Training is the key to aligning your new African businesses with your strategy

South African companies that want to succeed as they expand into other African countries - or elsewhere in the world, for that matter - must be willing to make real investments in training staff in their processes and systems, writes Ivanna Granelli, founder of Can!Do Consulting.

As South African companies try to come to grips with the red tape, regulation, culture and infrastructure as they expand into the rest of Africa, they often forget one of the most important elements of success-ensuring that employees in new territories are aligned with the operational processes and the strategic direction of their organisations.

Here, companies should be investing in tools and structures that help their people to get operational on their systems and processes as quickly as possible while helping them to feel connected to the purpose and outcomes of their jobs. This is not just about training and change management - it's also about creating a culture of learning and providing business performance support tools that help people do their jobs more efficiently and effectively.

This demands that companies not only roll out training and user adoption programmes, but also provide users with performance support systems that help them to better use company systems and processes while they're working.

By helping process operators to understand how their work impacts the whole organisation, a business empowers them to perform better in a way that enhances the performance of the whole organisation. They understand how their work links into the business's strategy as well as how it helps other people do their work.

Process champions

It is easy for top management to formulate a vision for an integrated business system that underpins an integrated enterprise. It's far from simple to translate this into organisational action. The reality is that even departmental heads and middle managers often lack insight into how their departments impact on business performance.

For that reason, it's important to roll out training and user programmes that are cross-functional and integrated in nature. One must strive to ensure close integration of the organisation's departments and functions, appointing process champions to lead the implementation and change efforts.

Remember that one can't simply give people boot camp training and expect them to perform straightaway. They need time to integrate into company culture, to learn their jobs organically, and absorb the knowledge being thrown at them.

For that reason, there must be a strong focus on on-the-job training and investment in performance support tools to enable this. Employees learn better through practice and application than they do from having too much theoretical information thrown at them in a few classroom sessions.

Technology has an important supporting role to play in helping companies train staff in their systems and processes. In Africa, cloud computing and mobile devices are a great way to get performance support and e-learning systems up-and-running quickly and at a relatively low cost. The technology is immediate, accessible, efficient and affordable.

Head in the cloud

We find that e-learning is best-suited as a mechanism for introducing users to theoretical concepts, ahead of more practical training. It is also well suited to training people in areas such as company culture or basic policies and procedures.

E-learning by itself will not be enough to achieve the required skills transfer. It will be important for the company to send trainers - versed in its systems, processes and culture - to its new subsidiary to transfer their knowledge.

It's also essential to provide a range of support mechanisms so that employees can learn on the job. Digital learning materials can be valuable here, but we also find that some workers prefer something more tangible.

For example, learning and job aids such as summarised decision matrices, graphical business process flow diagrams, and paper-based "how do I" guides can help users to find information they need quickly when they're struggling with a task or system.

Many people find paper reference materials easier to search from than second-guessing the search terms of an online system. We are also seeing companies build performance support tools into their business applications. For example, one could guide a call centre agent through a flow chart of questions to ask a client.

Closing words

There are no quick fixes for talent management - companies must invest time in mapping out the skills they have and those they need as well as the systems and process proficiencies its workers need; designing strategies to addresses the weaknesses; and then measuring performance and outcomes.