corporate finance department is in need of an accounting specialist,

so they reach out to their recruiting department, provide required details, and await a list of potential candidates. The recruiting department then posts the position and collects résumés and applications.

Consider a change to this typical process. Prior to posting the position, the recruiter reaches out to the education assistance program leader who reviews current and past program participants to identify existing employees who are pursuing or have completed accounting/finance programs that could potentially meet the job requirements. Integrating the education assistance program with the recruiting process is simple and effective. Take the time to build/strengthen your relationship with recruiting.

Learning and Development

The recent talent management trends have facilitated the need for integration between L&D and education assistance programs, but few companies have truly capitalized on the benefits of a close integration. The L&D function in most organizations focuses on identifying the skill gaps in the organization and works to fill those gaps with training interventions. Education assistance programs can be an effective means to fill skill gaps in the organization and also have the potential to address the larger concern of future talent gaps, whether caused by an aging workforce or lack of available resources.

Incorporating the education assistance program into the L&D process can be challenging but effective. Take the time to build/strengthen your relationship with L&D.

Working more closely with recruiting and L&D as described in the preceding paragraphs will scream out to the employee:

My company cares about my development!

My company cares about my career!

My company cares about me!

Information Systems

Program eligibility relies on accurate employee demographic information. This information is frequently maintained by the information systems group and leveraged by the education assistance program. While the relationship between information systems and education assistance is established during the initial program setup, building a positive working relationship with this group can ensure data quality and improve the overall data management effort on an ongoing basis.

Payroll

For tuition reimbursement programs, payment is typically made through the payroll department. The reimbursement process should be simple and seamless to the employee. The relationship between payroll and education assistance is created when the program is established. However, a strong relationship needs to be maintained in order to address payment questions, issues, or program changes that may arise over time.

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Corporate Communications

Due to the overwhelming amount of e-mails received by employees from inside a company and external sources, organizations are more frequently required to consult with their corporate communications department for guidance on proper program communication. To be effective, the education assistance program requires frequent communication. From initial application submission through tuition payment, notifications are a key component to program success. Working with your communications department will ensure that you are minimizing the volume of these notifications, maximizing the effectiveness of the content, and increasing the likelihood that the e-mails will be read.



TIP THREE – Align your tuition policy

In order to have an effective education assistance program, your tuition policy should be aligned to meet specific business objectives. The better understanding you have of the organization's talent needs, as previously suggested, the better you can align your tuition policy to fill gaps in your talent pool. To demonstrate this, consider a major company with locations across the United States, many in less than desirable areas. This organization has struggled in the past to recruit and retain resources with a specific degree to work in these locations. Also, statistics indicate that there will likely be fewer of these resources available and more competition for these resources in the future. To address this very real business issue, this organization is aligning their tuition policy in the following ways:

- Working directly with universities to design a custom degree program that integrates the specific learning needs of the organization and better prepares the learner for his/her role within the company.
- Heavily promoting this specific degree program to ensure that every employee is aware of it and aware of which jobs within the company this degree would prepare them for.
- Offering a higher tuition cap for this specific degree program to encourage employees to pursue this degree, resulting in a larger pool of internal resources available to fill these difficult-to-staff positions in the future.
- Offering pre-pay versus traditional reimbursement for this specific degree program to encourage those who otherwise could not afford to pay the tuition out-of-pocket.
- Offering incentives for individuals taking assignments in less desirable locations to encourage their pursuit of this special degree.



TIP FOUR – Enforce your policy

As a provider of learning outsourcing services, we have managed many education assistance programs and have helped to create program policies and procedures, and implement supporting infrastructure. One of the most fundamental tips to ensuring that your education assistance program is top notch is to enforce your policy. Say what you do, and then do what you say—no exceptions. While it isn't reasonable to believe that there will never be a situation or special circumstance that requires some deviation from your policy or procedures, your goal is to minimize these exceptions. Exceptions cause confusion, extra work, and overall distrust. To do this, your policy must be clear and appeals should be managed consistently.

There are companies that choose not to support a formal appeals process in order to discourage requests for change consideration. Some companies use an informal request process, while others have a more formal process and incorporate internal escalation for review and approval prior to submission to the education assistance program managers for a final decision. Managing a formal appeals process requires resources, and making consistent appeal decisions over time will drive down the volume of appeals requested.



