

Next Generation Digital Learning Strategies

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Chapter 1: The changing landscape of learning

New perspectives

Arthur Koestler's 1959 masterpiece, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe*¹ presents an account of man's slow yet sure realisation that the earth is not at the centre of the universe, but instead is a bit-player in a small galaxy out near the edge of a vast expanse of nothingness.

Koestler explains that rather than sleepwalking into the future, close and sometimes painful research and observation over many years has led us to a better understanding of the reality of our place in the cosmos. He likens this journey to sleepwalkers slowly waking and comprehending their surroundings.

The world for many organisations – and for training and learning and development (L&D) professionals particularly – is analogous to that of the ancient astronomers and philosophers. There are new demands on organisations for innovation, for speed, for growth and for increasing value. Some of these demands fall directly into the hands of the HR and learning departments as they design and develop strategies and solutions to build sustainable workforce learning and capability.

However, there is a general view that as technology continues to transform the way we work and play, its use in education and training still lags behind.

Changing work – Implications for learning

The social context of work is changing, and the tools and technologies being used

to carry out work are rapidly evolving. Transactional work, especially in the developed economies, is contracting, while work requiring decisions and management of tacit knowledge is expanding. McKinsey and Company² reported that: "Seventy per cent of all US jobs created since 1998 required judgment and experience." By 2005 these tacit jobs made up 41 per cent of the labour market in the US, increasing year-on-year.

The implications for supporting learning and building workforce capability are clear. 'Best practice' does not exist in this new world. Learning based on replicating past practice has little value, where the context is continually evolving and where repeatable work is diminishing. Organisations need to build learning strategies that are responsive to rapid change. A robust digital strategy plays a critical role in the overall strategy.

There is an increasing need for agility in the workplace, as well as increasing agility in the approaches taken in learning and development to support workers. The main driver in this area is the need for learning and work to be combined. In a world where change is already fast and increasing, a culture of continuous learning is required.

eLearning originally brought learning to the learner, yet the new generation of digital learning strategies is moving beyond this to breaking some fundamental principles that have been in place for hundreds of years.

The skills and the talent challenge

The PricewaterhouseCoopers 2011 Annual CEO Survey³ found that 66 per cent of CEOs say that lack of the right skills is their biggest talent challenge.

There is an obvious premium on skills as we move from manufacturing to service-based economies and from largely transactional work to knowledge work and beyond. At the same time, an increasing proportion of the 'value of organisations' is being derived from intangible assets, ranging from technological patents to human capital. Non-physical assets now comprise around 80 per cent of the value of Standard & Poor's 500 US companies in leading industries.⁴ A large percentage of those 'intangibles' reside in the heads of the workforce, in the form of their skills and capabilities.

In a world where the supply of skilled candidates for roles in organisations is a challenge, we need to increase focus on developing skills and capability within the workforce.

Challenging our existing models for learning

The ways in which we have been preparing people for work is still largely rooted in the Taylorist approaches of the early 20th century.⁵ Taylor's focus was the improvement of industrial efficiency through identification of best practices – the one best way in which work could be accomplished. The principles he developed were based on structured training for specific tasks and jobs and the provision of "detailed instruction and supervision of each worker in the performance of that worker's discrete task".⁶

Together with the 19th century Lutheran-influenced Prussian education system,⁷ with its concepts of a curriculum and grades and rigid structures, Taylorist approaches have

been the dominant model for organisational training into the 21st century.

Learning professionals are not usually conscious of these origins when they develop a learning plan, draw up a set of learning objectives for a course, or start to build an eLearning module, but nevertheless, they are present, at the heart of the majority of learning approaches used to this day.

Change drives change

However, when we look at the modern organisation and modern requirements, we see a world in constant flux, where roles and jobs are not fixed with interchangeable occupants.

