

# How a Learning Culture and Diversity Drive Business Success

An Interview with Jenny Dearborn,  
Executive Vice President, Human Resources, SAP

**EDITOR'S NOTE** *Recognized as one of the 50 Most Powerful Women in Tech, Jenny Dearborn is a thought leader in human capital management. She is a regular contributor to USA Today, Forbes, Huffington Post and Fast Company. Her book, Data Driven, was number seven out of 11,000 business books published in the U.S. in 2015. Her next book, The Data Driven Leader, was published in November 2017. Before joining SAP, Dearborn was CLO at SuccessFactors, where her team was recognized as the number one performing corporate learning department by Elearning Magazine and won numerous industry awards for sales enablement and learning impact measurement. Dearborn earned an A.A. in Social Sciences from American River College in Sacramento, a B.A. from University of California at Berkeley, an M.Ed. from Stanford University and an M.B.A. in Organizational Development from San Jose State University.*



Jenny Dearborn

My role touches the employee experience at every step of their journey, from onboarding to retirement, and we are laser focused on what employees need at each of these stages, not just to support our business strategy, but also to be their best selves at work.

**With the size and scale of SAP, how challenging is it to communicate internally to the employees about these learning and growth opportunities?**

I have been at several large global multinationals and internal communication has been challenging at all of them. Most important is to regularly communicate a clear vision, strategy, and purpose, and show our people how critical they are to advancing them. Learning and growth opportunities are one way to make those connections, showing the links between the knowledge and skills we're offering and how they can be meaningful to our people's success – in their role at SAP as well as their career.

**How vital is a diverse and inclusive workforce for a company like SAP that has such a diverse customer base?**

It's absolutely central, first of all to SAP innovation. A wide range of both professional outlooks and personal experiences is essential for any technology company, but especially for a market leader working to invent the future across the globe. The more diverse the people are that are tackling the problems, the better the solutions will be.

Diversity is also essential to having an inclusive, bias-free workplace where every individual can be recognized for what they have to contribute. At SAP, we focus on skills and strengths, rather than what others may see as impairments. This is especially important to me. Until I was 19, people assumed I didn't have much to offer. Then I was diagnosed as having severe dyslexia, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. I was able to tackle those challenges and now I harness them as strengths. Everyone deserves a chance to reach their potential.

I'm very proud of SAP's Autism at Work program, which operates in 12 countries. By embracing differences, we help spark innovation while challenging assumptions and inspiring change.

**How important is it to put metrics around SAP's learning and development efforts?**

It's incredibly important to measure our impact and be accountable for our work. L&D professionals need to be as metrics and numbers driven as anyone else. To truly align our activities to top-level business goals, we need to understand the fundamentals of data science, organizational psychology and measuring what matters.

This takes discipline and focus, as well as a commitment to develop our own people's skill sets. We can absolutely prove the value of the work we're doing.

**You use the phrase, "learning and development company." Is this how you describe SAP?**

Yes. SAP understands what is most critical for the skills of the future. We can talk about machine learning and artificial intelligence and all sorts of amazing ways to augment humanity in the future. However, what differentiates a company and workforce is their ability to be human and to focus on unique, fundamentally human skills. These are things machine learning and AI can't do.

This includes critical thinking, problem solving, innovation, creativity, empathy, trust, and emotional intelligence – these are the things we need to stay ahead.

SAP's learning culture is key. Knowledge is static, but our ability to adapt, change, learn and grow is what keeps us ahead of the market, and that is what SAP is about.

**Does that commitment need to be set at the top with the C-Suite?**

Absolutely. Many companies may talk about it, but if they don't walk the talk, then they are breaking trust with the market and their employees, who will see through it.

When I came to SAP six years ago, I was part of the SuccessFactors acquisition and I had been a Chief Learning Officer at five companies, so I knew how this function should be run. But it's because of Bill McDermott's consistent leadership that I have been successful.

Bill creates an environment for the best leaders to thrive and excel. The journey from on-premise to cloud for SAP over the past six years has been extraordinary. This all comes down to leadership and his vision.

He is incredible at inspiring loyalty and leadership and bringing out the best in people to singularly fulfill our mission of making the world a better place. ●

**COMPANY BRIEF** *SAP (sap.com) is the world's largest provider of enterprise application software, founded in 1972 and headquartered in Walldorf, Germany. SAP empowers people and organizations to work together more efficiently and use business insight more effectively to stay ahead of the competition. SAP applications and services enable more than 350,000 customers to operate profitably, adapt continuously, and grow sustainably. SAP is listed on several exchanges, including the Frankfurt Stock Exchange and NYSE.*

**How do you define the strengths of the SAP brand?**

SAP has a legacy of trust and integrity. People trust in our products and our ability to innovate, and we see that in our consistent market leadership.

**How critical is it for your role to be engaged with business strategy and to have close coordination with SAP's business leaders?**

It's integral to what we do. My responsibility is to ensure that our talent can help achieve our business goals and objectives, now and in the future. That process starts with aligning a strategic workforce plan with the board. We evaluate the talent we have today and the development they need every year to support our future strategy with the right knowledge and skills.