

Square One: Repurposing Career Development Models to Retain Workers and Expand the Workforce

TORINA CRAIG, MS
ALAMEDA COUNTY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Emerging Leader Track (ELT 2.0) is a successful career development program that has been implemented by the County of Sonoma Human Services Department since 2013. The intent of this research is to draw an illustrative map for the Alameda County Social Services Agency which demonstrates a correlation between career development programs and employee retention based on the ELT 2.0 model. Engaging employees

through quality career development programs has historically been a way for businesses to cultivate and preserve what is arguably among its most valued assets “the workers.” Despite past industrial shifts, which have caused turbulence in the labor market, career development permits employers to make an effective investment in workers which often yields the high return of loyalty in the form of retention.

Torina Craig, MS, Program Service Coordinator
Alameda County Social Service Agency, Workforce and
Benefits Administration, Program Planning and Support

Introduction

In an era of modernity, where most existing businesses have experienced the COVID – 19 pandemic, it is likely that the universal lesson learned is “change is inevitable”. Though a rare historical event, the global pandemic has meant major adaptations for businesses, even the most antiquated industries. Its impact forced businesses to reimagine their template of work and what that looked like for its workforce. Over the past four years, most employers have been tasked with re-evaluating daily operations and implementing new practices as safety protocols to retain workers. County governments have not been immune from this dilemma and have perhaps for the first time in decades embraced a paradigm shift. This evolution has meant pivoting from obsolete practices of the past to retain laborers for the work of the future. The intent of this research is to draw an illustrative map for Alameda County’s Social Services Agency which demonstrates how career development programs have been used to improve employee retention. Although many factors have impacted businesses and disrupted the workforce, in most cases one of the most impactful ways employers have maintained its workforce has been by investing in their career growth.

Workplace Flight Etiology

The 2019 pandemic, and the workplace mores that spawned from it, have produced adverse repercussions to employee retention for most businesses. In California, innovative technological advances implemented by businesses during the pandemic permitted many workers a degree of safety and flexibility. The advent of remote work, coupled with the high cost of living in the state, has made it easy for some

government agencies to have their employees poached by competing industries.

Alameda County Social Services Agency has experienced a historic drop in their full-time employees. According to the human resources department, from 2020 – 2023 (at the time of this research) there were 472 employee resignations – leaving them with a need to fill 332 full-time employee (FTE) vacancies (SSA Human Resources Department, Resignation Report, 2023). The labor pains endured by Alameda County and other local government organizations in California are not attributed solely to the pandemic. In fact, one can only imagine the massive exodus of skilled government workers that may have resulted from the tech wave of the 90s which bore the “dot com boom.” Some sources estimate that tech companies added nearly 250,000 jobs in the early 90s (Dennis, 2023). Many of those jobs were filled by workers that switched industries seeking relief from: sub-par wages, mundane assignments, and stagnant career trajectories (Saxenian, 2001).

The dot com boom of the 90s is yet another of many past labor phenomena that changed the traditional employment landscape and wreaked havoc on the retention of employees. For many workers, the newly formed tech industry was their first glimpse of autonomy, financial security, and freedom from workplace frigidity. For still others, particularly those that belonged to culturally marginalized groups, it may have been their first equitable opportunity to propel from “the bottom up” without cracking their heads on glass ceilings. Also noteworthy was the value that tech businesses placed on workers who possessed the professional acumen attained through more traditional means of employment.

