

EXPLAINER

# As the pace of change quickens, the need to keep learning deepens

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A challenging new workplace reality for many Canadians is the need to constantly learn and develop new skills as the pace of change accelerates.

"The hard part for people nowadays ... is that you have to commit yourself to [expanding] your knowledge and experience – and that's just to stay current. If you want to be ahead of the curve now, you've got way more to learn," says Heidi Rolston, vice-president of learning, diversity and inclusion at Hootsuite Inc.

For the rapidly growing technology company, whose software helps businesses manage their social-media accounts, "it's critical that you have a team of adaptable learners who are up for all the challenges and opportunities growth presents," she wrote in a recent career blog.

By way of organizational support, Hootsuite aims to create an environment that makes learning "part of how we work." It's a work in progress, Ms. Rolston said in an interview. "We are trying to educate the organization around this idea that learning does not only happen in the classroom ... the most significant learning is going to happen on the job."

While employees understand the importance of professional development, they often are so busy working "in the moment" they don't take time to reflect on what they have learned and how to build on that knowledge, says John Horn, board chairman at the Canadian Education and Research Institute for Counselling (CERIC), a not-for-profit organization that supports research on career education and development.

However, now more than ever, career stability cannot be taken for granted. "Whether a new grad, mid-career professional or mature worker, Canadians can expect multiple career transitions. They will need to reinvent their talents and redefine 'career success,' " CERIC said in a recent bulletin.

Mr. Horn, manager of learning and development at Vancouver City Savings Credit Union, encourages employees to take charge of their own career development and choose their own format, whether it's e-learning, challenging work assignments, coaching, classroom workshops or formal training.

"Placing your own destiny in your hands is smart and good advice," says Vancouver-based career coach Ian Christie, founder of Bold Career. "One of the biggest career traps people fall into is what I call accidental career progression. Your company needs you to do this, they're reorganizing, redefining roles and all of a sudden you have a job you never intended to have," Mr. Christie said in an interview. It's difficult to move on from a role that is important to your organization but not so much in demand in the broader labour market.

In his practice, Mr. Christie sees clients who are excited by the prospect of new and emerging job opportunities and keen to explore how they can position themselves to take advantage of those opportunities. But he also sees people who say "I am happy where I am, just tell me what I have to do to hold on to my job."

"There's a risk attached to that approach. ... It's sad to see people just hanging on by their fingernails to some role they have had for the last 15 years."

At VanCity, Mr. Horn is always on the lookout for new books and informative blogs to read, online courses to explore, interesting YouTube videos to watch. A big proponent of colleagues sharing knowledge – regardless of job title – he once blogged about the insights he gained from VanCity's young interns. "We want 'reverse mentorship' and 'professional reciprocity' between our interns and regular employees. ... How we might better engage youth as employees and members of our financial co-operative is something that they've been teaching me."

That blog, posted by Mr. Horn in 2015, was co-written with Ashley Dhaliwal, a VanCity intern at the time. She now works in a human-resources role at Hootsuite in Vancouver.

Mr. Horn's enthusiasm for continual learning was infectious, Ms. Dhaliwal said in an interview. "Of course, formal education is a great way to further your development, but it's not the only way."

Ms. Dhaliwal said she learned invaluable lessons from her master of management courses at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business and her internship at VanCity: "How to be resourceful, how to have the confidence that I can figure things out, understanding [in the face of a new challenge] that maybe I don't have the skill set yet, but I can find it, or I can ask somebody or I can Google it."

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