

H E @ Work

# Employee attitude to workplace learning

13 June 2008



## Foreword

This paper provides a useful snapshot insight into employee attitude in large organisations in the United Kingdom and as a result, will be used to inform the work of HE@Work with employers. In addition, it may have some relevance to the current interest by government and higher education in employer engagement.

To put this in context, there is a perception, post Leitch, that a significant proportion of future degrees will come from those already in employment and that employers will facilitate this. Some see employers in the role of education providers; others see higher education institutions in the role of workplace training providers; however, few have considered the wishes of learners who are already in full time employment. HE@Work experience from working with employers is that they will only support higher level workplace learning if it motivates employees in ways that support business objectives. Hence HE@Work has taken the view that understanding the opinions of those in full time employment is central to employer engagement in higher education.

Whichever way you wish to consider the results, and we have argued for caution, nevertheless there is an emerging picture of employee interest in employer training at the higher levels and that those who have already gained any degree for example are more willing to continue their professional learning. It points to the importance of higher level skills development within a professional context as a means of keeping the more expensive staff in a organisation up to date and productive.

We look forward to sharing these observations with employers to enable them to develop their existing training programmes to not only meet the needs of employees but also deliver their key business strategic options.

**Dr John Mumford OBE**  
**Executive Chairman**

## A Background to Work-based Learning

'work-based learning', as explained by Carol Costley from the National Institute of Work Based Learning, Middlesex University, is part of a cluster of concepts, including 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'flexibility'. One of the challenges which results from this for higher education providers to employees is to attempt to introduce some clarity about what work based learning at this level involves and the contexts in which it occurs. "It is evident there can be no single or simple definition of what work based learning entails beyond the notion that it is about learning (not teaching) and occurs in the workplace (rather than on campus). As such, *work based* learning can, and should be, distinguished from the notion of *work related* learning; the latter, in the form of vocational programmes designed to prepare people for employment which often includes employer-determined competencies e.g. national occupational standards, and does not necessarily require significant areas of the curriculum to be completed in the work place itself. Neither should it be assumed that work based learning in the higher education context is specifically about training; work based learning may take many forms and be undertaken for a number of different purposes; it is not restricted to performance-related learning in a narrow sense. Instead, the emphasis is on identifying and demonstrating learning that has occurred through work based activity, wherever and however this may have been achieved" (taken from the University Vocational Awards Council publication in 2005).

This position is underlined by the Higher Education Academy's guide to learning and employability written by Little and ESECT in 2004: "It is not necessarily the experience of work itself that is paramount – rather it is the learning that an individual derives from that experience of work and from reflecting upon it. A government-sponsored review recognised that work-based learning could take many forms including a full-time undergraduate undertaking a work placement planned as part of the curriculum; a full-time undergraduate doing a part-time job; a full-time employee seeking to explore work focused and work-related issues in the context of the knowledge, skills and values of a higher education institution. The common factor linking these forms was that the individual would be doing a job of work, or would be undertaking a work role."

However, confusion remains over work-based learning terminology for employers and higher education, and as a result it is recognised as essential that a common language is established: as described by Ian Nixon in a report to the Higher Education Academy "... it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an academic and employer perspective, irrespective of the terms used."

It is also clear that the work-based learning landscape has become more densely populated in recent years, with diverse partners, players and cultures now located on its territories. However, one concept that is frequently used in discussions of work-based learning is 'flexibility'; all organisations, including higher education, are expected to respond flexibly and rapidly to labour market changes. Flexibility may require working in partnership or collaboratively with other organisations in order to achieve desired goals most effectively. With this drive to create flexible organisations has come a corresponding emphasis on flexible learning, within and across organisations, which includes different learning levels, contexts, and modes of delivery and assessment methodologies. As Garrick and Usher (2000) in an article in the *Electronic Journal of Sociology* state: "Organizations are expected to respond flexibly and rapidly to market changes and a premium is now placed on the

need for flexibility not only within workplaces but also between them. Within this context are located interlinking discourses of flexible organizations, flexible workers and a consequent perceived need amongst managers (at a range of levels) for flexible structures, modes and contents of learning to service these organisations and workers.”

Flexible learning and work-based learning are used almost interchangeably by government agencies; for example in a DfES 2005 White Paper there is reference to progression taking place through ‘flexible, i.e. work based learning routes’. Along with online and distance learning delivery mechanisms, work-based learning routes have come to be regarded as an important part of flexible learning processes.

