



Tailored for success

River Island's learning strategy is heavily influenced by individual preferences and commercial imperatives

People are at the heart of all that we do at River Island, so we have a strategic focus on investing in our people's development and career progression. We want to attract and retain the best talent in the industry, as well as develop world-class management and leadership skills. Recently, we have been approved as an apprenticeship-employer provider – an employer that delivers some, or all, of the off-the-job training element of an apprenticeship to their own staff. This shows our commitment to developing our people to be the best they can be.

Writing
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and **Nebel Crowhurst**

OUR FOCUS
IS ON
DEVELOPING
CURIOSITY AND
A GROWTH
MINDSET

As we have a philosophy of employee-led career development at River Island, we encourage our people to take ownership of the time they spend learning and developing new skills. We consciously do not measure hours spent, since this would go against our culture of continuous improvement. Our focus instead is on developing curiosity and a growth mindset, where people can find and discover topics that are of interest to them and help them be better at their jobs. We have aligned our measurements and data to questions around engagement and relevance, rather than time spent learning or the number of classroom hours delivered.

We base the way in which we support learning in our organisation on the 70:20:10 ratio (70% experiential, 20% social and 10% formal). This framework ensures that we are always maximising opportunities for people to learn. We have worked hard to raise awareness and educate our colleagues that learning doesn't just happen in a classroom. We encourage a true learning culture by distancing the organisation from the notion that learning is separate from working. Both go hand-in-hand. The growth and accessibility of digital tools have provided new opportunities for our people to consume new knowledge, find resources or connect with other colleagues. This is a big focus for us and our employee engagement scores recognise that we have made a big investment in transforming the way in which we support people development.

The business case for learning

We strive to continually demonstrate the business impact of learning. To do this, we work closely with key business areas to ensure we are strategically aligned to business priorities. For example, the shift away from learning being 'courses' towards developing solutions that are more fitting to the needs of our people supports the technological transformation of our business. This technological transformation means that our people have access to great new workplace communication and collaboration tools, such as Slack, Skype for Business and Microsoft Teams. River Island's learning and development team is strategically supporting the implementation of these tools to ensure that technology is not a focus, but merely an enabler of a better-connected workforce who share what they know, leading to better ideas and innovative ways of working. We're looking to forward to piloting initiatives such as Working Out Loud Circles, which are peer support groups, to enhance these connections.

Our goal is to add value to the bottom line of our business, which means we work with business leaders to define what success looks like. The credibility of the learning and development team has been underpinned by us becoming more commercially aware, focusing on what matters most and understanding how learning impacts performance. A good example of this is a programme that was designed specifically with our retail management team in mind. Partnering with Sheffield Business School, we agreed key business metrics – including sales conversion, store order and product write-off targets – at the start of the programme. Then we monitored these metrics over a 12-month period. At the



ABOUT RIVER ISLAND

- River Island was founded as a brand in 1988, although its history as a fashion retailer dates back to 1948.
- The privately owned chain has 350 stores across the UK, Ireland, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.
- It employs 12,000 people in the UK.
- Besides its stores, River Island has offices in London and a distribution centre in Milton Keynes.

end, we could demonstrate a £6.8 million positive impact to the bottom-line performance of our retail network. As a team, we are constantly making decisions based on the available data, which means we can track the impact of our activity and see how it translates into performance outcomes.

Boosting performance

To measure our effectiveness as a learning function, we embarked on a benchmarking exercise with research company Towards Maturity in 2015. We then reviewed our progress in 2016 and 2017. Pleasingly, we have seen a phenomenal increase in our score, from 12.86 in 2015 to 63.26 in 2016 and 71.13 in 2017. In addition, we monitor the answers to specific questions in our employee engagement survey, including questions related to our people being aware of which development opportunities are available to them. We recognise that trying to measure learning in hours, or learning by numbers, or scores from a multiple-choice quiz, are not a true measure of learning. We have explicitly linked 'people experience' and employee life-cycle to our learning strategy and we can see that increased access to learning opportunities leads to higher employee engagement and better performance.

Our vision is to be "award-winning industry leaders, educating everyone uniquely", so we strive to use learning innovations to enable our people to be the very best they can be. It would be easy for us to use every buzzword in the industry, but our focus is simply to support our colleagues.

We are, however, ambitious, and believe that a solid foundation needs to be set down to create a robust culture of learning. For this reason, we have been working with Towards Maturity to benchmark our approach, and we see real value in measuring learning outside that, assessed by learning management systems. We have exciting plans to embed agile methodologies at the heart of how we operate and to prototype ideas quickly, gathering feedback as we go from our customers. As we are fresh and fearless in our approach, we see learning opportunities arising from augmented reality and artificial intelligence. These include simple playlist algorithms that can help people to personalise their learning, and chatbots that can support the employee journey from onboarding onwards. We want to strike the right balance between getting the basics right while continuing to push the boundaries. For us, this balance is central to our plans around learning. ■

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