

Enabling 130,000 employees to grow in an organization committed to continuous learning ^[1]

People and Culture ^[2]

Novartis is a research company at heart, and learning is fundamental to who we are. We spoke with Simon Brown, Chief Learning Officer, about how we are investing in learning and training for our employees to build the new capabilities we need to be successful in the future.

Why are new skills so critically needed in a company like Novartis?



Simon Brown, Chief Learning Officer

I believe that learning is even more important today than in the past, thanks to the speed of change in the outside world, with the acceleration of globalization and digitalization. What this means is that everyone needs to develop new skills, to be successful today and in the future. Outside research has shown that today employees believe that around 20% of their existing skillset will be irrelevant in three years' time. At the same time, more than a third of these people have already learned a "new to world" skill in the last three years. By that I mean skills such as artificial intelligence, data science or robotic process automation – things that weren't even on the radar just a few years ago. In a company like Novartis, we need to constantly and

consistently build new capabilities. We can buy, build or borrow them – and, without a doubt, building capabilities by investing in our own people is the best way forward.

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What is the learning approach at Novartis?

We try to strike a balance between developing functional and technical skills that are specifically designed to help our associates be successful in their roles – such as sales, manufacturing, finance and scientific skills – and developing broader skills that apply across the organization, such as personal effectiveness, leadership, and digital.

Right now, digital is a major focus throughout the company. To support that, we launched a massive online open course (MOOC) in June that aimed to demystify what digital is, explain our strategy and how it is being applied, and outline our key lighthouse projects and the technologies behind them. So far, over 20 000 associates have participated and earned over 12 000 digital badges. I think it's a great example of one way we are doing learning at scale – and it has received a lot of positive feedback from associates.

Can you outline some other examples?

We recently held our first-ever “Learning Month” across the company. Each week was dedicated to a different aspect of learning – digital, curiosity, continuous learning and taking action. At the core of the Learning Month were 70 global sessions - interactive virtual webinars with many hundreds people participating and interacting via video conferencing. The majority of these sessions were facilitated by Novartis associates, sharing their particular skills and knowledge with their colleagues. There were also numerous events held locally at our sites around the world, offered in the local language.

It was a resounding success: more than 15 000 associates participated around the world, resulting in over 50 000 learning hours. Beyond the sessions themselves, Learning Month generated a lot of excitement and energy around investing time in your own learning to develop further and grow.

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What other kinds of learning opportunities does Novartis provide?

We have the ambition to be offering our associates the best possible opportunities to learn and develop of any company. The Learning organization at Novartis offers many different forms of upskilling, of course there are traditional face to face programs, but there is also an extensive training catalogue containing thousands of online courses, virtual classroom sessions, videos, online books, audio books and podcasts. They cover a range of topics, are available in multiple languages, and are open to all associates worldwide on demand, no matter who or where they are. This allows maximum flexibility in scheduling, while minimizing any travel or time out of the office required.

As you move within the organization, there are also more focused learning opportunities available, including leadership development and management courses, and coaching and mentoring opportunities. We have great management and leadership programs linked to some of the top Universities in the world. Our thinking has evolved beyond the traditional “one week and that’s it” type of training courses – today, we prefer to offer more of a hybrid of self-study and part-time work in groups. Some of these courses are now more like 3 - 9 month journeys, with longer-term project assignments and group work. We believe this helps us achieve the greatest impact, while being better suited to the realities faced by our associates every day.

We are also leveraging blended learning approaches for some of our “soft skills” courses. First, we ask participants to prepare themselves on the theory via self-study, and then we bring them together for a shorter one or two day face-to-face or virtual workshop to practice in groups. By doing so, the participants are able to get real-world feedback in applying their newly acquired skills.

As a global organization, we also recognize that language skills are critical. Therefore, as of 2019 all our associates around the world have access to a virtual language training platform and upskill their language proficiencies in different languages. Over 5,000 associates took advantage of this in the first four weeks.

There are number of other exciting new learning additions that we are bringing in 2019, that will give our associates even greater, world-class opportunities to develop their skills and capabilities for the future.

What is the next frontier in learning?

We are already seeing some evidence of where we are headed in the future – and it’s pretty exciting. For instance, we are using virtual reality for manufacturing training in Austria. Associates wear virtual reality headsets, and are then sent into “virtual manufacturing plant” which recreates the real one. Then, they go through the process of line clearance, interacting with the various machines and tasks they need to perform. It is a realistic, highly engaging and immersive way of learning – and we don’t need to shut down the production line. At the same time, the trainees get guidance to improve their performance before they move on to the real thing. We are now applying VR learning for a different manufacturing onboarding process in the US, and expect to see it scale up in other areas in the future.

Gamification is also a concept we are leveraging more and more, especially with our sales force. We’ve used a gamification approach – using competition or badges - to further advance their already in-depth product knowledge, where the sales reps compete globally to answer questions, gain points and move up a leaderboard. It has been very motivating and very effective – we’ve seen a 17% increase in product knowledge since we put it in place.

I think the next big leap in learning is the concept of embedding learning directly into people’s day-to-day work. We are continuously evaluating the best place to learn. Rather than learning up front, we can instead provide nuggets of learning throughout the flow of work. This has several potential advantages. Associates wouldn’t have to take time out and go off to a class or log in to a platform; rather, the learning would be seamlessly embedded in the flow of what they do day-to-day. It would also give them the training they need when they need it, rather than frontloading it and hoping associates remember what they learned when they need it. I

think this embedded learning concept is something we'll be seeing a lot more of in the future.



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