TIP FIVE – Solicit feedback

To determine whether your education assistance program is meeting the needs and expectations of your employees, you need to ask them for their feedback. It is always useful to ask employees for their suggestions for improvement. Changes that are made based on feedback from employees should be communicated to encourage feedback in the future. Many ways exist to get information from program participants, and every interaction with them provides an opportunity to solicit feedback. In addition to listening to and documenting feedback provided during phone or e-mail communications, employee satisfaction surveys are a great way to organize feedback into areas of importance such as policy, system, and support.

Policy

When asking for feedback on your education assistance policy, focus your questions on the clarity of your policy, as well as the availability of—and accessibility to—your policy. Most employees want more from education assistance than what the program offers, so asking questions regarding satisfaction with the overall policy will likely result in low scores.

System

System questions should help to identify areas for improvement. Focus these questions on determining ease of use, system performance, and whether the features and capabilities of the system provide employees with the tools they need to effectively manage their tuition requests.

Support

The responsiveness and expertise of support staff can have a significant impact on employee satisfaction with your education assistance program. Asking questions that give you insight into the performance of your support team enables you to make timely changes as needed.

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TIP SIX – Mine your data

One of the greatest advantages of leveraging a technology solution for your education assistance program is the availability of data. Throughout the education assistance process, from application submission through tuition payment, data is collected. Some of the key data elements captured include degree, course, credits, school, tuition fees, other fees, and a variety of dates such as class start and end dates, approval date, and payment date. Most technology-based education assistance program management systems are integrated with a HR database for employee demographic information. Combined, the available data, when mined, can provide a wealth of information.

Usage reports can offer insight into many aspects of the program. For example, you can use program data to identify trends by evaluating the types of employees using the program, where they are located, which schools they are attending, and what degrees they are pursuing. Spend data offers details about how much and where program dollars are spent and the ability to evaluate and compare costs across schools and degree programs. Additionally, tracking employee communication through the phone can provide useful information about frequently asked questions, issues, and concerns. Ultimately, mining your data can help you identify issues and trends, and provide you with the information you need to make informed program management decisions.



TIP SEVEN – Measure results

Measuring results and overall program effectiveness is one of the most challenging and most important aspects of managing a successful education assistance program. Before you can measure results, you first need to define what program success looks like. To some, simply receiving high employee satisfaction ratings indicates success. To others, success may be based on complex promotion and retention statistics. The bottom line is that program success should be tied to the overall objectives you defined for your program.

The key to measuring results is to establish baseline measures. Know where you are today so at some point in the future you can see how far you've gone. This is easier said than done. Take, for example, an objective to increase retention statistics. At most companies, it is difficult to access the confidential employment information required to determine a baseline retention rate and to measure changes over time. Regardless of the challenges you will face establishing baseline metrics and measuring performance to those metrics, it is the only way to truly understand whether you are effectively managing your education assistance program.



TIP EIGHT – Promote success

There is no better way to retain your employees than by providing them with career-progression opportunities. Pursuing a degree while working full- or part-time can be difficult. Adding in the personal commitments that most employees have outside of work makes pursuing a degree even more challenging. Sharing stories about employees who have

overcome challenges and have successfully leveraged the company's education assistance program to improve their career growth opportunities demonstrates that the company cares about their long-term success. The following is an example of a testimonial posted on Qwest's Pathways education assistance program website:

“One of the main reasons I chose a degree in telecommunications was because I was already working in the field. I considered completing a bachelor's degree for some time and Qwest's tuition program was advertising the degree with Pace University. I wanted a program to be online because I didn't want to spend too much time in a classroom away from my family. In addition, the program needed to be flexible enough to work around a technician's unpredictable schedule. At the time I started with Pace three years ago, I had already been a technician for five years. I was surprised about the amount of knowledge I gained during the course of the program that helped me to become a better technician and prepared me for tests that helped me qualify for a different position. I set out to get a degree to have under my belt and ended up expanding my knowledge of not only telecommunications, but other areas of general study as well.”

