



Altria Puts Career-Focused Training Online for Its Salesforce

Altria

Best Unique or Innovative Talent Management Program

August 2018



Company Background



Altria

Company-at-a-Glance	
Headquarters	Richmond, VA, USA
Year Founded	1919
Revenue	\$10+ billion
Employees	7,500–9,999
Global Scale	Mostly located in one country with some global locations
Customers/Output	Consumer Goods
Industry	Consumer Goods
Stock Symbol	MO
Website	http://www.altria.com/Pages/default.aspx

Budget and Timeframe

Number of (HR, Learning, Talent) employees involved with the implementation?	2
Timeframe to implement	1.5 months
Start date of the program	Q2 2017

Business Conditions and Business Needs

In 2015, the Altria Group Distribution Company (AGDC) was preparing for a transformative realignment of the entire organization. Learning and development (L&D) was considered a key to successful realignment with responsibilities to upskill all operating company (OPCO) employees and create an organization where capable, diverse leaders are inspired and empowered to achieve their full potential.

Training and development previously focused on new sales employees and new-to-role first line managers, leaving the majority of Altria's ~2,000 employees without formalized role- or-skill training. The training programs consisted of instructor-led training supplemented by new-to-role curriculum. AGDC was vastly underutilizing its LMS capabilities by only offering custom-made curriculum, providing no off-the-shelf training resources and no social-training platform. In addition, all development activities were done offline by local management and eLearning sessions were lengthy, not mobile compatible, and not offered on demand. No user experience was incorporated into the website design.

The L&D team took a different approach to rebuilding training programs. The team conducted a review of past programs and their successes and shortcomings, looked to multiple experts and consultants in the field for direction, and created a vision to guide decisions and focus efforts.

To fulfill the vision, the team created AGDC University with six core principles that consisted of a centralized curriculum for all employees from hire to retire. Multi-modal learning was built by L&D experts with engagement from key stakeholders and backed by clear measurement.

Prior to AGDC University, training focused on new-to-role employees with little training for tenured employees. Yet, company leaders believe in lifelong learning. To put that belief into action for the salesforce, the company needed to offer optional training. AGDC University initially started the optional training strictly in person.

The salesforce was spread throughout the country, requiring extensive travel and increasing costs for the training. Additionally, miscommunication and no-shows for the training started to increase, and L&D team members realized they needed to switch to virtual training.



While AGDC University was changing some of its training delivery, the team decided to see if other changes were needed. To develop a baseline assessment of engagement and to understand learners' needs, the team deployed an engagement survey to the salesforce. The survey revealed the need for career-focused training directed toward individual contributors and managers. To meet that need, AGDC partnered with BlessingWhite, a division of GP Strategies, on quarterly training programs.

Overview

The AGDC L&D team developed AGDC University to provide training to Altria's salesforce around the country. The university is a comprehensive leadership/development system connecting learning to development for all OPCO employees. Its vision is to engage employees in lifelong learning, equip them with the skills needed for their roles today and in the future, and empower them to own their development.

This system leverages three learning approaches: formal, self-directed and social. The university continues to employ "best-in-class" instructor-led programs but now also delivers innovative, on-demand, online learning and connects learners via social learning. Through the platform, employees can find learning mapped to specific skills, OPCO-competencies, the Enterprise Leadership Model, and enterprise initiatives. Employees can align their learning activities to their dynamic development plans and managers can view them and provide feedback.

While AGDC University had many resources to help employees perform their best, the L&D team, led by Quan Schneider, identified the need to move the needle for the salesforce's career growth and development while moving to web-based training.

The new training programs were rolled out in Q2 of 2017. AGDC University offered "It's Your Career," "Career Coaching," and "Highlighting Performance." The workshops were designed to equip AGDC salespeople with the skills and resources necessary to have meaningful career conversations and actively manage their own careers.

The goals of "It's Your Career" are to:

- Equip the team with a new perspective on today's career landscape and offer effective career management.
- Provide clarity on sales teams' career drivers, strengths, and differentiators.



- Improve the understanding of conditions that encourage the salespeople to do their best work.
- Provide ideas for exploring opportunities in the organization.
- Prepare discussion plans to enlist support for career development.
- Provide familiarity with additional tools for taking control of their careers.

The goals of “Career Coaching” are to:

- Equip managers with a new perspective on their role in career development.
- Review how career coaching differs from performance management.
- Understand the three essentials for creating coaching partnerships based on trust, confidence and potential.
- Understand the steps for successfully preparing for and participating in career coaching conversations.
- Provide strategies for supporting career development of employees who hold a wide variety of aspirations, capabilities, and attitudes.

The goals of “Highlighting Performance” are to:

- Talk about the “why.”
- Highlight the value of clearly communicating accomplishments and connecting them to growth toward individual goals.
- Learn a situation.
- Action – Resulting structure succinctly communicates key accomplishments.
- Prepare an answer about a missed opportunity.
- Highlight goals and mention how this can strengthen relationships with managers.

