Target Prioritizes Upskilling and Mobility for Frontline Employees

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"Our purpose of helping all families discover the joy of everyday life is ingrained in who we are — it's how we care, grow, and win together as one Target team."

— Target's *website* description of its culture

Introduction

In partnership with UpSkill America, Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) research into *Employer-Supported Upskilling Programs* explored Target's commitment to making daily life better for its frontline workforce by developing and implementing innovative opportunities for upskilling and mobility. The retail firm, which employs more than 400,000 people, identified talent mobility as a top priority.

"The need for us to have a stronger internal talent pool to fill some of our biggest jobs became really apparent," says Kristen Lee, senior director of talent management. "It also became apparent that jobs were changing a lot, and we needed to better understand and develop the skills required to perform some roles or how to create non-traditional pathways for employee career growth."

Beginning with the basics

The realizations that Lee described inspired her talent team to begin in 2021 with what she calls "the basics"—building a skills taxonomy and introducing an internal talent marketplace.

Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the 2,000-plus job profiles in place at Target at the time, Lee says her group made the decision to begin with the top 10% of those profiles (which accounted for 75% of the company's workforce). A deep analysis ensued to understand not only the skills and experiences employees needed to *perform* those jobs successfully, but also to identify the skills and experiences workers *gained* from doing the work.

"As Target team members [employees] considered the jobs they wanted to do next, we could then clearly articulate what they needed in order to do that work. That made it much easier for them to understand the gap between the skills they had and those they needed to acquire. So that skills taxonomy piece was fundamental."

The next order of business for Lee and her colleagues was "leaning into our total portfolio of ways that team members could grow and develop within the organization so that our workforce could become more flexible while also ensuring that they could build the skills Target needed both now and in the future." In short order, a new internal talent marketplace opened greater access to jobs across the organization, and gig opportunities targeted exempt team members as a tactic for mid-level population development.

Turning the focus on frontline workers

With the skills taxonomy, the talent marketplace, and the gig opportunity options in place, Target launched a partnership with education benefits organization Guild. Termed the *Dream to Be* program, the alliance enabled Target to offer tuition-free access to formal education and skilling. Both full- and part-time team members are eligible from day one of employment to

pursue tuition-free undergraduate and associate degrees, certificates, and bootcamp programs from more than 40 colleges, universities, and learning providers.

"We'd found that our traditional tuition reimbursement program was primarily being used by headquarters employees and wasn't very accessible for frontline team members. It didn't meet their needs," Lee explains. "But the partnership with Guild offered something different, and we soon discovered that 90% of those using that benefit were frontline workers. We were investing in their development, and they were actively gaining skills relevant to Target's current and future needs. It made sense to think about creating pathways for people to move into different jobs. We began with a program similar to an apprenticeship."

Emerging engineers training fuels transitions

According to Lee, Target's existing practice had involved selecting candidates from outside the company to participate in a six-month boot camp, followed by a year-long apprenticeship as a means of expanding talent pools for software engineering positions. She and her talent team adapted the approach to fit employees already pursuing related new skills through the program with Guild.

"We identified people who were building relevant skills and marketed software engineering jobs to them, presenting information sessions and interview readiness courses. We guided them every step of the way, and hired over a dozen of them into the emerging engineer one-year apprenticeship. Participants went from being frontline employees in our stores to an engineer role on our headquarters team. That is a life-changing career transition."

With the basic framework in place, Lee and her team considered other areas within Target where similar approaches might facilitate growth for frontline workers. "We did some career pathing from our frontline into our supply chain headquarters organization and our inventory management functions," she says. Target's nearly 2,000 stores are supported by 59 supply chain facilities across the U.S.

More skills work, including mapping and alignment, led to the idea of inputting data on employees enrolled in Guild offerings into Target's candidate tracking system Avature. Lee notes that the strategy enabled her team to automate and track aspects of their work: inviting employees to information sessions and to sessions on networking, writing resumes, and exploring career opportunities.

Skills-based learning programs develop future leaders

Lee's team continued to focus closely on career growth for frontline workers, applying their skills work to accelerate transitions for employees aspiring to rise from entry positions to store or supply chain facility leadership. "Our internal learning team created a unique Target development program to help those frontline workers gain basic leadership skills to move into assistant manager roles. Again, a big career jump in terms of size, scale, and scope of the role. Our skills inventory work helps us enable those employees to close skills gaps faster and empowers us to get a broader set of individuals ready."

