

Organizational Learning

How Workers with a “Gig Mindset” Can Help Your Company Thrive

by Jane McConnell

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Summary. Success in today’s fast-changing world requires organizations to be in a permanent state of flexibility, able to react quickly when necessary. This requires a culture of constant learning. Gig mindsetters — a bold new breed of full-time, salaried employees who think... [more](#)

The pandemic has shown that companies need to be proactively resilient — to use the crisis as a learning experience and an opportunity to transform into something new and stronger. Flexible companies can assemble teams quickly, draw on collective knowledge and find expertise inside and outside of the

organization, communicate strategic messages to the workforce, and collect information from employees in the field in real time. To build those capabilities, constant learning needs to be part of the company's culture.

Large-scale change or learning programs aren't the answer. While they're well intentioned, they're generally structured from the top down, and the majority of them fail because they don't enable people to take individual initiative.

Instead, companies should enable employees to become "gig mindsetters": what I call a bold new breed of full-time, salaried employees who think and act like freelancers. Gig mindsetters are constant learners — they self-manage, take spontaneous initiative, focus on skills more than roles, feel free to shortcut processes, and don't hesitate to question the status quo. They share what they learn with others, take ownership of their own personal growth, and feel confident in their ability to influence people.

A gig mindset learning culture starts within individuals and grows to serve both people and the organization. Here's what we can learn from two very different companies that cultivated gig mindset learning cultures by putting people in control while maintaining a complementary focus on the organization.

Learn, Apply, Share

I talked with Dany De Grave, senior director of digital transformation at Sanofi, a diversified global health care company present in more than 170 countries. With the help of a few colleagues, De Grave developed a "learn, apply, share" strategy. People who want to kick off their own learning actions are asked to complete a formal but simple one-page document that poses six questions:

- What will I learn?
- How will I learn?
- How will I and Sanofi both benefit from my investment?
- When will I learn?
- Where will I learn?

- Who will help me make this a success, for myself and for Sanofi?

Formalizing the individual initiative on paper makes it part of the job, not a sideline or after-hours task. People are encouraged to share their learning in a dedicated Yammer community and in local onsite communities.

A “learn, apply, share” initiative can help organizations retain talent, as illustrated by the path taken by an ambitious employee who decided to learn new skills on his own with the intention of changing companies for a new job. De Grave told me:

There was a biostatistician studying machine learning at a university on his own time outside of his work at Sanofi. We contacted him and discussed how we could help him make the next step in his career while staying at Sanofi. We offered to give him real data sets to work with, and thereby made his work valuable to Sanofi as well as serving as real-life material in his course. The result? He stepped into a new role at Sanofi rather than looking for a new job in a different company.

Sanofi retained a talented employee by supporting his learning officially and enabling him to apply and share it within the company.

Lifting Engagement Internally and Externally

Nishith Desai Associates (NDA), a 31-year-old international law firm with 120 employees and a presence in Asia Pacific, Europe, and North America, was recognized by the *Financial Times* as “India’s most innovative law firm” for six years. They provide strategic advice in future-oriented areas of law, such as blockchain and virtual currencies, internet of things, artificial intelligence, privatization of outer space, drones, robotics, virtual reality, and nanotechnology.

Nanda Majumdar, leader of strategy and transformation, explained how the gig mindset became part of the company's culture: "We embraced the gig mindset starting in 2016 by shifting from a traditional partnership hierarchy to a networked leadership model, based on self-responsibility and self-management."

Nonstop learning is important, and NDA is often described as a "law school after law school" where each employee is required to do one hour of learning every single day. During the pandemic, NDA developed a Client Continuing Education Program (cCep), which extended beyond clients and potential clients to include other professionals like lawyers, accountants, bankers, and the larger community, including law students. It was designed specifically to offer guidance during the challenging conditions people were experiencing and included online webinars, such as "Covid-19: Force Majeure — Can Parties Renege from Their Contracts?," "How Do We Accelerate Drone Deliveries During Lockdown?," and "How Would Covid-19 Affect Acquiring Distressed Businesses in India?"

cCep benefitted NDA internally by lifting engagement, focus, and unity, and externally by supporting clients, many of whom were in deep flux and distress. According to Majumdar, "Clients have been able to benefit from our expertise and that of people in our network, such as top politicians, bureaucrats, economists, policy makers, investment bankers, venture capitalists, industry experts, entrepreneurs, and domain experts."

