

ATK Aerospace Systems

Creating career opportunities and reducing staff turnover in a tough economic climate

With the Space Shuttle program being discontinued, and the United States in the midst of a severe economic downturn, ATK faced turbulent market conditions. What should they prioritize to pull them through?

As a company operating at the forefront of science, engineering, and technology under the motto “Innovation... Delivered,” ATK recognizes, perhaps more than most organizations, that its value is determined by its ability to harness the talent, intelligence, and creativity of its employees.

“Career development is critical to our success,” said Jeff Brody, vice president, Human Resources, ATK Aerospace Systems. “It’s vital that employees have an opportunity to grow and contribute in new ways and are excited about future opportunities.”

Change has been a continual part of the business over the past year at ATK. With the triple onslaught of a revamped NASA budget, rapidly evolving Defense Department initiatives, and the worst economic downturn in generations, the organization is facing a critical juncture. Its Aerospace Systems Group faces a major challenge in that a large portion of its business focuses on producing rocket boosters for the Space Shuttle. As the Shuttle program is scheduled to end, this has been a source of uncertainty.

Business Challenges

- Maintaining stability in an uncertain economic climate
- Re-energizing the business during times of change

Company Profile

ATK was a Minneapolis-based defense industry company with business divisions in aerospace systems, armament systems, missile products, and security and sporting goods. It produced solid rocket propulsion systems and was a leading supplier of military and commercial aircraft structures. The aerospace and defense divisions merged with Orbital Sciences Corporation in 2014 to become Orbital ATK. It was then bought by Northrop Grumman Innovation Systems in 2018.

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In response to these turbulent times, ATK Aerospace Systems made stabilizing its business a top priority. It decided that focusing on its leaders was the best way to energize the organization and achieve the desired outcome.

In support of this focus, Sandra Stroope, from the ATK Aerospace Systems Human Resources department, partnered with Bonnie Hagemann of Executive Development Associates (EDA) to design a program with the ultimate goal of creating an agile, empowered, and accountable workforce. It did this with input and oversight from Jeff Brody, LeAnn Dickerson, Alicia Ashton, Suzette Taylor, Sharon Giles, Chad Miskin, Toni Mund, Nancy Kobel, Vicki Werling, Tom Bunn, and Jennifer Jacobsen and feedback from interviews with company leaders.

The challenges, as well as resultant workforce reductions, have strained the employee base. Therefore, ATK Aerospace Systems has made the task of retaining top talent a critical priority. To address this issue, the HR team has employed career development as a tool to attract, retain, and energize top talent.

Solution

The HR team's goal is to engage emerging talent within the organization and help those individuals understand how to align their talents and interests with the company's business directives. This would lead to a highly productive, fulfilling career. The HR team tailored the Career Development Workshop toward individuals identified as high-potential leaders.

The program, initially delivered to 95 participants, began with a series of pre-workshop assessments—including the Strong Interest Inventory[®] (Strong) instrument—followed by an eight-hour career development workshop. The workshop taught individuals how to

- Take ownership of career decisions
- Align personal interests with organizational needs
- Draft an ideal job description
- Consider alternatives

Solution

- Deliver workshop for high-potential leaders using Strong assessment
- Focus on interests to broaden career options and align with ATK direction
- Create immediate, short-term and long-term actions

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- Use resources and tools available within the organization
- Conduct a conversation with a leader or mentor and set realistic goals

The program uses a career development model called AIM, composed of four steps:

- A—understand ATK
- I—assess personal Interests
- M—develop Multiple career options
- Create an action plan

The workshop starts with understanding ATK's business environment, the business case for the program, and how the changing environment affects the company's strategies and needs. Discussion focuses on how the workplace culture influences the individual career, and how generational differences within the company may materialize in office interactions.

These higher-level discussions provide a context for the next portion of the workshop, which centers on personal interest—the most important indicator of job satisfaction and success, according to Stroepe and Hagemann.

This section offers participants a chance to assess their personal interests and pinpoint the specific kind of work they want to do on a day-to-day basis. To help participants understand how their own interests fit in various company roles, ATK relies on the Strong assessment.

The Strong assessment helps people select a career by giving them insight into their interests, preferences, and personal styles. It compares their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career. It also generates a list of the top 10 occupations they're most likely to find rewarding.

Results

- Individuals are more proactive at managing their career
- Greater fulfillment at work
- Reduced staff turnover

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The Career Development Workshop leverages Strong to help participants accomplish one or more of the following:

- Choose a career path or specific job
- Identify satisfying work environments
- Enrich current work
- Generate ideas for volunteer or leisure activities outside work to achieve greater work/life balance

ATK participants took the Strong assessment online as pre-work prior to the workshop. Before reviewing the assessment results, they went through a broad discussion of occupational themes within ATK, and then specific jobs associated with each theme.