Grip, Loo and Sanders, in 1999, suggested that if the nature and pattern of work is changing, a consequence must be that the context in which work based learning occurs has also changed. In addition, responsibility for career-management and skill development is seen to reside more and more with individuals, rather than with organisations; workers are expected to be more flexible, to have a wider range of skills, and to be able to take on responsibilities previously undertaken by managers and supervisors.

In this respect, technical skills alone are insufficient, as cognitive skills, together with an array of generic skills and dispositions, come to be regarded as the essential ingredients of successful performance in the workplace. Problem solving, continuous learning, communication and teamwork are singled out for particular attention, alongside qualities such as being enterprising, highly motivated and prepared to take risks.

The HE@Work poll makes a useful contribution to this debate.

**Professor Simon Roodhouse**  
**Technical Director**

## Introduction

HE@Work is a learning and development consultancy staffed by people with extensive business experience and a broad understanding of the education sector. We are a not-for-profit organisation formed by a partnership between the Edge Foundation and the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) and we work in collaboration with government initiatives in workplace learning.

Our objective is to support businesses in their drive for improved performance by linking workplace learning and working experience to university qualifications, to enhance Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes, add external credibility to existing training, recognise and reward employees, and strengthen recruitment and retention appeal.

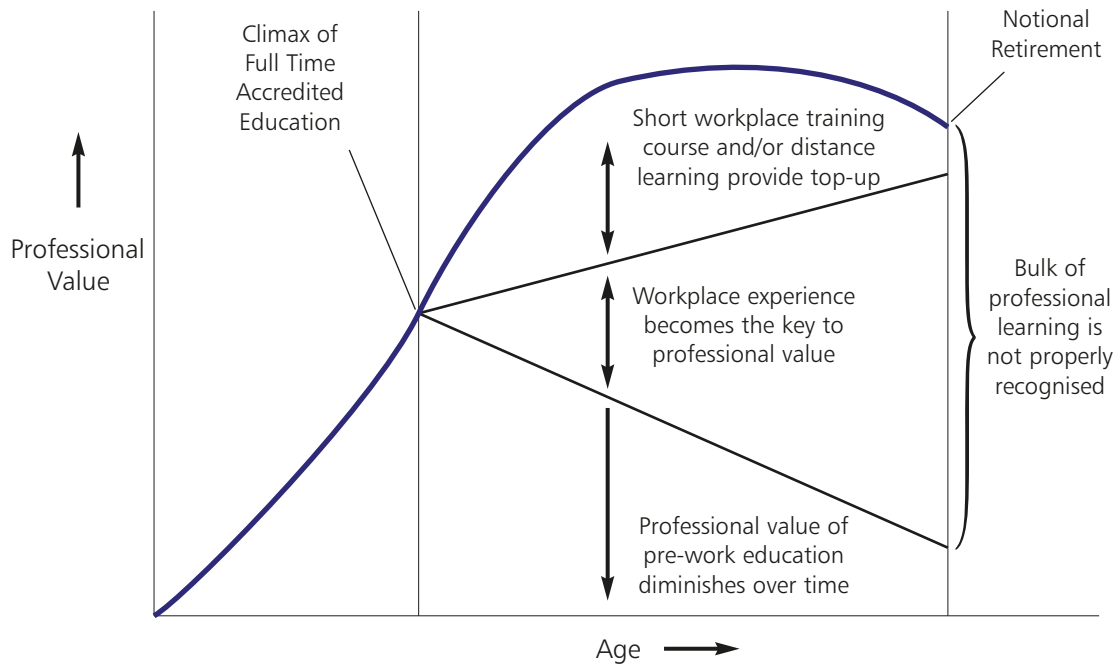
It is in this context that we commissioned OnePoll to undertake, on our behalf, a survey over a 5 week period of employees in the United Kingdom, working for private and public businesses in a variety of industrial sectors which typically employ over 2000 people. It is an attempt to gain a large organisation employee insight to inform discussions with employers and test employer engagement strategies.

The analysis that follows was based on a self completed web-based questionnaire offered to 50,000 members of a polling network and completed by over 4,600. The essential characteristic for the poll was that everyone should be in full time employment with a large employer. Data was collected by age, gender, type of role and type of sector.