Correlation of Career Development and Retention

In preparation for, and maybe even in response to, past workplace flight, many California county agencies have placed a high priority on cultivating some of their most treasured assets, “the workers.” Since as recently as the early 2000s, leadership in local government agencies has contemplated innovative career development models that have imbued workers. Most employers are aware that setting their workers on a structured career development pathway helps them gain confidence and the knowledge necessary to propel them toward a clear career trajectory. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), employer-led career development programs instilled confidence by assisting workers with gaining mastery over niche skill sets indigenous to their companies (2023, <https://www.shrm.org>). This may also eliminate the need for workers to seek opportunities elsewhere -which is essentially retention. Retention is an integral byproduct of employee confidence, and as such, many employees are more willing to consider the time and other investments poured into them by employers as a sign that they are valued. They may also accept that this newly perceived value - endowed upon them by the employer - positions them for future promotions. In a recent study, Monster found that almost 50% of employees viewed career development to be in large part the responsibility of the employer. While 29% stated that too few chances for upward mobility within their companies was what pushed them to consider other opportunities (2023, <https://www.shrm.org>).

Before the cataclysmic onset of the pandemic, many human resources teams had been keenly aware of how vital career

development was to employee retention. Organizational development teams have worked diligently to bolster such programs in an attempt to retain workers and stave off the allure of competing industries.

Emerging Leader Track

In the mid-2000s, the leadership of Sonoma County Human Services Department (HSD), embarked upon a charge to equip workers with the tools of ascendancy. With every intention to sow the promising talent that flourished from this venture, Jerry Dunn, former head of HSD, desired to design a multifaceted career development program. Although he laid the framework for what was an auspicious program, his goal was to build a robust platform that launched leaders from every level—essentially meeting workers where they were and empowering them to meet their fullest potential. Not one to reinvent the wheel, and armed with knowledge of an existing program in Contra Costa County (CCC), Kiergan Pegg, current HR Manager, attended the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) Executive Development Program (EDP), to research CCC’s: *Art of Managing and Supervising People* program.

ELT 2.0

In 2013 Sonoma’s HSD launched the Emerging Leader Track (ELT). ELT, a four-year career development program, comprised of a cohort of staff at all levels primed for a rigorous training in executive leadership. Over time, this laborious four-year model was condensed into a two-year path in 2017, and by 2021, it evolved to a one-year multi-track sequence designed specifically for leaders at two levels (Track 1 - individual contributors) and (Track 2 – managers and supervisors) which is now the ELT 2.0.

Since its inception, the program has produced six cohorts of potential leaders - the most prolific among them being the 2022-2023 cycle which boast of an almost one hundred percent completion rate (for cohorts in Track 1 and 2), see Table 1. There is also a plan to add an additional track making a total of three training cohorts that will run concurrently. The impressive nearly 40% promotion rate of Sonoma's ELT 2.0 program lends credence to how strong and effective a structured career development program - initiated by an organization's leadership - can become. HSD's program has not appeared to be just for the purpose of producing an executive assembly line, but rather to ensure that each cohort is engaged and enriched through an exploratory process of best practices that can be implemented into current and future roles.

Each year in March, Jennifer Hayworth, Staff Development Manager, sends out an ELT 2.0 recruitment announcement to prospective leaders within HSD. The announcement gives an overview of the program including: the application process, expected time commitment, and program objectives. To enroll, employees submit an interest form for ELT which is then forwarded to employees' supervisors, managers, and ultimately the division leadership for final approval. Noteworthy is the intentionality of the interest form which poses open-ended introspective questions forcing candidates to delve deep for well-crafted answers to questions such as: *An ELT 2.0 participant should be committed to moving HSD initiatives, Racial Equity and Trauma Informed Care agency, forward- tell us how you identify with [this statement]*).

ELT 2.0 is composed of two tracks. Track 1 and Track 2 are similar in that they are both cohorts of community style adult learners. Both tracks also run simultaneously, each of

which are released from their work assignments to attend class one day per month. Additionally, the curricula of both tracks are designed to be a multimodal amalgamation of classroom and home-based study. Track 1's cohort is comprised of 25 employees selected from amongst individual core staff of various divisions aimed at preparation for middle management. Track 2's cohort consists of 15 middle managers on route to executive leadership. Also woven throughout the curricula is the mission and philosophy of the HSD.

