The Employee Journey

How to Train Throughout the Entire Employee Lifecycle

We should not judge people by the peak of their excellence; but by

the distance they have traveled

from the point where they started.

- Henry Ward Beecher
Minister, Social Reformer, and Abolitionist

The key to realizing a dream is to focus not on success but significance, and then even the small steps and little victories along your path will take on greater meaning.

- Oprah Winfrey

For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as

forward motion,

a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self.

The journey doesn't end.

- Michelle Obama
Former First Lady, in *Becoming*

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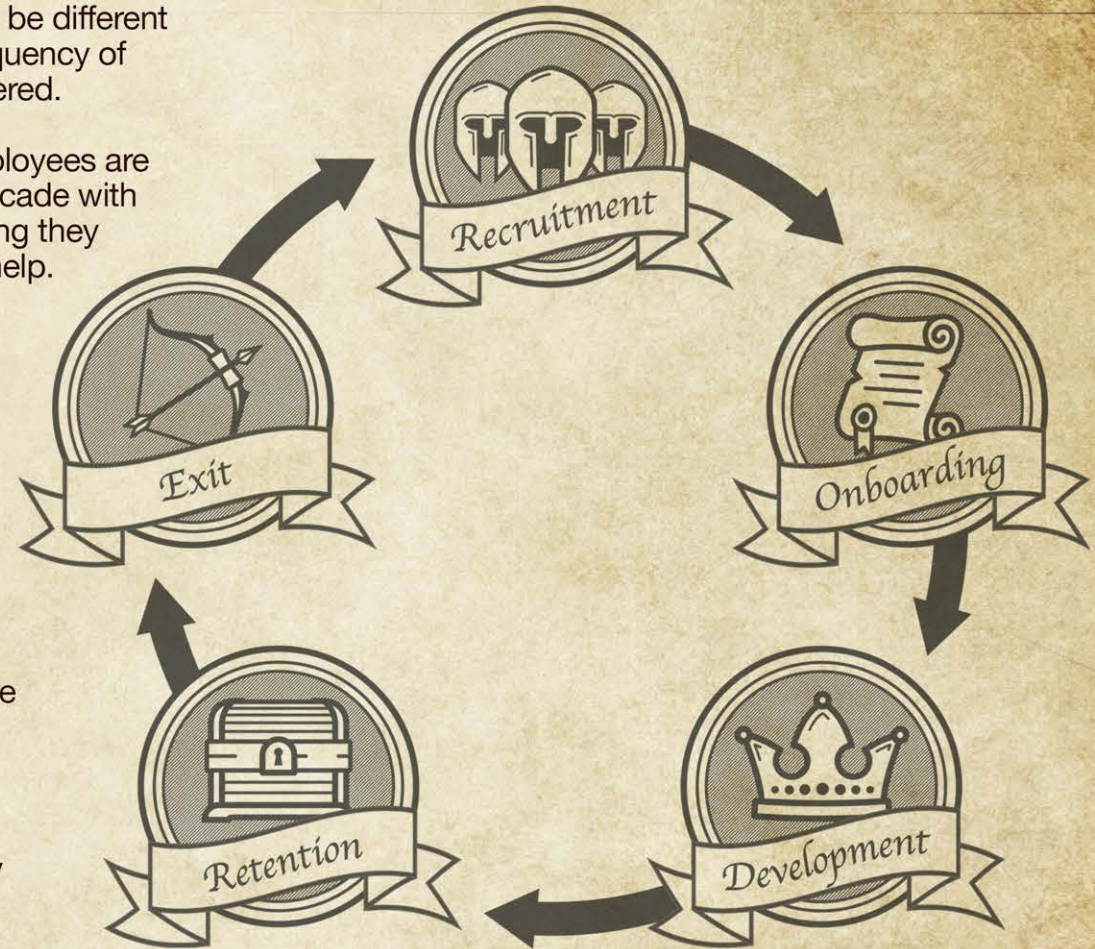
The Employee Lifecycle

The kinds of corporate training you offer a seasoned employee should be different from those you provide during onboarding. The same goes for the frequency of training, the depth of training, and even the kinds of training topics offered.