Additional benefits soon became apparent. When Lee and her team examined their findings on existing Target jobs and skills, then looked at external data on emerging jobs in the industry, they were able to identify skillsets that were highly transferrable within the company as

enablers of internal movement into exempt-level roles. That insight has driven development of supportive content in Target's own internal learning programs.

Says Lee: "We've built our library of internal programming on those enablers we identified: problem-solving, influencing, data-driven decision-making and other readily transferrable skills. That instruction is available in a variety of modalities so that those resources can be deployed in many ways to meet the needs of our audiences and align with their access, technology capabilities, and other constraints."

Metrics mark progress and success

Although some of the programs that Lee and her team have put in place are still in their early stages, initial metrics point to measurable success.

As noted, about 90% of employees who are enrolled in educational offerings through Target's alliance with Guild are frontline workers. Analysis performed on that group found that participants are three times more likely to earn promotions than their colleagues who aren't in that program. Lee adds that the research also found that the group pursuing education through Guild reported feeling better about their careers and had an impressive 70% lower turnover rate.

"That three times more likely to be promoted figure is huge," says Lee. "It confirms that we've figured out how to drive upskilling and career growth for those frontline employees. Now it's about how we replicate and scale that."

Internal partnerships are critical

Lee is quick to affirm the importance of partnering with other business functions and professionals across Target to make success with talent mobility possible. While she heads a full team of nine who focus on talent management and executive succession, only three of those are working on the frontline upskilling and mobility initiatives.

Additional support and participation have come from colleagues in talent acquisition, pay and benefits (the leaders of Target's relationship with Guild), HR data and technology specialists, and the HR leadership team.

Lee adds, "My team is accountable for the jobs and skills of today, but the workforce planning team is about the skills and jobs we'll need in the future. We work closely with them because we understand that what we're doing now is also connected to the skills Target needs going forward."

Partnership with Target's learning and development team is a critical one, helping to assess whether career pathways and skills gaps are best addressed through internal programs or externally sourced through Guild.

Says Lee: "Evolving upskilling and mobility is a highly cross-functional effort. There are many work streams we have established to govern and make sure that things are moving. And the involvement of so many areas of the organization has helped everyone see that progress is happening. We feel good that we're investing in and contributing to the right things in the right places."

Lessons learned point the way for others

To help talent leaders in other organizations who also are turning their attention to opportunities for frontline workers, Lee shared some of the insights gained from her group's work:

1. **Clearly define talent mobility for your organization.** "We want to empower Target team members to have equitable access to meaningful careers. If it doesn't fall within that lens, it is not part of this work, and that has helped us stay focused."

2. **Aim for balance.** "There is the foundational work to be done on skills, and there are flashier efforts, such as career pathways. You can't do one without the other, but you need to strike a balance. I see other organizations get stuck on the basic skills work because it can seem enormous and overwhelming. That hinders progress. Here at Target, we've taken a scrappy progress-over-perfection approach. We aren't going to figure out skills for every job, but we determined we could figure it out for the most important jobs here."

3. **Imagine broadly.** "We quickly understood that our work on skills and mobility for frontline employees would have significant effects far beyond our talent management team. It has tangible uses across the organization, which makes the effort more palatable. So does the cross-functional approach we've taken, and participation by other functions also helps uncover new opportunities and applications."

4. **Culture provides the foundation for success.** "At Target, we have a culture that is very movement centric. Leaders don't hoard talent. That makes it possible for team members to move up, especially when that mobility means going beyond the limits of one's own individual pyramid. So, culture is very core to this work."

Lee also observes that a significant degree of change management can be involved in imagining and implementing new ways of thinking about talent and career development.

"It was hard for people to envision at first. It wasn't that they weren't onboard or that they disagreed, it was a matter of actually changing how we'd approached things before. It took time to see the progress we made. But we've created a strategy and a movement that's gotten everyone all-in. That tells me that progress will continue."

Finally, she notes the pride she and her team feel when they look at the impact on Target's frontline employees. "Career mobility helps improve their lives outside of work, too. Even those who don't move up now have access to tools and education that will serve them whether or not they remain at Target.

"Our work in upskilling and talent mobility also means greater support for our organization's continued evolution, and a workforce that's better equipped to manage the ongoing ambiguity and complexity in the broader business environment."

Acknowledgements

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