Consequently, in our view the results are to be considered indicative as the absolute levels of response may not be statistically valid. The analysis therefore focuses on the ranking of responses rather than absolute levels.

Nevertheless there are a number of interesting observations which provide a useful 'snap shot' understanding of employee attitude. In particular it confirms our analysis on the key area of potential need described in the following diagram. Prior to employment an individual's professional value is defined predominantly by progress on a ladder of qualifications. However, once in employment an individual's professional value becomes defined more by practical experience and specialist workplace training. An individual's professional development thus becomes detached from the formal qualification ladder. Is this what employees want? Is this what employee's want? Would employees prefer to have their ongoing experiential learning and workplace training recognised through accredited qualifications? These are some of the questions the poll sought to answer.

## Life-Long Professional Development



The next sections provide a detailed summary of the key findings.

## Do people in employment want to do more learning?

75% of people questioned felt they had failed to achieve potential in full time education and wished they had achieved more. Two thirds said they would turn the clock back if they could. The result was strongest amongst those with the lower qualifications but even 65% of those with degrees and 50% of those with post graduate qualifications felt they could have achieved more.

Asked whether people felt they had achieved their potential at work circa 75% said no. There was little distinction between people who were very qualified and people with no qualifications. However when people were asked whether they wanted opportunities to develop professionally more than 80% said yes. Here, those with higher qualifications were keenest to develop, for example 87% of post graduates wanted to progress further whilst amongst those with no qualifications the figure was significantly less at 67%.

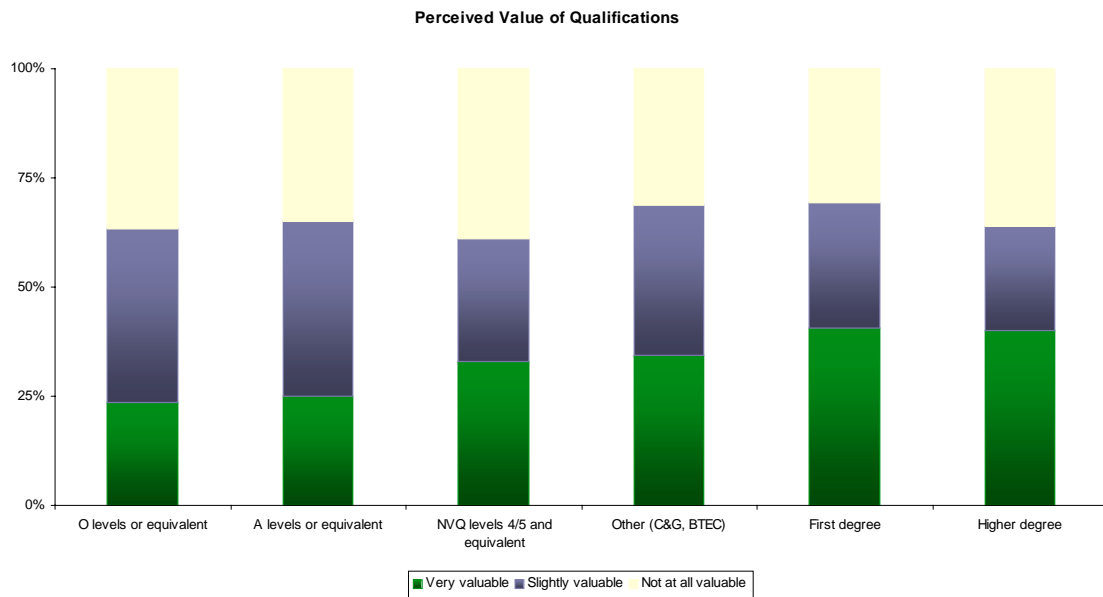
When the results were analysed by sector there was a tendency for those in technology based sectors to be keenest on further development (85-90% saying yes) whilst those in sectors like media, hospitality, building were least keen (60-70% saying yes). There appears to be a correlation between sectors where respondents tended to have lower qualifications and sectors that where people were less interested in development.

The conclusion is that the vast majority of people in employment say they want to continue to develop and the more qualified people are the keenest to progress further.