In some organizations, the focus is onboarding and the seasoned employees are often overlooked when it comes to training or development. After a decade with the company, the organization assumes the employee knows everything they need and conversely, the employee doesn't want to admit they need help.

HR and learning professionals know what needs to be done but they rarely have the budget, time, or leadership buy-in to effectively tackle the issues. How does one go about accommodating all those various needs?

Many Learning and Development professionals respond to these different requirements by developing programs for every "stage" of employment in the employee lifecycle. Those stages are typically Recruitment, Onboarding, ongoing Development, Retention, and Exit or Separation. Using a lifecycle model (like the cycle of the seasons) is a good way to visualize how an employee engages with the organization over time...

...But it does have its limitations, too. For one thing, a lifecycle model puts the emphasis on the activities of the organization, rather than the activities of the employee. This emphasis becomes especially tricky when you consider that each employee's career path through the organization might be a little different. (Some will be long, some will be short. Some will wind through many roles, and some will see growth within a single role.)
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Recruitment

Onboarding

Development

Retention

Exit

The Employee Journey

Rather than viewing employees through the lens of a lifecycle, we invite you to think about things from the employee's point of view, where their time with your organization is a journey. Instead of seeing employees as revolving through your organization, with new employees continually replacing those that leave, we want to look at employees as evolving with, and in your organization. The stages are the same, but the ways in which we think about the challenges and solutions at each stage will start to sound different.

For example, when we think in cycles, it's easy to think of preparing a set schedule for training where, say, all new employees take a set curriculum, all HiPos take another curriculum, and so on. This is not a bad way to do things, especially for larger organizations. But what would happen if you allowed employees to direct their own learning, setting their own path, at their own pace? What if training was geared not just toward achieving certain training department goals, but toward helping employees with the hundreds of little challenges that they confront daily in their work and private lives?

It's time for a new way to visualize your employees' career path. It's time to capture both the overall epic scope of an employee's time with your organization while still understanding what it looks like "on the ground."

It's time to consider what these employee lifecycle stages look like as an employee journey.

The Crossroads
of Recruitment

Just about every company needs to attract new, capable talent, but it can seem odd to say that training starts before a person even joins the organization.

It's less odd when you consider that some of the very same content and materials used in onboarding new hires can also make good recruitment materials for your organization.

Think about it from the perspective of a potential new hire. It could be that they are actively searching for a new position, or maybe they were just doing a soft search. If they are executive level, a recruiter might have been involved. They are open to a new opportunity, but they are wondering if your organization is really it.

How do you get across to interested parties that your organization can be the beginning of a much longer and more fulfilling journey together?

Confidence at the Crossroads

Give a taste of the culture. According to a 2018 survey by recruitment company Jobvite, 46% of job candidates believe culture is "very important" when making application and offer decisions[1]; 15% say they have turned down an offer outright because of doubts about company culture. On the flip side, a well-done video showcasing a positive culture can be one of your best recruiting tools.

Present your organization's mission and values. A landmark study by Deloitte shows that 76% of employees who put a priority on business culture also believe that a "clearly defined business strategy" does help to create such a culture.[2] Having a clear, succinct statement of your company's mission and values can be one of your best recruiting tools—and literally one of the first things you will want your new employee to learn about.

Highlight your diversity. Have you made diversity and inclusion an important focus for your organization? If so, that's great...but does the rest of the world know this? According to the 2018 Yello diversity survey, two out of three employees (64%) say a potential employer's commitment to diversity and inclusion would be an important factor in their decision to accept an offer of employment, so highlighting your diverse workplace is also a key recruitment tool.[3]

Think across platforms. These days, employers are growing their brand in several ways: Corporate websites, social media, job recruitment platforms, and even traditional advertising. There's a good reason why employers do this: Job candidates are doing their research across platforms, too. (For example, 59% of job candidates go straight to a company's website, while 34% use social media to research companies in which they are interested.[4]) This means that your organization's recruiting materials should be ready to use on multiple platforms. Short-form video is a great example: It can be used and reused on a website, social media, and even some recruiting sites.

The Hero
starts their
journey at a
crossroads...

...wondering whether to take the next step.

