

Hire a teen, before they know everything...

Businesses in the digital age need to adapt quickly to new technologies but upskilling to stay ahead can be expensive and time-consuming. An effective strategy to address this skills gap is growth from within - a strategy that requires savvy management who can spot talent and provide mentorship to high potential candidates.



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“Upskilling young employees is a smart way of ensuring your business remains agile. Staff that take up new learning opportunities are hugely valuable, they have a broader understanding of the business and are more likely to stay with the company in the long term,” says Thomas Vollrath, head of South African web hosting company, 1-grid.com.

Software development, one of the most sought-after skills in South Africa is a case in point. Unlike traditional professions, the learning content for a tertiary education in IT is often obsolete before the learner completes the qualification. Many developers skip the four-year university degree and fast-track directly into their career through personal development and peer learning.

Vollrath, who employs a team of 22 developers and systems engineers, said he’d rather hire and upskill a driven 17-year-old who knows how to code than an industry veteran: “Most great coders learn their skills through boot camps or online short courses. They enter the job market at a junior level, learning and growing in line with shifts in how software is written.”

Vollrath's industry is dominated by young people – those who have grown up with the internet, smart phones and cybersecurity threats. It is a generation with skills that are sought after, but one that is particularly flighty when it comes to employment. According to the 2018 Deloitte Millennial Survey, 43% of millennials and 61% of Gen Z's expect to leave the company they work for within two years.

The same survey shows that a company culture that supports flexibility, openness and mentorship goes a long way to boosting staff loyalty. After over 10 years' experience heading up international web hosting companies, 1&1 and Host Europe Group, Vollrath agrees. "A management culture that supports individual employees to achieve their desired career path is the dominant reason behind high staff retention."

The relationship between an employee and employer is a two-way street. "Employees with the right mentor can quickly move up in a company and absorb new knowledge. At the same time, the mentor benefits from their commitment and ability to grow into different roles," said Vollrath.

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