### What qualifications are most valued in the workplace?

The table below shows the perceived value of qualifications by all respondents, regardless of whether they hold the qualification or not. One surprising result was that around 40% of employees saw no value in qualifications. A similar percentage of employees see degrees and vocational qualifications as very valuable. It seems that employees are split 50/50 between those who are motivated by work related qualifications and those who are not. This is an important message for those who see qualifications as the measure of skills. O levels and A levels are seen to be of limited value, probably because for employees these are not the pinnacle of their education. The percentage of respondents claiming to have O and A levels was also very low (eg less people claimed to have A levels than claimed to have degrees, which is improbable) again suggesting that employees do not see these qualifications as anything more than stepping stones to more relevant qualifications

Analysing the results by sector one sees that HEI qualifications are valued most highly by those in technical or engineering based sectors, whilst NVQs, O levels and A levels are valued most highly by those in sport, fashion, advertising. People in these sectors also valued having no qualifications most highly, probably reflecting the lower qualifications held in these sectors. It was also apparent that managers are more positive about the value of qualifications than non-managers but both are equally positive about the value of professional development.



It was also interesting to look specifically at the value of qualifications as perceived by those who actually hold them. This showed that O levels and A levels were valued quite lowly by those that had them (typically 20-30% saying they valued them highly) and they valued these qualification lower than those not holding the qualification. Conversely those that held vocational qualifications (NVQs, HNDs, BTECs) and post graduate qualifications valued them much higher (typically 40-60% saying they valued them highly) and the holders of the qualification valued them much higher than those not holding the qualification. The exception to this effect was the standard university degree were both the holders and non holders valued the qualification highly (40-45% saying they valued them highly).

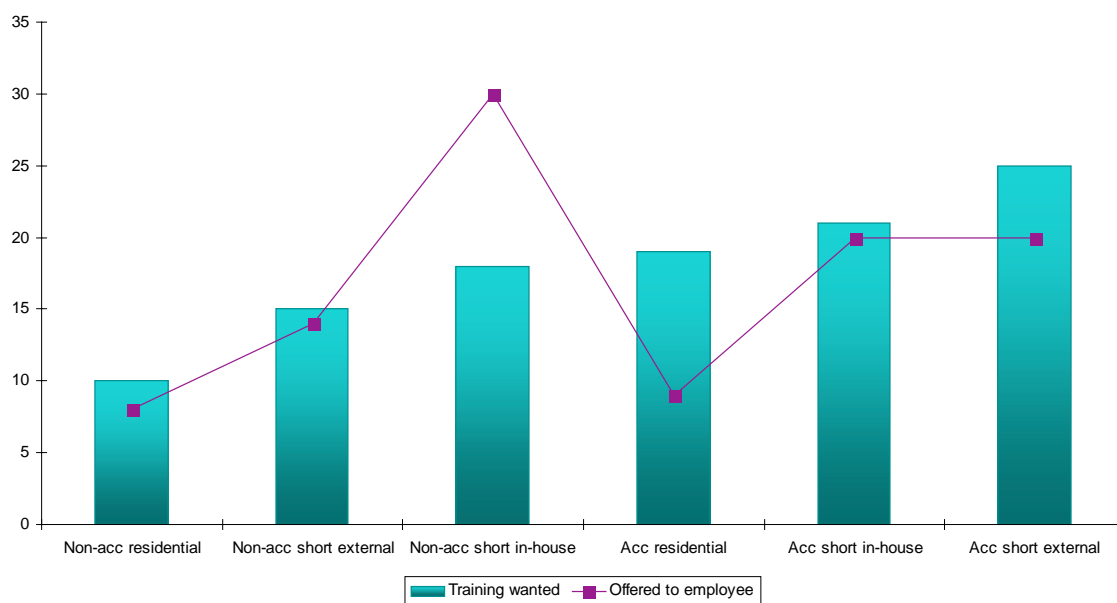
The inference from this is that 'school type' qualifications are not very relevant to employment and people with these qualifications are disappointed. Conversely those who go on the get vocational or specialist professional qualifications find them very valuable and more valuable than they expected. It is interesting that those with higher level vocational qualifications appear to value their qualification more highly than do those with university degrees.

### How would employees like to learn?

The highest response (over 40%) said they wanted on the job role specific training. Attendance at conferences and seminars, CPD programmes, and accredited short courses also polled more than 20%. External non-accredited courses, and support with longer term external programs such as MBAs and external degrees polled lower in the 10-15% range. In general distance learning and web based learning polled close to 10%.