Matt in Minnesota



TIP NINE – Protect your investment

Like our family members, we want to believe that our employees can be trusted, and we operate under this assumption. Even so, if there is a way to defraud, then someone will figure out how to do it. Steps need to be taken to protect this significant investment in employee development through education assistance. This is particularly important for more generous and less restricted education assistance programs. One of the best ways to prevent fraud is to identify warning signs and carefully monitor your data for these signs. Assuming you are using technology to capture your program data, you should be able to set up alerts to help you do this. While there are many system stops that can be implemented to prevent fraud, in some instances a system stop is not feasible.

In addition to formal system prevention methods, it is important to identify and set up thresholds for specific data elements that trigger alerts for further investigation. For example, you can set payment amount thresholds that alert you when a payment request received exceeds the set threshold, encouraging you to examine the request more closely prior to making payment. Another potential warning sign is the number of payment requests an employee makes over a specific period of time. Running a report that lists payment requests, by employee, during a specific period of time can identify suspicious activity, encouraging you to examine an employee's record in further detail if warranted. These are only two simple examples of how to monitor your program for fraud. Since every tuition program is different, the methods used to prevent abuse of the program will be unique.

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TIP TEN – Commit to cost reduction and continuous improvement efforts

In a fast-changing world, nothing can remain still. This is especially the case with your education assistance program. Since it requires a significant financial investment, it is necessary to continuously evaluate program effectiveness and relevance. Focus should remain on two key areas: cost reduction and continuous improvement efforts.

Cost Reduction

Companies must look for ways to mitigate the rising cost of education. During the last economic downturn, many companies elected to suspend their tuition program or reduce their tuition benefit. However, there are other creative and positive ways to reduce your investment in tuition.

- **Partnerships with educational providers.** Many schools are willing to offer discounted tuition and waived fees in exchange for accessibility to your employees and promotional opportunities. They also are eager to create specialized degree programs and short courses that can be offered at discounted rates. Some companies are reducing the number of schools that employees are able to attend under their education assistance program. By doing this, companies can direct their tuition spend better, take advantage of special programs designed specifically for them, and negotiate better rates with these schools.
- **Educational counseling.** Some companies use educational counseling, sometimes referred to as academic advising, to shorten the timeline and reduce the cost of acquiring a degree. In order to utilize the education assistance program, employees are required to meet with an educational counselor to review their academic history and work experience, receive degree and school recommendations, and create a formal education plan. By doing this, it is believed that the employee will be able to leverage potential equivalencies to meet degree requirements, be a more focused learner given his/her targeted education plan objectives, and be able to complete his/her degree requirements more quickly at a lower cost.
- **Technology solutions.** One of the most effective ways to cut costs is to reduce administrative effort. The best way to do this is by introducing technology solutions that offer greater self-service capabilities, automated processing, and notifications. It's hard to imagine that many companies manage paper-based education assistance processes. The initial investment in a technology solution is quickly overcome by the benefits received not only in reduced administrative overhead, but also in improved quality and employee satisfaction.

Continuous Improvement

A strong focus on continuous improvement is needed to be sure your education assistance program remains effective and relevant. By using information collected through data mining and employee feedback and measuring program results, program leaders can proactively identify opportunities for improvement and make adjustments to address business needs as they evolve. Focus your continuous improvement efforts on improving process efficiency and automation, increasing policy clarity, and enhancing self-service capabilities.

Conclusion

Change is inevitable. Your ability to recognize shifts in your business environment and your responsiveness to those changes are vital to the success of your education assistance program. The preceding ten tips for program excellence will help you create a well-aligned and flexible education assistance program that can demonstrate its contribution to the bottom line and substantiate its long-term value to the company.

About the Author

Heidi Milberg is a Director of Business Development at General Physics Corporation (GP), a global training and education assistance program outsourcing company. For more than 18 years, she has helped to establish and manage education assistance programs for some of the world's most recognized and well-respected companies. ■



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Author Contact Information

For more information, please contact
Heidi Milberg
Director of Business Development
General Physics Corporation
hmilberg@gpworldwide.com
248.526.5500

General Physics Corporation
6095 Marshalee Drive, Suite 300, Elkridge, MD 21075
888.843.4784
www.gpworldwide.com