Even the concepts around 'job' and 'job role' are being questioned and replaced with team and task-specific activities. Chief executive officer of Bersin & Associates Josh Bersin terms this world 'the borderless workplace',⁸ seeing it as an ecosystem where workers communicate continually and seamlessly across time and distance with co-workers both inside and outside their own organisation.

For the HR department the question becomes one of preparing people for jobs that often do not even exist. Many roles in organisations today barely existed five years ago, and the pace of change is increasing.

Also, workplaces are highly social places. Our learning and employee development strategies need to take this into account. The rise of social media is adding additional layers to social interaction, helping flatten hierarchies and extend organisations beyond their walls. Social media is driving the pull of customers, clients and employees. No longer are pure top down approaches sufficient, or even practical. Expectations are changing. Employees want instant access to knowledge resources and to learning on their own terms. The idea of setting aside a week to

attend a formal training programme is alien to many new entrants to the workforce. They want their learning at a time that suits them, on their own terms.

When we look at the necessary mechanisms to achieve this, it is evident that technology and learning must be combined.

New environments, new approaches

Organisations such as Cisco and Genentech (ranked by FORTUNE as one of the 100 top companies to work for, 14 years in a row)⁹ are building learning services on the basis that the workforce of the future needs to learn differently. Learning and development departments (or the ‘learning and knowledge management’ department in the case of Genentech) are responding by embracing a wide range of technology-supported learning approaches. Cisco L&D manager Ray Garra¹⁰ said: “For young employees living in an abbreviated ‘instant message’ type of world, we need to provide opportunities to learn that suits them. They simply can’t focus for long periods of time.”

These issues raise questions about not only the methods of training, but also about some of the fundamental principles underlying learning and development generally. For example, with the rise of social media over the past ten years, the entire concept of individual training for job preparation has been called into question.

Individual training requires a stable work environment, a luxury often not available any more. People change roles and jobs at an increasing frequency. In the US, the average person born in the latter years of the baby boom held 11 jobs from age 18 to age 44, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. More than three-fifths of these jobs were held from ages 18 to 27.¹¹

The expectation is that new entrants to the workforce will have even more

dynamic working careers, along with more job changes. Portfolio careers and temporary work are also increasing. Different learning and development approaches will be needed for people with these working characteristics. These approaches will require learning and technology to be brought together.

New opportunities in breaking the ‘richness and reach trade-off’

Until recently, the approach to learning has always involved a trade-off between richness and scale. This trade-off was described in 1999 by Philip Evans and Thomas Wurster in their innovative book *Blown to Bits: How the New Economics of Information Transforms Strategy*.¹²

Evans and Wurster explained the impact of the telecommunications revolution, particularly the internet, on existing economic models: “The internet can blow away practically any business. The new economy is deconstructing the newspaper, auto retailing and banking business while creating new opportunities for others.”¹³

The world of learning is not immune from this phenomenon. It is, in fact, in the middle of the storm.

Past training had, in Evans’ & Wurster’s words, “richness or reach”, but not both. We could provide rich learning experiences in a face-to-face environment or learning with reach using the traditional postal system and correspondence-type courses. We could not have both.

However, advanced telecommunications has changed it all. We have broken the richness/reach trade-off and can provide rich learning experiences and reach together through the vehicle of digital learning. Of course prior to the development of the internet we were enriching the learning environment at a distance through television,

but television offers one way broadcast. The new networks are far more powerful two way communication tools.

The power in search is breaking old learning models

'Knowledge is power' was the old adage, but today, knowledge is no longer power – access to knowledge is the new power. At the click of a mouse button anyone with a connection to the internet has access to an almost unlimited repository of data and information. The amounts of data and information we deal with daily are staggering. However, most of our training and learning strategies are based on a world where information and knowledge were limited.

We bring people together in a classroom, or build eLearning courses, using a model that is based on transferring information. We then test and assess knowledge transfer (i.e. a short-term memory test and not related with learning) and assume that the people completing the course are equipped to perform well in the workplace.