Looking specifically at courses the most favoured were short external accredited courses (25% poll); short accredited in-house courses and medium length residential accredited courses polled 20%. Non-accredited courses polled lower, especially the longer non-accredited courses which polled 10%. These results were consistent between people with different qualification levels and people in different sectors, though retail, media, sport and transport seemed more strongly biased against in-house courses (polling around 10% even for accredited in-house courses).

### How does this compare with what employers offer?



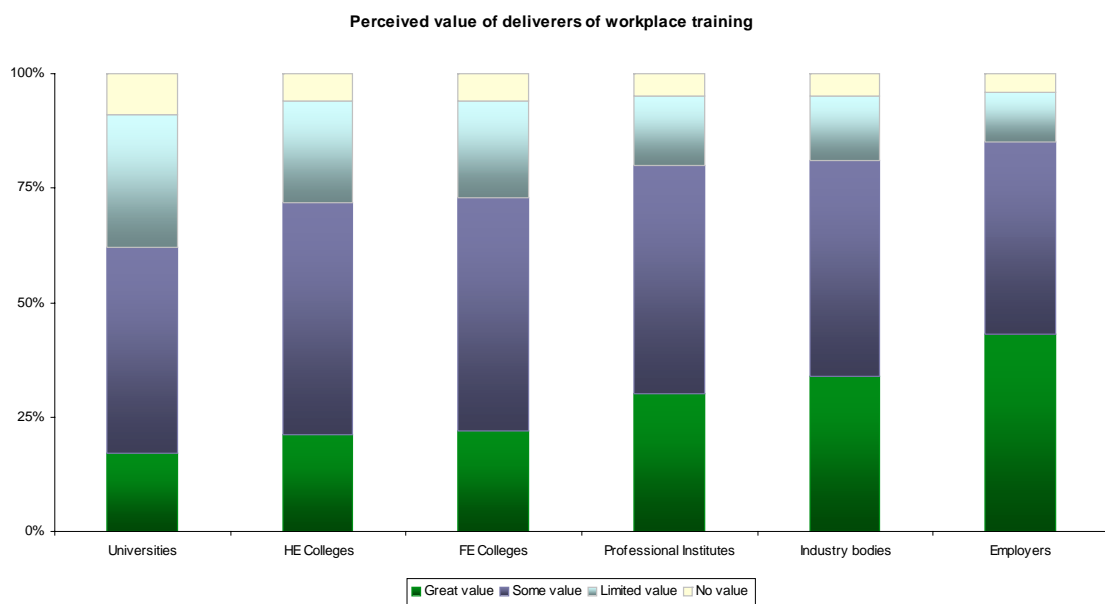
The strongest message is that employers predominantly offer short in-house non-accredited courses while employees predominantly want short external accredited courses. In rough terms the overall provision of short courses meets employee desires but desire exceeds provision by a ratio 25% to 19% for external accredited courses while the provision exceeds desire by a ratio of 30% to 18% for in-house non-accredited courses. There is also a strong desire for more medium length accredited residential courses (19% say they want but only 10% say they have available).

Dissecting this result by qualification level suggests that the need for more short external accredited courses is strongest amongst those with vocational qualifications or post graduate qualifications while graduates seem happy with the level of provision. This is not a matter of employers offering more to graduates; the difference was that 27% of graduates wanted external accredited courses while 35% of post graduates and BTECs wanted external accredited courses. Looking at sector

differences it appears that employees in retail, media, hospitality, construction and advertising want less courses than employers provide while the more technology oriented sectors want more.

There is also a perception amongst non-managers that managers get twice as much workplace learning support as non-managers. However both managers and non-managers polled equally in their assessment of what they received. Similarly, when asked what training employers make available to staff in general the poll was much higher than when asked what training is made personally available to the individual. This is presumably just a 'grass is greener elsewhere' phenomenon.

