Creating a Program That Lasts

A management trainee initiative withstands the test of time by evolving as needs and circumstances change.

BY ANTHONY SALAZAR AND ANGELA GARCIA

Maintaining a management trainee program for almost four decades is not an easy task. CJ Logistics America (CJLA), a global supply chain management company, implemented its Successful Careers in Logistics (SCIL) program in 1987 to support the rapid growth and expansion of the business. The 38-year-old management trainee initiative has a history of retaining top talent, with 30 percent of the company's current senior leaders being program graduates.

As a constantly evolving curriculum, the SCIL program's current structure offers eight to 15 recent college graduates from across the US the opportunity to learn all aspects of warehouse operations through a full year of job rotations for each cohort. Participants also meet virtually once a month to learn leadership principles (such as accountability, branding, and theories of motivation) and speak with senior leaders about their own professional progression and leadership philosophy.

IMAGE | ADOBE STOCK

CJ Logistics America

Industry
Supply Chain and Logistics

Workforce Size
4,000

L&D Team Size
8

HQ Location
Des Plaines, Illinois

Learning opportunities in leadership—including a mentorship program, an in-person conference at corporate headquarters, various improvement projects, and presentations—are curriculum elements that enable SCIL participants to share and strategize their unique on-the-job perspective with their cohort and senior leaders.

While the program has shaped the development and success of many leaders across the organization, it has also faced many hurdles resulting from the constant evolution of various internal and external forces, such as changing leadership, shifting generational needs, and program restructuring due to new technological capabilities. However, the company has a tried-and-true way—the APP approach—of dealing with the historical, current, and future obstacles that may derail efforts in recruiting and developing future leaders. The framework focuses on:

- Advocates who support SCIL
- People who participate in the initiative
- Program evolution

Through continuous attentiveness to APP, CJLA achieves success via adaptability and a willingness to evolve the program alongside uncontrollable forces.

Finding candidates who understand the assignment

When the program launched, it targeted Gen X college graduates whose technical capabilities were equivalent to the minimal technology integrations in warehouse operations at the time. That yielded ideal candidates because warehouse expectations centered on laborious work with minimal technology.

However, today's Gen Z college graduates are mostly digital natives. Within the past five years, many program participants have voiced their interest in analytical positions upon completing the yearlong program. Thus, the needs of earlier generations were vastly different from those of today's generation, whose ambitions clash with the expectations of warehouse operations and minimal computer-focused positions across the organization.

Recruiting the right people for leadership has become a pillar of CJLA's strategy. The program's selection process involves recruiters screening potential candidates and general managers conducting in-person interviews at locations across the US. While the recruitment team seeks recent business administration and supply chain management college graduates for the program, the recruiters repeatedly convey to candidates the expectations of warehouse operations. The initiative's structure and job responsibilities are not intended for individuals who want to work at a desk all day; rather, the program needs individuals who maximize their knowledge of supply chain from college to motivate frontline workers and recommend improvements to the company's processes.

Recruiters also seek individuals driven for success and who know how to find opportunities throughout the organization. The company often promotes existing employees, so program recruiters continuously emphasize the importance of self-agency beyond SCIL. That means searching for college graduates who understand they have control of their future at the company—if they are willing to take advantage of those opportunities. Some of the most successful SCIL graduates attribute their postprogram success to transferring to one of the more than 60 CJLA warehouse locations in search of their next move.

When the company selects program participants, it hires them as full-time employees who rotate to all primary job functions within their sole assigned location. Upon graduating from the program, the company decides participants' future placements based on current opportunities in concert with graduates' preferences. As an organization largely functioning in warehouse operations, postprogram opportunities outside of warehousing, such as analytical and continuous improvement roles, are typically minimal.

It takes a village

Though company leaders have always supported SCIL, specific views on how to maximize its effectiveness have changed over time. Some leaders believed that the company should place participants in a role to "learn by fire," while others thought providing a detailed and prescriptive schedule was the best approach. As program leaders moved out of the organization, the company likewise retired the structure and details of training modules and implemented new ideas. Such a shifting approach has resulted in a fluctuating experience from year to year. For example, at one point, program participants received a lengthy checklist of tasks to complete; more recently, they receive a set of objectives focused on the necessary core skills for each function.