Design of the Program

“It’s Your Career” is a three-step, blended-learning process that centers on know yourself, know your options, and take actions. The blended process consists of an online pre-work assessment that participants complete prior to the program. Participants define their values, job conditions, and other important career attributes that will be used as guideposts to the learning. The program was designed so participants can:

- Take ownership of their careers and understand the three components of successful career management.
- Assess their personal values, career drivers, strengths/weaknesses (full-spectrum leadership competencies), and preferred-job conditions.
- Align their capabilities, interests, and aspirations with organizational goals and available opportunities.
- Use existing career resources in their career-management process.
- Explore and evaluate career moves and job rotation assignments for job fit.
- Identify strengths to build and weaknesses to address so they can create targeted development plans.
- Continue to actively manage their career long after the workshop concludes.

“Career Coaching” focuses on the steps managers/supervisors can take to assist their direct reports in career planning. Managers and supervisors have pre-work prior to the program.

Career Coaching was designed to:

- Give employees greater clarity on their own strengths that contribute to the organization’s success.
- Lower turnover rates.
- Increase talent preparedness across the organization.
- Increase levels of trust between managers and their direct reports.

An online post-work site was provided for sustainability. The site contains such resources as tools, processes, and other career components.

After running “It’s Your Career” and “Career Coaching” for Q2 and Q3 of 2017, the L&D team began working on the third program designed to prepare the salesforce for performance reviews. The customized program utilized BlessingWhite’s framework and content from core coaching programs, methodology, and knowledge as career counselors. In Q4 of 2017, AGDC introduced “Highlighting Performance” to help sales team members with their performance management conversations. “Highlighting Performance” was designed to:

- Talk about the “why.”



- Highlight the value of clearly communicating accomplishments and connecting them to growth toward individual goals.
- Learn a situation.
 - Act – Resulting structure should succinctly communicate key accomplishments.
- Prepare an answer about a missed opportunity.
 - Highlight what was learned to apply in now against goals. Proactively mentioning the missed opportunity can strengthen the relationship with the manager.

Delivery of the Program

To accommodate AGDC's salesforce, all three programs were delivered via webinars designed to provide participants with the full effect of the classroom training. This training proved to be cost effective and time efficient since the sales employees could attend the webinars in whatever area of the country they were at that the time. Breakout sessions were included in all three programs, allowing participants to meet new people and share differences and similarities in their experiences.

The biggest challenge was the overall change from ILT to WebEx format. This change led to an attendance issue because sales team members are not used to an office setting and typical office hours. To overcome that problem, AGDC sent out multiple reminders. In addition, AGDC solved the absentee problem by opening slots for participants from 20 to 25.

Measurable Benefits

The successful launch and adoption of the university program has had impact and influence beyond OPCO. In January 2017, the university expanded to include an additional OPCO by offering optional, ongoing training and development for tenured employees. In the past, development for tenured employees was left to the manager and employee. Now L&D is leading conversations with HR senior leadership around integrated talent management for all enterprise employees. The newest programs greatly lessened the impact on the culture change and change management that the salesforce was experiencing. The switch from in-person training to virtual training also made it possible for AGDC University to reach more employees while realizing huge cost savings by eliminating travel.

Specific results of the programs include:

It's Your Career

- 87% of participants understand the conditions that encourage them to do their best work.
- 74% of the participants feel better equipped to manage their careers.
- 79% of participants can identify skills and knowledge to leverage and develop themselves.

Career Coaching

- 91% of participants can identify at least one useful strategy in handling career coaching challenges.
- 83% of participants believe the course provided insights and strategies that will make a difference in their jobs.
- 83% of participants better understand objectives and structure for career-coaching conversations.

Highlighting Performance

- 87% of the participants understand the importance of highlighting their performance to their managers during performance reviews.
- 71% of the participants feel better prepared for their performance reviews.
- 83% of participants plan on using the Situation/Task-Action-Result approach learned during the program when discussing their accomplishments during their performance reviews.



Feedback

Some examples of feedback from participants about what they found most useful and effective from the program:

- “I enjoyed the session and had the opportunity to reassess and consider things that I had not seen or heard recently. I am better for going through this training.”
- “This training is great for all employees. I feel this is extremely helpful for new unit managers.”
- “I really liked the breakout group format to generate engagement; that's not always easy in a WebEx.”
- “Great presenter and engaging atmosphere using WebEx. I really liked the interaction and the capability to break out into small groups.”

Overall

The biggest result from “It’s Your Career” and “Career Coaching” is that participants can take ownership of their careers by understanding the components of successful career management. Managers are now equipped to have purposeful career conversations that benefit AGDC just as much as they benefit the teams. Both managers and individual contributors can align their capabilities, interests, and aspirations with Altria’s organizational goals and available opportunities. Participants of the “Highlighting Performance” program now have a simple strategy to highlight accomplishments and the confidence to have performance conversations and set goals.

The AGDC team discovered that it is difficult to find a career-development program that fits the needs of a large salesforce. The team found that the three programs were great for newer managers and for those who did not have any direction in their careers. As a result, AGDC plans on rolling out different levels of career development for new managers and seasoned managers. Altria leaders also learned the importance of readying managers to have career-development conversations.

After the three programs were successful within AGDC, other leaders became interested in having similar training. The university has been expanding the online program to multiple-operating companies within Altria.



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