Of course we have 'train and train again' situations. Many workers are simply swamped with information. Providing them with more and expecting it to be absorbed and acted upon, even if it is structured in the minds of the learning or training professional, is like believing in magic! Part of the problem is that we have plenty of information but currently very poor 'filters' to allow us to get to the right information at the right time.

Amit Singhal,¹⁴ the man responsible for Google's search algorithm, explains part of the reason: "Search engines are still in the information age. Our objective is to make this a source of knowledge for our users." Maybe Google will manage it. Maybe other technology companies will devise better approaches.

Ideally, we would provide workers with some core skills, including important search and find skills and then arrange access to the vast array of information stores so they could find the information they needed when they need it.

Unfortunately, our search and filter systems are still relatively rudimentary so there is a role still for learning and L&D departments, but that role is changing rapidly.

What does the new learning landscape mean for your organisation?

The Training Industry Inc. 2011 Trend Survey¹⁵ identified four principal factors in the new learning landscape:

- Increasing complexity;
- New technologies;
- The need for speed; and
- Changing content.

Increasing complexity

This is a trend across organisations, forcing a change in role for learning leaders (chief learning officers and learning managers). Roles previously focused on the design, development and delivery of training courses, programmes and curricula. Roles also involved some training needs analysis and evaluation, but for many organisations the last two tended to be 'nice-to-have' rather than integral. The survey identified a shift in role for senior learning leaders from programme managers and providers of point solutions – learning events of various types – to solution architects.

Doug Howard, CEO of Training Industry Inc. says: "Learning is becoming much more about access to information – meaning that the leader's role must become more of a solutions architect, someone who designs innovative approaches for employees to access knowledge, when they need it, in

relevant chunks, no matter where they are. The learning architect is becoming more of a consultant.”¹⁶

Organisations are also becoming more social, collaborative and virtual. A whole new area of social business has developed in the past two years with large consultancies such as IBM and Accenture helping organisations accelerate social business growth and adoption. IBM offers education and mentorship programmes supporting community managers (the fastest growing job in the social sphere), as well as a range of social communication and technology-supported learning.

New learning technologies

The phenomenal growth of new learning technologies continues to accelerate. Pearson plc¹⁷ is a good example of a large multinational organisation that provides technology and services for the eLearning market. With a market capitalisation of \$15.4bn, Pearson is ‘the world’s leading education company’ (although it could be argued that Google actually wears that crown). Pearson provides learning infrastructure, bespoke and generic eLearning content and online testing services. Pearson’s North American education services were the company’s biggest revenue driver in 2010, accounting for 46 per cent of group revenue with an increasing percentage from learning technology and eLearning.

A number of specialist eLearning and learning technology companies have also grown significantly over the past decade. SkillSoft’s market capitalisation is around \$1bn, BlackBoard’s is slightly larger at \$1.39bn. While BlackBoard provides infrastructure services primarily into the mainstream education sector, SkillSoft is a major provider to corporate education.

The learning technology landscape is complex and despite the few large suppliers

such as Pearson and SkillSoft, is mainly populated by relatively small, private corporations. Also, learning technologies are becoming social, collaborative and virtual. This translates into difficult navigation for learning leaders and their organisations to select appropriate solutions and to combine technology with innovative learning approaches, to support next generation digital learning.

The need for speed

Speed is a vital driver in the new learning landscape. Learning has to work at the speed of business if it is to have impact. eLearning is one of the key solutions to overcome the inherent inertial of traditional face-to-face learning with long lag-times to build courses, programmes and curricula and its inability to scale, particularly for multinational organisations.

The changing nature of content

Learning content is being transformed for easier consumption. Performance support and learning object approaches have been in use for some time. The delivery of individual pieces of content rather than full courses to provide answers to a single question is the emergent approach in learning. This is impacting the way eLearning courses and modules are being built and putting emphasis on technology-enabled performance support approaches

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