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FIRM MANAGEMENT

17 Professional Development Ideas for 2017

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Paul McDonald • Feb. 17, 2017



It's no secret that a robust professional development program is beneficial for accounting professionals, but managers also reap rewards when they invest in employees. Your workers become more knowledgeable, which means they're able to contribute more fully to the organization. Staff members also will likely be [happier](#) in their jobs, and such programs give your firm an edge in recruitment, retention and succession planning.

Help employees — and your organization — thrive in 2017 with these 17 proven professional development strategies.

1. Publicize your programs. All the webinars, courses and workshops you make available won't do any good unless your staff know about them. Promote

professional development opportunities during staff meetings, send out email reminders, and don't forget to include dates and relevant links in internal communications.

2. Support industry credentials. A recent Robert Half [survey](#) of CFOs found nearly three in 10 employers do not offer financial support for employees who want to pursue professional certifications. If you're in that group, help your staff stay up-to-date — and [keep them happy and loyal](#) — by covering the costs of obtaining and maintaining in-demand designations.

3. Cover tuition. Motivate your employees to work toward another relevant degree by reimbursing the costs of tuition and course materials. To make this financial investment pay off, your firm may want to stipulate that unless workers stay a certain number of years after attaining the degree, they would have to refund the payments. As in all matters of compensation and benefits, check with your human resources and legal departments first.

4. Give them time. Help your employees maintain a healthy work-life balance by encouraging them to attend courses and take exams on company time. And if a conference requires extensive travel or a weekend stay, allow them to take an extra day off.

5. Provide free resources. Subscribe to virtual training sources or buy continuing professional education (CPE) self-study courses from the [American Institute of CPAs \(AICPA\)](#). Then make them available to your staff.

6. Designate a quiet room. Some of your employees, especially [working parents](#), may not have the time to study at home. Create a professional development haven by outfitting a room with comfortable chairs, accounting journals, exam study guides and computer terminals.

7. Subscribe to industry publications. Stock your break room and library with recent issues of trade and business journals. And since many of these magazines are online but behind a pay wall, give employees their own accounts.

8. Promote information sharing. Encourage your staff to learn from each other. For team meetings, assign a different person each week to lead a discussion on an article of his or her choice. When employees return from a conference, have them give a presentation on the tips and best practices they picked up.

- 9. Steer employees in the right direction.** Hold career path discussions with your staff so you understand their aspirations. Then point them toward additional professional development opportunities that can help them reach their career goals.
- 10. Encourage cross training.** Increase your workers' skill sets and business acumen by having them rotate jobs within the team and shadow colleagues in other areas.
- 11. Establish a mentorship program.** Foster in-house mentoring so employees benefit from new perspectives while honing their technical and interpersonal skills and deepening their [network](#) within the firm.
- 12. Hold brown-bag sessions.** Give your staff easy access to experts in accounting and finance by hosting guest speakers. Topics for lunch-time talks could include innovative uses for [big data](#) and [Sarbanes-Oxley Act \(SOX\) compliance trends](#).
- 13. Tap into employees' leadership capabilities.** Bolster your [succession plan](#) by implementing a leadership program that identifies and grooms your firm's future managers, directors and partners.
- 14. Reimburse membership fees.** Make it easier for employees to improve upon their networking and leadership abilities by covering their annual dues for professional organizations.
- 15. Build up your team.** A large part of professional development has to do with [nontechnical skills](#) such as communication, leadership and problem solving. A good way to promote that is through team-building exercises, both on- and offsite.
- 16. Offer encouragement.** Your staff will be more enthusiastic when you provide positive feedback on their activities. Take every opportunity to let them know you appreciate all their efforts to grow their careers.
- 17. Lead by example.** Be their role model. Continue your own growth so your staff will be encouraged to follow in your footsteps.

Ongoing employee development gives your staff and your business an edge. Give your team an encouraging push by following these 17 tips. There's no time like the new year to make a fresh start. Let 2017 be the beginning of your revitalized professional development efforts.

Paul McDonald is senior executive director at [Robert Half](#), the world's first and largest specialized staffing firm. He writes and speaks frequently on hiring, workplace and career-management topics. Over the course of more than 30 years in the recruiting field, McDonald has advised thousands of company leaders and job seekers on how to hire and get hired.

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