Following this discussion, the workshop offers each participant a full review of his or her Strong assessment results, as well as the opportunity to ruminate over them and fully digest the occupational themes the instrument generates. In fulfillment of the M step in AIM—develop Multiple career options—participants are given information regarding career motivators and job tasks for careers that most closely align with their interests. They are counseled to focus not on job titles, but on the actual tasks and phrases highlighted in their report.

Strong reactions

Facilitators occasionally encounter participants whose Strong results indicate little connection between their work and interests. In some cases people have entered into a career for family or other reasons. However, it's more typical for them to find that their career and interests are closely aligned in many respects. This is not entirely surprising, as participants are those within the company identified as top performers. As interest is a key indicator of performance, one would expect high performers to have a high degree of interest in their job. Insights from the Strong are helpful not only for career choices, but also for enabling participants to adjust their work/life balance. For example, participants may realize that they need to pursue activities that address certain areas of interest.

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One participant found that his interest in outdoor activities kept manifesting itself in his Strong results. However, his job was primarily office based, and he had stopped his work as a part-time ski instructor. The Strong assessment helped him realize that he might be able to achieve greater effectiveness at work if he engaged in more outdoor extracurricular activities.

In general, participants find value in the Strong and the opportunity it provides for self-reflection. “While reactions vary from surprise to affirmation, the Strong portion of the workshop tends to be one of the things that participants value,” said Stroope. “Often people are so busy at work that they don’t have time to reflect on the big picture of where their career is headed. This gives them information and tools to examine their career choices, path, and future in a focused, structured, and meaningful way.”

Finding meaning in work

Using the Work/Life Values Checklist, workshop participants identify their core values and explore how their current or projected career path either supports or works against them, and how they can bring their values and their career path in line with each other.

The results from the Work/Life Values Checklist can be very personal and serve to shed light on the kinds of changes employees might need to make. If people feel their values are not in line with the kind of work they’re doing day-to-day, the program helps them determine actions they can take to change their situation. Stroope reports that, in general, the people who are most affected by the Work/Life Values Checklist are those who feel their work and values are out of alignment.

Putting learning into action

Later, participants are asked to take the information gleaned from the Strong, the Work/Life Values Checklist, and various other assessments included in the workshop and create the description of an ‘ideal job’, with the goal of defining the kind of work role that best suits them. They then incorporate this information into a career action plan, which can be compared to the role they currently have. This allows them to think about other roles at ATK, and what actions they may need to take to obtain the kind of job they’d ideally like to have.

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The next step involves a briefing on how best to hold a 'career conversation', emphasizing that employees are the owners of their own career and success. During the briefing the HR team provides tools and resources designed to facilitate productive and insightful career conversations. This is followed by an actual conversation between the program participant and his or her leader or mentor, who is available to advise and coach.

Once participants have drafted an action plan, the HR team guides them as they detail short-term goals and aspirations, as well as long-term goals, and immediate action steps to be taken within the next 90 days. The participants then enter these plans and goals into an interactive system called Total Talent @ ATK, which enables them to implement them more effectively over the coming months. The foundation for the action plan, however, begins at the onset of the workshop, as participants discuss why career development is important to both the business and the individual. Included in the discussion is the impact the right career has on engagement and productivity, essentially making the business case for how attaining job satisfaction makes people more productive and creative, ultimately leading to higher levels of customer satisfaction and increased revenue.

Results

While the program is still relatively new, program facilitators have observed participants taking concrete steps to define their career. Additionally, post-workshop evaluations indicate that participants have found value in the program. The average post-workshop evaluation for the first workshop, on a scale of 1 to 5, was 4.30.

Participants surveyed 90 days after the workshop to assess the status of their career plan and the impact of the program reported an increase in their ability to take ownership of, and a proactive approach to, managing their career. The most common actions reported include network building, using internal tools and resources, defining career goals, discussing career goals and their action plan with others (leaders, peers, and mentors), and gaining new development experiences at work.

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Aligning careers, interests, and values for the common good

The Career Development Workshop was rolled out in the context of the mentoring program at ATK. However, as the response has been so positive, it now serves as a stand-alone workshop as well. Insights gained through the Strong Interest Inventory assessment and Work/Life Values Checklist provide an opportunity for participants to think specifically about their career aspirations in very concrete ways. With the availability of more detail regarding personal interests and values, and how those may or may not relate to the day-to-day tasks of a particular position, participants are in a better position to determine, for example, whether or not they'd like to 'move up', or perhaps specialize in a technical role.

Additionally, the program tangibly illustrates that the company is invested in its employees. According to Stroope, this is recognized by participants, who comment that the program helps them feel appreciated and that the company cares about their development. In summary, as ATK Aerospace Systems' employees develop careers that more closely align with their interests and values, they are positioning themselves to contribute more meaningfully to the company and gain greater fulfillment from their work. Consequently, ATK is well-positioned to reduce employee churn for top talent and is fine-tuning its organization to maximize the collective talents, intelligence, and creativity of its workforce, thereby preparing to successfully navigate any challenges that may come its way.



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