ELT 2.0 Pedagogy:

ELT 2.0 provides potential leaders knowledge through a "competency framework" (Hayworth, 2021). Knowles' Five Assumptions of Adult Learners, and the Principles of Andragogy is an evidence-based form of pedagogy often implemented as a way of engaging adults through more practical means of learning. This experiential model is often the preferred technique when engaging adult learners as it is a more comprehensive approach (2023.<https://research.com>).

Ultimately, the vision of ELT's founder has either been realized or superseded. In a recent interview of ELT 2.0's participants, the panelist from cohort 2022-2023 praised the program. Each postulated various attributes the program contributed to their career development. Yet, collectively, almost in a melodic unison, "confidence" was the resounding result with which each unanimously agreed they would depart.

The Efficacy of Career Development

Confidence, while a commendable quality, is often difficult to gauge in workers. However, one way to do so may be by means of

assessing the rate at which employees mobilize through a company and apply for promotions. Confident employees often excel in their careers and as such many are more apt to take the risk of applying for and attaining promotions. There is data that confirms that ELT's program participants have a trend of upward mobility within HSD (see Table 1).

Employee retention may also be a quantifiable method by which to evaluate the program's success. HSD's most recent iteration of matriculated ELT 2.0 participants retained employment at a rate of 98% (Hayworth, 2023).

Employee retention could be at the crux of Alameda County's Social Services Agency (ACSSA) need for adopting a more holistic career development model. Although ACSSA has several career development programs, few provide the structure exhibited by Sonoma's ELT 2.0's. Therefore, retention continues to be a point of contention for this county. It is important to note that at the time of this research very little data was available to prove the efficacy of several ACSSA career development models. However, despite the limited data ACSSA does have a program with the potential to streamline recruitment and retention if repurposed and fused with the framework of the ELT model. The program, which has quantifiable efficacy, could be the foundation for obtaining and retaining the future leaders of the agency.

In 2014, The California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids Public Service Trainee Program (CPSTP) was designed by the agency to support participants of the CalWORKs program to prepare for work while fulfilling their Welfare-To-Work obligations. To this point the program has prepared just under 60 employees for

Alameda County's workforce (see Table 2), while preparing still others for work in similar organizations. Similar in origin to ELT, CPSTP's model was created for one purpose, but has the potential to be repurposed for so much more.

CPSTP & ELT- Congruence and Contrast

CPSTP and ELT 2.0 are congruent programs in many ways. The parallels begin with the recruitment process, cohort sizes, and training styles. Although some program components are similar, there are distinct differences. For example, ELT's (Track 1) cohorts begin their program as core staff of the Sonoma HSD, whereas CPSTP's cohorts are non-employees, and every effort is made to assist each through employment acquisition by program's end. There are also variations related to program design. CPSTP is a fourteen-week comprehensive job preparation program which includes a range of topics from employment basics like computer literacy, to very detailed county specifics taught by in-house experts. Although similar training methods are used by both programs, at the crux of ELT is evolving in one's career while CPSTP's core training is attaining a career. Like ELT, CPSTP's training begins with theoretical course knowledge, but it is later transposed to hands-on practically honed skills through on-the-job training. CPSTP's dualistic approach has proven efficient as most matriculated cohorts leave exceptionally positioned to attain a job – many at SSA (see Table 2).

CPSTP is unique from other career development models in that it allows members access to what for most is an elusive life changing opportunity. Program members get to explore the inner workings of a powerful system from which they had only at the point of entry received help – become

trained and empowered enough to help. Each cohort member has this “lived experience” in common which indelibly changes the core meaning of cohort to that of community. This shift in paradigm, for each cohort member in this exchange, can be a conduit for some degree of life altering change.

