

Montessori: It's good for business

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Emmanuel Dunand/AFP/Getty Images

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, a Montessori student as a child, introduces the new Kindle Fire tablet in New York, on September 28, 2011.

An [interesting post](#) from Harvard Business Review's blogs, written by [Ambiga Dhiraj](#) of Mu Sigma in Chicago. Her company is revamping professional development in the image of...Montessori education. If you don't know about Montessori, here's a [good primer](#). I should confess right up front that my daughter, who's nine, has been in a Montessori elementary school for the last two years, and my 6-year-old son will start at the same school this fall. He also went to Montessori preschool. My wife and I are big fans.

Businesses could be, too. Mu Sigma certainly is:

[I]n 2010 we began to model our development after Montessori schools, whose principals include "an emphasis on independence, freedom within limits, and respect for a child's natural psychological development, as well as technological advancements in society." Since then we've applied these basic tenets to our workforce.

[...]

Prior to the Montessori model, our managers used promotions as carrots. Now they are challenged to motivate employees in other ways — by giving them interesting projects to work on, public praise for their work, and the right guidance and encouragement.

The end effect is that employees develop a longer-term vision for their place at our company — it's the genesis of a career, rather than just an entry-level job. There will inevitably be some turnover, as there is in any firm, but we believe this intrinsic motivation — an employee's [love for what she does](#)— is better than money and promotions. We've already seen the results in terms of lower turnover among the entry-level employees who have been through the program. Our retention rates were noticeably higher in 2011 than they were in 2009-2010, and are trending steadily upward.

Famously, according to [this Wall Street Journal article](#) anyway, there's a "Montessori Mafia" that's responsible for some of our most innovative companies. But that's just the marquee Montessori news. From my perspective, Dhiraj's story is even more compelling, because her company isn't just looking to *hire* students with a Montessori background, it's looking to bring Montessori into the enterprise environment and make use of its principles.

The basic lesson I think Mu Sigma has picked up is that advancement is less rewarding than what you hear Montessori educators refer to as "flow" — the ability of a student to engage in period of prolonged concentration on a task ([here's a post from Laura Flores Shaw](#), my kids' Head of School, on that very subject). The [Energy Project](#) (which also appears often on HBR blogs) recommends a version of this thinking, which I've applied very successfully to my own work (I didn't have a Montessori education).

For some workers, this may not fly. Motivation to receive short-term rewards, like raises, can be exceptionally compelling. But it doesn't always lead to *rewarding* career development. Just take a look at the results of [this USC study](#) (summarized by the WSJ), which showed that the investment banking rat-race actually leads to health problems.

Can Montessori reshape American business? Probably not. But it could help to reshape the best parts of the American business. You know, where the innovation happens.