Do they head back to safety, or do they boldly set out towards a new horizon? This is where the Hero needs a glimpse of what lies down the path, and beyond.

The Fog
of Onboarding

Good onboarding leads to strong retention rates, and the research bears this out.[5] For example, a presentation to SHRM by The Wynhurst Group reported that employees who went through a structured onboarding program were 58% more likely to be with the organization after three years. A classic study published in Training Magazine puts this percentage even higher, finding that, in the companies studied, 69% of employees stayed three years or more when they experienced good onboarding.

So what makes for a good onboarding process? Good processes are about more than just filling out paperwork and getting a tour of the building. This is the time when a new hire learns their role, acclimates to the organization, and builds new relationships with their peers, direct reports, and managers. So ask yourself: What would those new hires want in an onboarding program to make these activities as seamless as possible?

A Clear Direction for All

They want training that is relevant to what they will be doing from Day 1.
A study by Aberdeen Group found that 83% of the highest-performing
organizations began onboarding before the new hire's first day.[6] (For contrast:
A separate study by CareerBuilder.com found that only 47% of employers
have a formal process in place for communication during the post-hire but
pre-start time period.[7]) Organizations can, for example, send new hires short
courses on company culture, role expectations, safety guidelines, and so
forth through a corporate LMS. Some also send content about benefits (like
healthcare and 401k plans) so they can review and discuss with their family
before coming in to fill out the relevant paperwork.

They want training that will give them a "feel for the place." While there is
something to be said for touring a space and meeting the people in it, a lot of
what new employees get is the same "schpiel" from HR. While that script is
important, it's easy to see why an HR professional would lose some
enthusiasm after giving it for the 20th time…and that lack of enthusiasm will
show. Sometimes, the best way to get a feel for a place is to perform these
tours and talks virtually, using a polished video presentation.

A Clear Direction for All

They want training on the way things are done, pertinent to their role. What are procedures around handling customers? Or around safety while in the warehouse? How do teams work? What process does, say, sales use? According to 2014 research by BambooHR, roughly 73% of new employees want a review of company policies during onboarding, and 76% say they want on-the-job training.[8] (For comparison, only 59% want a company tour and/or introduction to equipment, and only 56% want to be introduced to a buddy or mentor.)

They want to get excited about the possibilities. Don't just limit onboarding to training for their current role, however; start them on their (potential) career track early. Inform them of opportunities for advancement, then wow them by showing them a personalized course of study that will help them to pursue their goals. Then allow those new hires to direct their own learning, on their own time-table.

Soon the Hero finds their way obscured by a fog.

Where are they, exactly?
Which is the right way to go? What does this way hold?

The way must be clearly marked if they are to make it on their journey without becoming lost.

The Development Desert

Employee development is the overall process an employer provides to employees to help them gradually improve skills, acquire new knowledge, and progress in their careers. The benefits of development are already well documented by L&D researchers: More employee engagement, better productivity, and better ability to promote from within.

On the flip side, one study (commonly attributed to IBM) found that employees who do not feel they are developing in a company are 12 times more likely to leave it. Even if that statistic overstates the case by double, that is still a substantial loss.

That said, creating an employee development program from scratch is a challenge. It has the potential of eating up copious amounts of time, for both employees and training departments, without a provable ROI.

One good way of guaranteeing that you have a good development program is by considering the employee's point of view. What are employees developing toward? How do they want to get there?

Development that Makes Employees Thrive

Once you start thinking about development in terms of an employee's journey, you can approach the process of creating your own employee training and development program in a new way:

- **Recognize Goals.** Your organization's journey will influence your employees' journeys, and vice versa. What changes do you foresee for the organization in the next five years? Where does each employee want to be in the next five years? What skills will be needed to meet both sets of expectations?

- **Identify Competencies.** Competencies are groups of abilities, behaviors, knowledge, and skills that impact the success of employees and organizations. In one study by Development Dimensions International (DDI), 89% of best-in-class organizations had core competencies defined for all their roles (compared to a mere 48% of all other companies). Once you have your goal, outline competencies that will help your organization get there.