Conclusion

With 332 vacant positions, it is clear that ACSSA could benefit from a tool that enhances employee retention. This research illustrates that a well-structured career development program may be the most advantageous way to stave off the lures of outside business and retain employees. Sonoma HSD’s ELT 2.0 program has proven efficacy. So has ACSSA’s CPSTP. It is recommended that ACSSA repurpose and expand its CPSTP model for recruitment purposes and design a career leadership model similar to ELTs to allow employees to bloom from within and later flourish into their fullest potential. Currently, ACSSA’s recruitment process spans a minimum of one year when recruiting from the outside. Those candidates usually possess little knowledge of the agency, and once hired must undergo extensive training and long probation periods. This lends itself to high turnover and low retention. CPSTP’s program participants are eager to join the workforce and possess basic knowledge of the agency’s services. They also have the unique attribute of lived

experience, which could be leveraged in a transformative way to add value to the agency’s service delivery. Employees with lived experience, merged with their newly acquired knowledge of the intricacies of the agency could ensure higher rates of training completion, and employee retention. Also noteworthy is the fact that expanding the existing program may come at a relatively low cost. Currently, Sonoma HSD’s ELT 2.0 multitrack model operates with a staff of two. CPSTP is currently being run by a dynamic program coordinator, Aishah Bashir, and adding an office assistant to the program would put its staffing on par with ELT.

ACSSA should also consider designing an evolutionary ELT career model to launch and propel future leaders through the ranks of the organization. ELT has a proven track record for retaining and promoting employees, and with the underpinnings of a similar program in place ACSSA has already proven it has the bandwidth. If bridged, the two programs have the potential to make a revolutionary impact on the symbiotic recruitment-retention process allowing ACSSA to grow and cultivate a workplace lineage among those engaged in the services. An amalgamation of CPSTP and ELT 2.0 could not only bolster the ACSSA’s recruitment and retention processes, but may also foster future leaders for generations to come.

Table 1 ELT 2.0

Cycle Year 22/23	Track	Cohort Size	Total Promotions
	Track 1 (Core staff)	25	9
	Track 2 (Supervisors/Mgrs)	10	4

Table 2 CalWORKs CPSTP

Cohorts 1 -9	Alameda County Employees	Potential total if 2x for ACSSA recruitment purposes	Less Attrition
Total Participants			
178	60	400	50

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Alameda County Social Services Agency (ACSSA) and the County of Sonoma HSD. I do not have the verbiage to express how integral your assistance was with seeing this project to fruition. A huge thank you to ACSSA leadership including Andrea Ford, Agency Director, Anissa Basoco-Villarreal, Assistant Agency Director, and my supervisor Antionette Burns, CPSTP coordinator, Aisha Bishar, and BASSC liaison, Michael Little.

To the County of Sonoma HSD Agency Director Angela Struckmann and staff development training manager Jennifer Hayworth, thank you for availing yourself at any time. Clearly your work is a labor of love, and the County of Sonoma is blessed to have you. Also, thanks to the human resources team at HSD for quantifying your data empirically – it contributed greatly to the foundation of this project. Thank you to the ELT 2.0 2022-2023 cohort panelist for taking

the time to share your experience of the program.

Finally, a special thanks to the BASSC Executive Development Program Team. I am grateful to have been involved in what I believe to be one of the most comprehensive career metamorphoses I have ever experienced.

References

- Alameda County Social Services Agency 2023: *Resignation Report, Human Resources Department*.
- Bashir, Aishah 2023. CalWORKs Public Service Training Program: *Program Statistics*.

Dennis, Michael Aaron. "Silicon Valley". Encyclopedia Britannica, 20 May. 2023,
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Silicon-Valley-region-California>.
Accessed 22 May 2023.

Hayworth, Jennifer. 2021. *Emerging Leader Track 2.0 Overview: Description*.
<https://research.com/education/the-andragogy-approach>.

Hayworth, Jennifer. 2021. Emerging Leader Track 2.0 Program Statistics.

Developing Employee Career Paths and Ladders,
<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/developing-employee-career-paths-ladders>

Walker, Richard. 2005. Boom and Bombshell: New Economy Bubble and the Bay Area: Historical Essay. *Originally written for The Changing Economic Geography of Globalization*, Ed., Giovanna Vertova, Routledge 2005.