

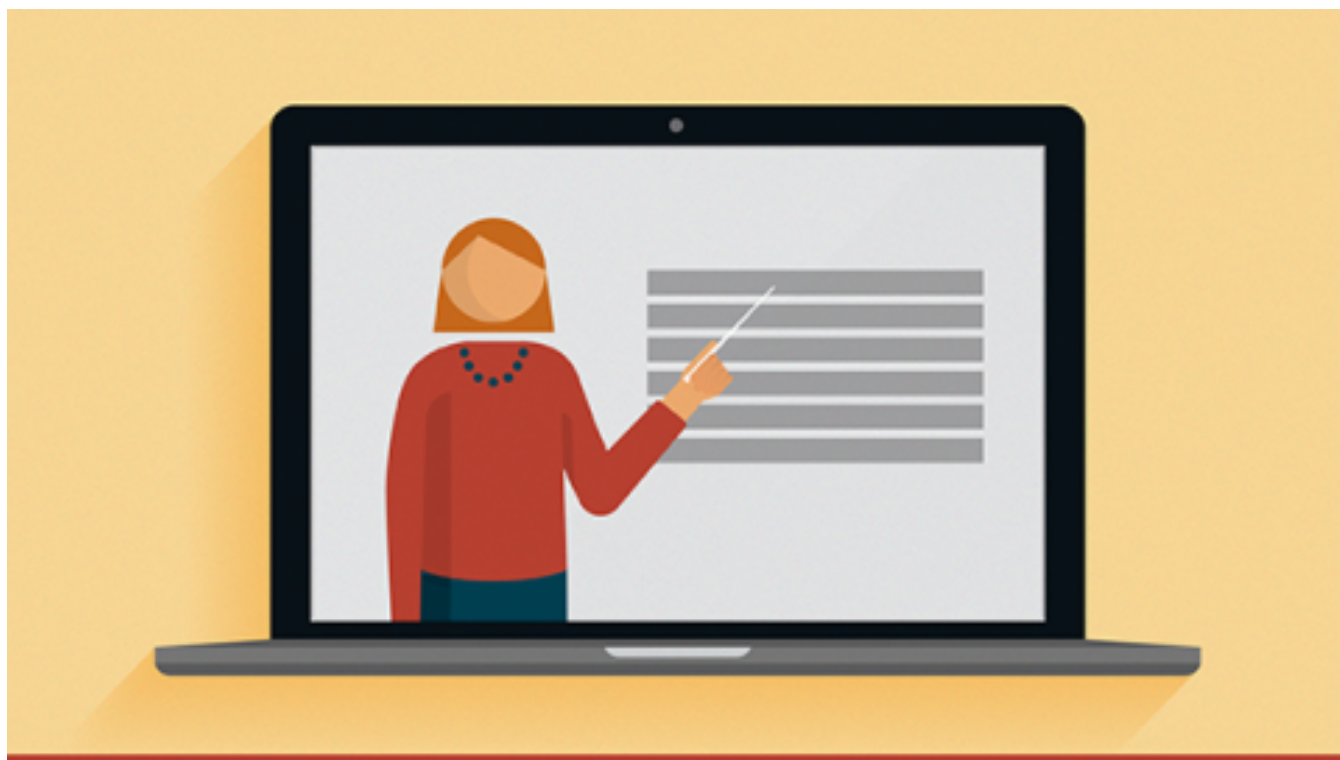
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How to build a blockbuster internal IT talent program: 8 tips

How can IT leaders retain their most valuable people and prepare them for a stellar career path? Learn from organizations that have created internal IT academies that are big, branded, and budgeted

By Stephanie Overby



Unemployment levels among IT occupations continue to be low. "There has never been a better time to be in the information technology field," says Dan Roberts, CEO of Ouellette & Associates and author of *Confessions of a Successful CIO*, for those who are well-qualified

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As the 2020 Harvey Nash/KPMG CIO Survey pointed out, IT skills shortages were close to an all-time high prior to COVID-19, and they have remained high. There is also the threat of a looming turnover tsunami in IT. "Many are predicting attrition of 25 percent as we come out of the pandemic – a talent migration we've not seen before," Roberts says. "One of the best tools that a CIO has at their disposal to better engage and retain their talent is to invest into their development."

One thing some CIOs have done both to address the skills gaps and to better arm their teams for long-term tech careers and IT leadership roles is to create an internal talent program. "One of the reasons why these kinds of talent initiatives are so critical [is that] we need to do a better job of preparing our people to meet the changing expectations of the role today," Roberts explains.

