Are You Missing out on Top Talent Because You Don’t Understand MOOCs?



The seemingly simple solution to the skills gap is to train and educate your workforce. But, the big question remains: Who picks up the tab?

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An August 2017 American Student Assistance study found that 64 percent of the 92,419 people surveyed owed more than $30,000 apiece in student loan debt. That’s a huge burden to take on, even if means landing a better job or hiring a better qualified candidate.

As an alternative, many people are turning to MOOCs – or *massive open online courses.* These educational opportunities are more flexible, and, in most cases, more affordable. Instead of taking on a full course load, enrollees participate in courses specific to their professional needs.

Although MOOCs seem like the perfect solution, many employers remain dubious: Do they really provide a quality education?

Here are the three steps you need to take when looking to hire people with MOOC-based degrees and certifications:

Do your due diligence.

Like traditional universities, not all MOOCs are created equal. A business degree from Harvard signals a different level of skills than a general education degree from a state college.

Mario Peshev is the CEO of DevriX, a WordPress development platform in Sofia, Bulgaria. The company has hired several people who built up their knowledge base through Coursera, Khan Academy and similar platforms. But Peshev admits he would have missed out on some of these employees if he hadn't looked into the courses they'd taken.

In an email, Peshev told me that these people represented a "middle ground" of talent. They have know-how, but their lack of a traditional degree means they probably wouldn't make it through most applicant-tracking system filters.

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"If you hear [the course is from] Stanford or MIT, you can probably rely on their entire training program, all lecturers and each course," Peshev said. "If there are doubts [about a MOOC], cross-reference the course with other people in your network who have graduated from the same place."

Never underestimate a self-learner.

Don't make positive or negative assumptions based solely on a candidate's educational background. Instead, allow this individual the opportunity to prove his or her knowledge.

"The best way to assess education quality – whether it is gained in a traditional classroom setting or online – is to ask the candidate interview questions that reveal their understanding," Michelle Prince, senior vice president and global head of learning and development at the Atlanta-based staffing organization Randstad, said via email.

She went on to advise that employers ask MOOC candidates additional interview questions. Instead of having them list what skills they've learned, ask for examples. Propose real-life scenarios that challenge candidates to solve problems

they would face in your company’s position.

Conduct a work trial.

Often, people who complete MOOCs do so later in their career. They are too experienced to be given entry-level jobs but still need to prove themselves in any newly developed areas. A work trial is an ideal way to address this problem.

During the hiring process, have candidates work with current employees on a project. Give them the same responsibilities they’d take on if hired. Instruct employees to assess these candidates’ skills, not step on their toes. Let your employees know they can step back and observe, but also jump in if the project is going down hill.

Then, ask employees for their honest opinions. How did the candidate succeed? In what ways could he or she still improve? This will provide a clearer picture of the candidate’s skill level and ability to do the job without traditional qualifications.

Hold on to current employees.

Harsh fact: A February Office Vibe survey of 50,000 employees found that 15 percent didn’t see themselves working for their company in a year. In addition, 56 percent of respondents didn’t feel that they had career-development opportunities at their company.

Don’t let this happen at your company. Instead, be open to MOOCs, because that way, you can retain current employees by developing and promoting talent from within the organization.

For example, Laurie Pickard, now the Washington D.C.-based author of *Don’t Pay for Your MBA,* completed MOOC courses that were equivalent to an MBA. This gave her the skills to apply for a new position with her employer. “I got the position,

based in part on my education and due to my proven track record," she told me.

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So, keep track of your self-starters who are taking their education into their own hands. When they've reached the next professional level, offer them a new position. This will help your organization meet its talent needs and retain employees who have proven themselves.

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