- **Do a Gap Analysis.** A gap analysis shows where your employees are today, as contrasted with where you want them to be when it comes to their competencies. Every employee has a unique history, and so every employee will have some gaps in their knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Create an environment where gaps can be revealed and addressed in a non-judgmental matter.

- **Involve Them in the Development Process.** If your employee development program is going to work at all, you need to talk to your employees—and more importantly, listen to them. One eye-opening study by communication training company Fierce found that, in over 800 companies, less than a third of employees felt their input made any difference, and that this led to ineffective policies. Don't let your development program die by forcing it onto employees without their input!

- **Offer Formal and Informal Training.** Your formal training program should begin to address the gaps identified in step 3 above, assigning specific training courses to your employees. This can be augmented with informal training, too, in the form of mentoring and coaching. (Note that your mentors and coaches will likely need training, too, to be the most effective mentors they can be!)

- **Allow Self-Directed Training.** Formal training need not always be assigned. Open up your training library to employees so they can find the courses they want, and take them at a time that works for them. This kind of self-directed learning better accommodates different learning styles, increases the speed of professional development, and gives you a better ROI for your training dollars.

- **Don't Forget Succession Planning.** Take the time to identify and develop new supervisors and managers, not just senior leaders who can fill the open positions when people leave, retire, or even die. Encourage your front-line supervisors to groom their replacement to speed their own career path within the company. Monitoring the topics employees explore through self-directed learning may help you identify future potential candidates.

To reach their goal the Hero must cross a vast desert.

Their motivation will carry them through
—though only if the Hero has also been well prepared for the journey.

The Rocky Crags of Retention

Retaining good employees and skilled talent is a huge problem for U.S. businesses. In fact, 81% of businesses agree that turnover "is a costly problem" for them. This statistic comes from recent research by HR-software company Zenefits, which also explains just why turnover is so costly. They surveyed over 600 U.S. businesses with anywhere from 50 to 500 employees and found:

- 68.3% of companies had experienced turnover in the past 12 months

- 1 in 3 business leaders expect their employees to stay for less than a year

- 63.3% of businesses felt that retaining employees was actually harder than hiring new ones.[9]

This still leaves open the question:
Why are employees leaving in the first place?

Conflict?

HR lore usually puts "conflict with a supervisor" or "poor management" as the number one reason why employees leave. But when one dives into the research, a different story emerges. Employees most often leave because of:

- **Poor Training.** This is especially true of newer employees: 40% of employees in the U.S. leave their jobs within the first year because of poor training.[10]

- **Lack of Growth Opportunities.** According to Willis Towers Watson's 2016 Global Findings Report, close to one-half of high-potential employees think they need to leave their organizations in order to advance their careers.[11]

- **Company Culture.** Specifically, employees want a company with open communication, strong leadership, and work-life balance, according to a survey of 2,000 employees conducted by Hays; 47% of those actively looking for new positions say company culture is the main reason they want to leave.[12] A separate 2018 study by Randstad US found that 38% of workers want to leave their jobs due to a toxic work culture, or one where they don't feel they fit in.[13]

- **Stress.** According to Dr. Tiffany Sanders, a licensed psychologist, entrepreneur, and expert on mental health in the workplace, approximately 40% of U.S. employees feel overworked, pressured, and squeezed to the point of anxiety, depression, and disease. A full 63% of Americans report they are not coping effectively with stress.[14]

Supporting Their Climb

If you can anticipate these causes of turnover, you can use your development programs as a tool to address them. For example:

- Poor training can be addressed by improving onboarding and conducting regular employee training assessments.[15]

- A lack of growth opportunities can be addressed through some basic succession planning, paired with opportunities for self-directed learning.[16]

- Company culture can be improved through better communications training, stronger leadership, and more emphasis on mutual respect.[17]

- Stress can be tackled through formal training, too. In fact, one study found that 55% of workers have turned to company-sponsored skills training to deal with stress at work.[18]

The Hero has come so very far...

...but, as the climb becomes more difficult,

this is precisely the point where the Hero might give up and try a different path.

The End of the Road

Even if you have the best retention policies and have achieved a low rate of employee turnover, employees will leave over time. Their life goals and circumstances might change, prompting a change in career or leaving the job market entirely. Or they simply might reach the age of retirement.