The result? Today, NDA is a thriving contributor to the vast regulatory, industry, policy, and government firmament in India, and the employees have a reinforced sense of purpose.

People want a sense of purpose more so today than ever before. A gig mindset work culture lets purpose come alive for individuals and organizations.

Company Self-Assessment

To determine whether your organization has a gig mindset learning culture, think about these questions, discuss with others, and discover action areas for yourself and your organization.

Flow of information and ideas

- Are people in your organization able to communicate directly with senior leaders without having to go through layers of management?
- Are people encouraged to challenge the status quo? Do leaders seek discussion, not consensus?

Teams and experimenting

- Are teams built by focusing more on skills and knowledge than on titles and positions?
- Are teams encouraged to work out loud, sharing their work before it is completed?
- When an experimental initiative fails, does management consider it to be a positive experience and ask the people involved to share what they learned?

Horizon scanning

- Are there systems for getting input from the edges, such as from customer-facing colleagues?
- Are people given time for activities, such as external networking, attending conferences, and taking online learning programs?
- Are there ways to follow developments in the external world — the economy, technology, society — whether or not they impact your organization directly today?

Retaining Gig Mindsetters

Fostering a gig mindset learning culture is a retention issue — if gig mindsetters encounter repeated obstacles, they may decide to look for more fulfilling places to work. This is easier to do now that established organizations are actively seeking new talent and small businesses and startups abound. One employee in a 100-

person startup told me: “We just got a new guy in our company. He’s about 35 or so and used to work pretty high up at [name of globally famous company]. He resigned and came here. He’s making much less money, he says, but the work is more interesting, and he’s enjoying himself much more.” And this, from a senior manager at a large company: “If I as a manager don’t encourage the gig mindset, I will lose both the motivation and in the end the best people.”

The paradox for leaders is that gig mindsetters behave in ways that can appear deviant. Challenging the status quo is a big deal in most organizations and can carry professional risks for employees if managers feel threatened. Gig mindsetters can encounter problems at work because managers see their behaviors as disrespectful, undisciplined, and self-centered. Those managers don’t understand positive deviance, where the so-called negative behaviors actually bring benefits to the organization as a whole. As one research participant told me, “The gig mindset includes a level of loyalty to the organization and not the process. It is a willingness to make things better.” The following table shows how behaviors that may be perceived as deviant are actually beneficial to the organization.

Deviance or Positive Deviance? It's All About Perception

Behaviors of gig mindsetters tend to trigger strong reactions, negative or positive, because they're signs of fundamental, deep differences between traditional ways of working and the advent of new ways of working.

Gig mindset behaviors	Deviance against the organization →	Positive deviance for the organization
Experimental, unapproved initiatives	Undisciplined, unmanageable, disrespectful of established ways of working	Discoveries within a broad framework, new services and markets
Team building across silos based on skills rather than roles	A threat to hierarchy, loss of control by silo owners	Faster and more-comprehensive results, increased impact thanks to diversity of ideas and skills
Openness and working out loud	Risky because confidential information may be exposed	Broader input and faster reactions, early anticipation and resolution of potential issues
Challenging the status quo	Lack of respect for management	Exploring new ways of working and of serving customers
External networking and continually learning new skills	Being self-centered and individualistic	Awareness of what is happening with both competitors and current and potential customers

Source: Jane McConnell, netjmc.com

HBR

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Success in today's fast-changing world requires organizations to be in a permanent state of flexibility, able to react quickly when necessary. Sanofi's and **NDA's innovative learning initiatives** illustrate how a gig mindset learning culture offers employees a chance to think about their purpose and define new roles. At the same time, they result in a culture of continual learning with engaged employees, making organizations stronger and proactively resilient.

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