## Who do employees think are the best providers of workplace learning?

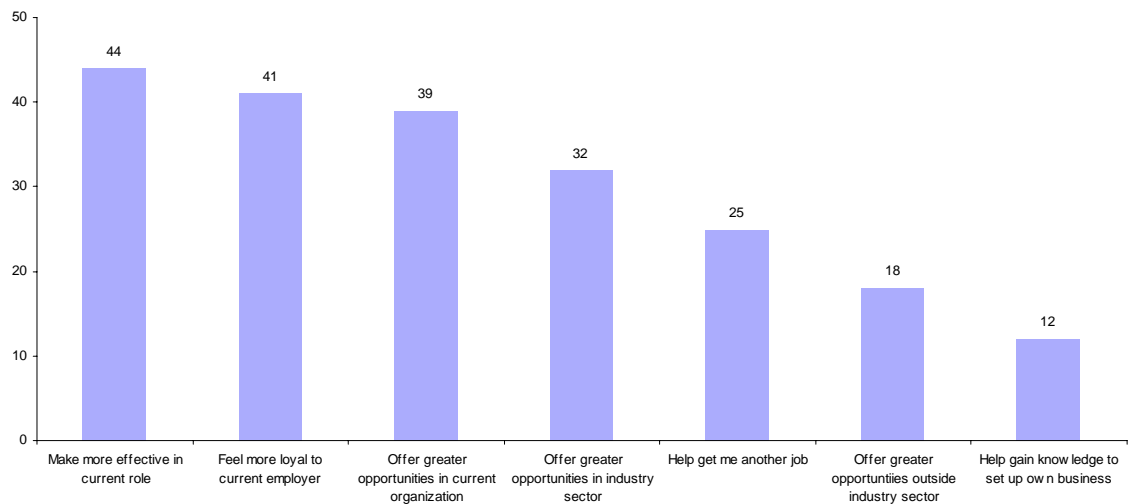


The poll suggests that universities are the least valued deliverers of workplace training while employers are the most valued. Colleges are more valued than universities and professional bodies are more valued still, but employers come out on top by a good margin. It is notable that around 40% of employees rate universities as having limited or no value as deliverers of workplace training. In combination these charts say there is employee demand for external accredited courses but that universities are not seen as the solution.

Dissecting this result, by qualification level or employment sector, yields only minor differences. People in property, media, building and transport seem to value HE and FE even lower, while those in managerial positions seem to rate HE and FE more highly. The only people who don't place employers as the best deliverers are post graduates and people in the property sector, and they put professional institutes marginally higher. The message that universities are bottom of the poll seems to hold in every subdivision of the data.

## Why do employees want to learn?

The final chart dispels the myth that staff do workplace learning in order to escape from their current jobs. This suggests the motivation for employees to study whilst in the workplace is overwhelmingly aligned to improved performance in current job and furthering the career with the current employer. The percentage who study as an escape route is relatively small.



This result was dissected by qualification type and sector of employment but while the absolute poll responses differed the ranking of answers was very consistent.

## Conclusion

The strongest suggestion from the poll is that people in employment want to develop further and would be motivated to better performance in their current jobs if they received more external accredited training. In particular:

- 75% of respondents felt they had failed to achieve potential in full time education and wished they had achieved more
- About three quarters also feel they haven't achieved their potential at work regardless of their educational level
- On average 80% say they want to continue to develop and the more qualified people are the keenest to progress further (87%). 67% of people with no qualifications at all would also welcome the opportunity to develop professionally.
- Those who get vocational or specialist professional qualifications find them very valuable and more valuable than they expected
- The strongest message is that employers predominantly offer short in-house non-accredited courses while employees predominantly want short external accredited courses
- The poll suggests that universities are the least valued delivers of workplace training while employers are the most valued. Colleges are more valued than universities and professional bodies are more valued still, but employers come out on top by a good margin. In combination (the findings) say that there is employee demand for external accredited courses but that universities are not seen as the solution
- The research 'dispels the myth that staff do workplace learning in order to escape from their current jobs. It 'suggests the motivation for employees to study whilst in the workplace is overwhelmingly aligned to improved performance in a current job and furthering a career with a current employer
- The strong suggestion from the poll is that people in employment want to develop further and would be motivated to better performance in their current jobs if they received more external accredited training

The implication for employers is that they can attract, motivate and retain better employees by providing:

- Just in time relevant learning and development
- Integrated continuous professional development programs
- More targeted use of training to reduce downtime
- A Better recruitment offer by including accredited courses
- Development within current job to lower turnover rates

– and do it in a way that is tied to the strategic business objectives of the company.

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