No matter why your employees leave, this is an opportune time to get important information that can help you further enhance your training and development programs at all the other steps.

For example, in addition to typical exit interview questions (such as "Why are you leaving?" and "What could we have done better?"), you can include training-specific questions like:

- Did you feel equipped to do the job here?
- How was your initial training experience? Did it prepare you for your role?
- Did you receive feedback to help you grow in your role?
- Did you receive advice as to how to advance here?
- Did opportunities for career advancement factor into your decision?
- How well did your supervisor communicate with you? (Set expectations, etc.)
- What's the main thing we should teach your replacement?
- How can we improve our training and development?

Even if an employee leaves on not-so-great terms, they can provide candid answers, which can in turn help you shape your future training programs.
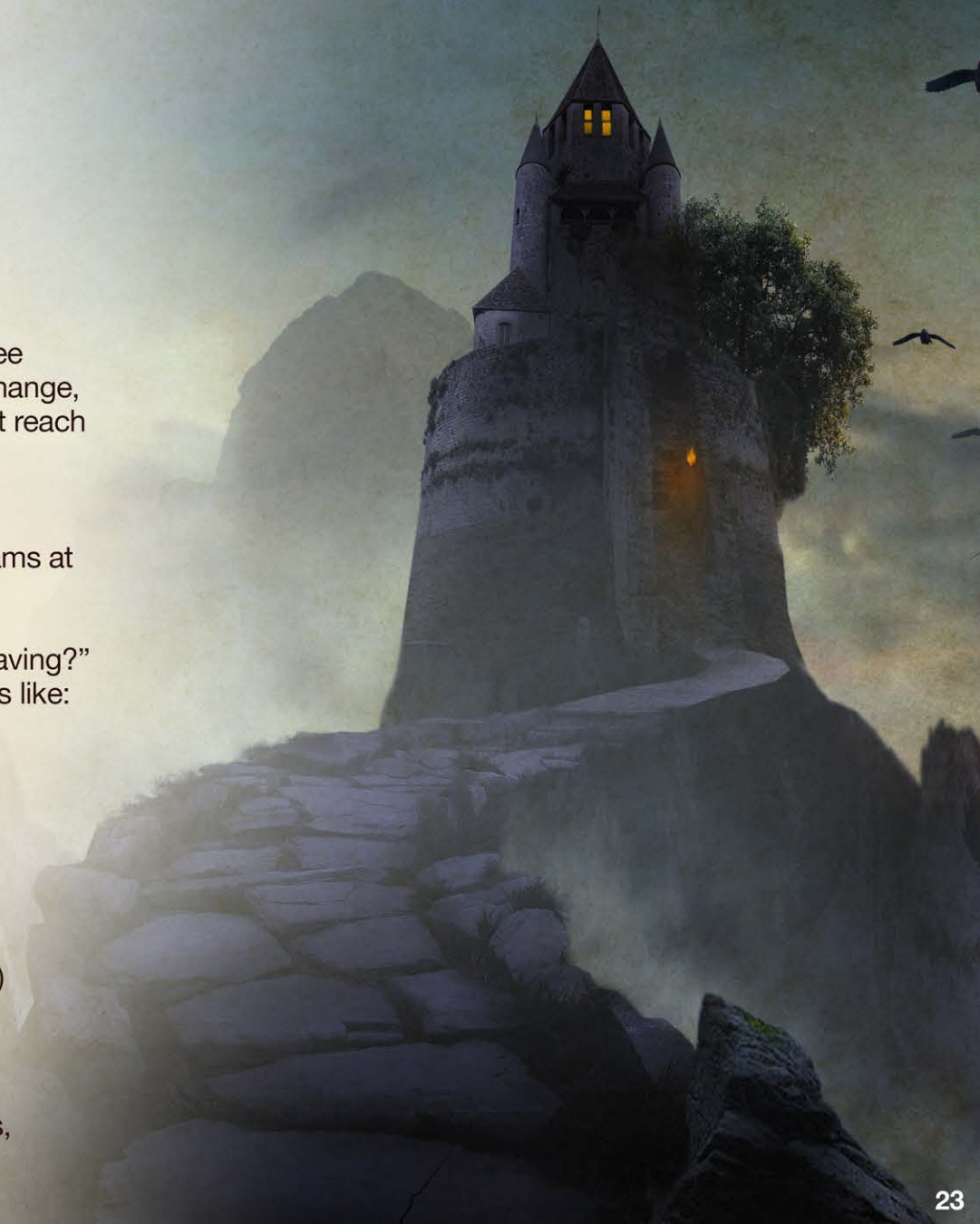
The Hero's journey is done, **but** the story does not end there.