The most impressive and effective of these internal IT academies are "big, branded, and budgeted," says Roberts. These initiatives have to be big and bold because there is a lot of work to do, Roberts explains – "a lot of skills debt to overcome."

The Harvard IT Academy – the brainchild of outgoing vice president and CIO Anne Margulies – is one such program. When Margulies and fellow school CIOs embarked on the process of creating the IT academy several years ago, they engaged leaders and staff across the 1,500-person IT organization to create a world-class program with breadth and depth. They designed a curriculum that would offer training not only in important technical skills but also essential capabilities like having a service mindset and taking a trusted advisor approach. "It is one of the most impressive programs I've worked on over the past decade," Roberts says. "And it is still going strong several years later."

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IT talent retention: 8 tips for building an internal IT academy

IT leaders who'd like to build their own big, budgeted, and branded IT academy can take a page from the playbook of Harvard's CIOs and others who have invested in significant programs. Consider this advice as you explore or shape an internal IT academy:

1. Know your mission

An IT academy is not just for tech upskilling.

An IT academy is not just for tech upskilling. "An academy is a sign of a CIO's commitment to their people: a commitment to their development to help them show up differently, build stronger relationships, and have greater impact," Roberts says.

It's important to put culture first and build a program around that, says Misti Fragen, vice president of Learning, Research, and Culture for Novant Health's Digital Products and Services (DPS) organization. "Know the purpose, mission, vision, and values of the organization," Fragen says. "Build [a program] around putting team members first where they feel valued, listened to, and engaged in all areas."

2. Create a learning culture

That's been key at Novant Health. "We have continuously worked to create and maintain a culture of learning within our technology group," says Fragen. DPS has its own dedicated learning teams and is constantly looking at partnerships with various universities, consulting companies, and more to be able to offer opportunities for continued growth to team members.

3. Tap into what your team wants to learn

"IT folks are wired for learning," says Fragen. "They are curious, and they want to keep their skills current." Find out what your team members want to learn and give it to them. Chances are those sought-after skills align with your organization's present

or future needs as well.

"The best CIOs are proactive and don't wait to get dinged via the engagement feedback," Fragen says. "Feedback is invaluable so listening and creating action plans is key to success."

4. Focus on important non-technical skills

Differentiating skills include the ability to influence others, communication and collaboration, leading change, and business acumen.

When Ouellette Associates asked CIOs of organizations high on the company's IT Maturity Curve what core competencies they were developing or looking for in new hires, just two were technical skills. The rest were what Ouellette calls "human factors" or core skills.

"Savvy CIOs such as Harvard's recognize that there are new skills that are essential or core today," Roberts says. "Some of the other differentiating skills include the ability to influence others, communication and collaboration, leading change, and business acumen. This is a new world and being successful is going to take new skills."

5. Secure adequate resources

For these talent programs to be effective, they need adequate funding. "Even more importantly we need to give people the time and headspace to stop, hit the pause button and focus on learning new skills," Roberts says.

"At the end of the day, when you look at the high and growing cost of attrition and talent replacement, you realize that proactive investments provide a great ROI."

6. Develop a brand that reflects a commitment to growth

"The best talent initiatives I've seen over the past three decades were branded, they had a name, something everyone could rally around," Roberts says. "A well-branded

IT Academy also becomes a powerful talent attraction tool, because IT professionals want to be in an environment that provides development opportunities.”

That may not be the only branding exercise you need to consider. Novant Health rebranded its entire IT service (ITS) group as Digital Products and Services three years ago. “As we work through our transformation efforts, the traditional ITS didn’t truly encompass the overall vision and work of the teams and the future ahead,” Fragen says. “Digital Products and Services truly puts the lens on the innovation of our digital transformation and the spotlight on the products and services being developed for consumption to our business partners, rather than just the traditional efforts of an ITS organization.”

7. Keep investing

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Without ongoing effort, a talent program can quickly become stale and have the opposite of its intended effect. “Stay the course and don’t allow your program to be one of those flavor-of-the-year, check-the-box exercises that only creates more cynicism amongst the troops,” Roberts says.

8. Get started, even if you start small

It may be tough to get the resources for a full-fledged IT academy right away, but it’s okay to start small. “Let your early wins build momentum towards something bigger,” Roberts says.

He recalls a cartoon making the rounds a few years ago, featuring a CFO protesting: "What if we invest in our people, and they leave?" "The savvy retort was 'What if you don't, and they stay?'" Roberts says. "Get started, even if you don't have an HR partner who can help you out. This is too important to wait."

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Stephanie Overby is an award-winning reporter and editor with more than twenty years of professional journalism experience. For the last decade, her work has focused on the intersection of business and technology. She lives in Boston, Mass.

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