The executive team recognizes the value of SCIL, but maintaining that support takes work. It starts with including leaders in various program events. The executive team shares its department strategy during monthly development calls with SCIL participants and answers their questions during an annual corporate conference. Leadership also attends the final graduation ceremony, where graduates present their contributions throughout the past year to roughly 50 leaders, mentors, and past program participants.

In addition to executives, other stakeholders have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Those additional roles are critical to each participant's success.

- Program leader: An L&D leader who keeps participants and stakeholders on track throughout the year and facilitates most engagements
- Sponsor: Typically a senior leader who graduated from SCIL who shares their experience and participates in monthly development meetings and in-person events
- Direct manager: Typically a general manager who provides daily oversight to ensure the participant at their assigned location is learning, rotating positions, and progressing through the program
- Local HR leader: Supports the SCIL and the direct manager to confirm everyone is meeting program requirements
- Mentor: Meets with their assigned mentee at least once a month and guides their career journey to achieve early success
- Ambassadors: Recent SCIL graduates who help the recruiting efforts, connect with new participants upon program acceptance, and regularly check in with their assigned participant during the program's first three months

The program leader has continuous open dialogues with key advocates to assess what is working and implement adjustments as needed. They never assume that key stakeholders intuitively know their role to guide participants to success and, as a result, provide orientation training prior to the start of each new cohort every June. The program leader also checks in with stakeholders throughout the engagement to confirm they are maintaining their responsibilities. It is crucial to always review the program's purpose and intended outcomes to maintain stakeholder buy-in.

If you build it, they will come

In 2020, the pandemic thrust the organization into an immediate budget overhaul and focused on hiring and retaining employees in critical roles. As a result, the company placed existing SCIL participants in new positions three months before their scheduled graduation date while redirecting incoming program participants to open roles (as opposed to giving them the luxury of floating between jobs).

The program's extensive project plan with individual job tasks and rotations ceased to exist. In-person learning opportunities were also on an indefinite hold. The SCIL needed a shift in perspective and a strong dose of creativity.

Because past program leaders and advocates are no longer with the organization, it is difficult to define the program's curriculum from its origin. However, archival data suggests past participants traveled much more than recent cohorts. Original participants would travel frequently to the corporate office for leadership and professional development as well as to visit different warehouses.

The program leader has redesigned the current curriculum with an emphasis on digital learning and engagement to provide participants with business exposure through remote monthly meetings. The sessions teach individuals the functions of various departments as well as provide them the opportunity to engage with their cohort from across the US.

Assignments also include mini-presentations throughout the year for participants to showcase their unique knowledge from their on-the-job experiences. No warehouse location operates identically because customers have different product expectations and requirements. Meeting online once a month to share knowledge enables participants to learn how other warehouses operate while remaining at their primary locations.

CJLA has embraced technology in the globally connected world, which was not possible during the program's origin. Stakeholders at all levels of the program have leveraged opportunities derived from technology to remain connected with shared knowledge while saving time and resources on travel.

There's an APP for that

The program leader and recruiting team regularly ask themselves: Does CJLA have the ideal organizational structure, processes, opportunities, and leadership buy-in for an annual management trainee initiative? Creating a lasting program requires defining program objectives and developing a supporting framework. For all stakeholders involved, that entails redefining the ideal candidate who will succeed in a warehouse environment postprogram and ensuring senior leadership supports continuous program improvements, such as remote learning and less travel.

The evolving SCIL program has yet to solidify due to equally evolving internal and external forces. Resisting stagnation is the primary reason the program has managed to retain 70 percent of participants from 2015 to the present, promote many graduates into leadership roles, and witness employees who have stayed with the company for more than 30 years. The organization's conscious efforts with the APP components are necessary for the healthy growth that has yielded the retention of top leading SCIL participants at CJLA.

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