Tales of the Hero's journey become insights for the next generation of Heroes to come down the path.

What Does This All Mean?

Employee training is usually viewed as a lifecycle. The model of an employee lifecycle is not a bad one by itself, but it focuses too much on concepts like turnover, and not enough on each employee's unique career path.

Employees evolve with, and in, your organization. They have specific goals in mind when they interview for a position. They come on board with a unique set of habits, skills, expectations, and hopes. Those habits, skills, expectations, and hopes change over time, both in response to your organization and with changing circumstances in their personal lives.

For these reasons, we feel that the best strategy that a director of L&D or a CHRO can put into action is to set the appropriate learning culture, enable both self-directed and blended learning as appropriate, and then provide tools to enable and empower that learning.

There is no one set path for all employees in all roles. There is an entire landscape of possible paths, and you need to be their guide through this unfamiliar country.

Do that, and every employee gets to be the hero of their own story.

Further Reading

For more ideas related to training and the onboarding process:
5 Tips to Improve New Hire Training

For a more in-depth look at creating programs:
A Guide to Creating an Employee and Development Program

If you already have a training program, but want to give it new life:
7 Ways to Revitalize Your Employee Training Program

To find out about self-directed learning and its appropriateness for your organization:
When is Self-Directed Learning Right for Corporate Training and Development?

HSI offers training, safety management and compliance solutions for businesses of all sizes. Our combination of technology and content solutions help safety, human resources and operations leaders train and develop their workforce, keep workers safe and meet regulatory and operational compliance requirements.

Source Links

1. 2018 Job Seeker Nation Study: Researching the Candidate-Recruiter Relationship, Jobvite, 2018

2. Core beliefs and culture: Chairman's survey findings, Deloitte, 2012

3. What Job Seekers Really Think About Your Diversity Practices: New Research from Yello, the Harris Poll, 2018

4. Ibid Jobvite 2018

5. Kathy Irish, "5 Tips to Improve New Hire Training, " ej4 blog, 2020

6. Madeline Laurano, Onboarding 2013: A New Look at New Hires, Aberdeen Group, 2013

7. Candidate Experience From End-to-End: What's Your Weakest Link? CareerBuilder.com, 2017

8. Tori Fica, "What People Really Want from Onboarding," BambooHR, October 2018

9. All stats from Jean Spencer, "Employee Turnover Is a More Costly Problem than Researchers Thought, Here's Why," Workest powered by Zenefits, 2019

10. Kathy Irish, "Top 10 Reasons You Need to Revamp Your Employee Training Program," ej4 blog, 2019

11. Global Findings Report: 2016 Global Talent Management and Rewards, and Global Workforce Studies, Willis Towers Watson, 2016

12. The Hays US What People Want Survey, Hays, 2017

13. "Your best employees are leaving. But is it personal or practical?" Randstad US/SHIFT Communications, 2018

14. Dr. Tiffany D. Sanders, "The Top 5 Reasons Employees Quit," Huffpost, 2014

15. For more on training assessments, see Kathy Irish, "How to Conduct Employee Training Assessments," ej4 blog, 2019

16. For a more in-depth look at self-directed learning, see Ryan Eudy, "When is Self-Directed Learning Right for Corporate Training and Development?" ej4 blog, 2017

17. ej4 has written extensively on these topics; see, for example, **Chris Scherting "Communication Skills Training in a World of Emojis, YOLO, and Ghosting,"** ej4 blog, 2020 and **Ryan Eudy, "Embracing Workplace Diversity,"** ej4 blog, 2019

18. 2017 Workplace Stress Study, Udemy, 2017