

Creating a digital ready frontline distribution workforce:

Steven T. Hunt, Ph.D.

Click to follow my posts: www.linkedin.com/in/steventhunt

Every industry is being changed by technology. But few are going through more disruption than parcel delivery. The rise of online retail shopping has changed its core customers while robot process automation is totally transforming its supply chain operations. The primary customer in this industry used to be shipping agents who focused on packages being delivered to commercial warehouses, shops, factories, and offices in a time frame usually measured in terms of days or weeks. Now the customers are often retail consumers who expect packages to be delivered to a residential doorstep in a day or less. Robotic automation and IoT tracking are also fundamentally altering how packages are stored, sorted, inventoried and retrieved. And predicted development of self-driving trucks and autonomous drones is poised to totally change how packages are transported and delivered.

[Purolator](#), the largest courier company in Canada is on the forefront of these changes. They are an industry leader in the use of technology to re-engineer work processes across all area of their business. This includes ensuring their front-line workforce is ready, able and willing to adapt to a fully digitalized workplace. This is no small undertaking. How do you get a long-tenured, largely unionized workforce excited about technology that is likely to automate many of their jobs? How do you help a truck driver with twenty years of experience prepare for a future that could include self-driving trucks? These are the sorts of challenges Purolator is addressing.

Working with the workforce you have by making front-line managers change agents

A company's ability to adapt to a digitalized economy hinges on the [ability of its workforce to evolve to new ways of working](#). Purolator has approximately 12,000 employees, many who work in remote locations across Canada. Given current labor market shortages, it is unrealistic and operationally unfeasible to transform such a large workforce solely by hiring new people with technical skills needed for a digitalized workplace. A strategy only focused on staffing would also conflict with Purolator's commitment to the career growth of its existing employees. This is why Purolator has made employee training and development a core focus of its digital transformation.

Purolator sees front-line managers as critical to the transformation of its workforce. Transformation is about managing change. The first person many employees approach when confronted with change is their immediate supervisor. Field managers serve as the human face of a company to its front-line employees. This is particularly true in Purolator where many employees work remotely in small offices or distribution centers. However, many of these managers do not have extensive experience working as change agents. Like most companies, Purolator's managers were primarily hired for operational, technical and project management skills. A major challenge facing Purolator is how to turn these operational managers into transformational leaders and coaches.

Real development takes real time and effort.

Purolator's digital transformation is built around a front-line manager development program called Evolve. The name Evolve was chosen for several reasons. First, evolution is not about qualitative change. It is about modifying existing capabilities to adapt to changing environments. This captures the situation facing Purolator's workforce: how can we adapt our behaviors and processes to succeed in a

radically changing industry? Second, evolution does not happen all at once. It unfolds over time through gradual and steady development.

The Evolve program has been in place for less than 2 years and has only touched a minority of Purolator front-line managers. Yet it has already driven millions of dollars in profit through increased process efficiency, customer satisfaction, and sales revenue. The success of the program lies in several key features including:

Quality over quantity. Purolator has around 400 front-line managers. But only 20 managers participate in each cohort of the Evolve program. Despite demand from managers, the company resisted increasing the size or frequency of the cohorts to ensure every participant receives extensive personal attention throughout the program.

Distributed training. The program is conducted over six months. It involves three on-site sessions, combined with multiple short online micro learning and coaching sessions. A critical part of the program is demonstrating active use of training concepts in the workplace over multiple months.

Holistic focus. The program starts with helping managers understand how they personally react to change. Managers then learn how to coach and support others through change at an emotional and behavioral level. Last, managers are given guidance on how to initiate and lead change projects in their departments. Understanding change from a personal, interpersonal and operational level equips managers to address the full spectrum of issues that derail organizational transformations.

Active leadership involvement. Managers cannot participate in the Evolve program unless their direct leader signs a contract pledging to support their development. These leaders are held accountable for ensuring managers have the time and resources to fully participate in the program, including putting concepts from the program into action in their own departments.

Executive time commitment. Purolator's CEO, CFO and CHRO meet individually with every cohort for several hours. Cohorts are scheduled to ensure these executive meetings always happen. While the executives might occasionally reschedule this meeting, they never cancel it. Executives' willingness to spend hours in conversation with 20 front-line managers enables significant cross-level learning. It also underscores the importance of the program to people across the company.

Cross functional collaboration. The cohorts are selected to bring together managers from different functional areas and regions across the company. This enables managers to build relationships with peers in other parts of the country and organization. The result is a more cohesive company and broader perspective among managers about how changes impact different aspects of the organization.

Action learning. Each cohort is given an assignment to address an existing operational problem or opportunity. These issues are identified by the company or by the cohort itself. Cohorts propose a solution to the executive leaders in the company, and then implement this solution using change management concepts learned during the course. These projects have already generated financial results that justify the cost of the Evolve program many times over.

Despite inevitable pressure to reduce the course time commitment or increase the size and frequency of the cohorts, Purolator's leadership has remained committed to the concept that creating real change requires a real commitment of time and resources. And this is paying off.

Enlisting employees and customers to guide and support change.

Frontline managers are a key focus of Purolator's transformation efforts, but the effort does not end there. Purolator is also building methods to gather input from employees and customers on how to improve and expand business operations. Enabling employees and customers to offer insights based on their experiences provides a rich source of ideas that the company might never capture if it relied solely on leadership observations alone. It also increases the sense among employees that they have an active role shaping the company's digital transformation. This is helping the workforce move from a mindset of "surviving change" to one of "driving change".

Creating a digital ready workforce is about moving in a direction, not reaching a destination. It is never truly achieved. As soon as one change is mastered, another one must be addressed. Purolator knows the change in its industry will never stop. Which is why they are helping employees to view change as an opportunity to learn and grow. This requires getting all employees involved in the transformation from senior executives through front-line managers and employees. It also includes acknowledging the tactical and emotional challenges that come from technological disruption. And giving employees confidence that even though the nature of their jobs may change over time, the value they provide as people will endure.