
The future of learning and development: enhancing capability

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In the first half of 2008, in conjunction with TJ (Training Journal), IES carried out a project exploring the future of learning and development using techniques from scenario planning. The three scenarios are summarised below.

Scenario 1 - L&D is Queen

L&D is genuinely embraced as a driving factor in business success and individual fulfilment. L&D activities are not seen as purely remedial for fixing people's weaknesses but are regarded as an integral part of people's on-going growth and contribution. The impact of L&D on organisational performance has been clearly demonstrated.

Scenario 2 - Organisational necessity

Whilst markets are competitive in all the scenarios, they are particularly tough in this scenario. Competition is very hard and organisations are focused on keeping costs down. Although learning is recognised as important, it is also seen as a cost in both time and money. In this environment, L&D activities are focused on the skills and knowledge that are required to do the immediate job.

Scenario 3 - National learning

Recognising the growth of the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the potential impact that they will have on the UK's ability to compete, successive governments have put skills development at the heart of their strategies. The UK is just about hanging on to its position in the first division of labour capability but is having to fight ever harder to attract inward investment.

Remembering that this work was carried out before the demise of the financial sector and its knock-on effect on the rest of the economy and workforce, Scenario 2 now seems to have been quite prescient though at the time most participants in the project indicated that we were moving more towards the 'L&D is Queen' scenario. Wishful thinking at the time perhaps but there is no doubt that the landscape has shifted since then.

Direction of travel

Drawing from extensive discussion about the implications of these scenarios, the expert and practitioner participants in the process concluded that, whilst there will be changes over the coming five to ten years, this will be along routes that have been previously identified and discussed in the L&D world, but are now expected to have a more significant impact. This is likely to lead to a change in the balance of L&D activity rather than a complete new way of working – evolution rather than revolution (albeit rapid evolution).

In addition, the speed of movement along these new routes is increasing as elements of the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in many jobs change faster. There is no longer always one central repository of the ‘right’ knowledge or skills; it is dispersed amongst experts spread across an organisation or even in other organisations. Businesses are looking for more responsive and more targeted solutions to their L&D requirements, and technology is facilitating new ways of working and learning.

It is becoming harder to anticipate what new skills and knowledge will be required and to put in place a structured programme to deliver it; problems (or opportunities) will occur in organisations and solutions will need to be found, rapidly. The people involved will need to learn about a new area and create a solution much more rapidly than previously – the learning curve will need to be much shorter and people will be going up new learning curves on a regular basis.

Continuous, informal and social

Learning will continue the shift from being just thought of as formal and away from the office to an on-going process where learning is continuous, social, informal and embedded in the workplace. People learn all the time, it is almost impossible not to learn on a daily basis, but many people only think of development as having happened when they have been formally trained in a particular area. As the knowledge required for many jobs changes more rapidly and becomes more dispersed, it won't be practical to help people learn all that they need to in this way.

More traditional models of classroom based or facilitated learning will still have their place, particularly for regulatory, core skill set and/or brand values-based development. It is likely though that their role will diminish for other types of development as people draw on their network of contacts or use technology to access relevant learning material on a just-in-time basis.

The challenge for organisations is how to help people learn most effectively in these connected and independent ways which will allow the rapid spread of knowledge as and when required, perhaps recognising that they can't control this process but can create the right conditions for it to occur.

The importance of technology

It is tempting to think of some of the advances in technology as just new delivery mechanisms, delivering the same content in new ways. Indeed, some of it may be just that, an extension of e-learning to m-learning, podcasts, and so on. However, even these provide opportunities for people to learn at different times and in different situations than they did previously, accessing the required material on a just-in-time basis. Organisations are also getting smarter at deploying these technologies, solving real business problems rather than implementing them just because they can.

More fundamentally though, recent advances in technology have helped people connect and collaborate more easily with a wider range of colleagues. Always-on internet connections make it possible for people to interact and learn wherever and whenever they need to. This isn't just about delivering the same content in a new way, but providing ways for people to seek out and find learning for themselves, be that through accessing existing knowledge or tapping into a network of contacts (or their contacts).

These networked uses of technology require a different way of thinking about learning which isn't about content delivery necessarily, but more about providing the means for people to find and share information for themselves. Understanding the psychology of relationships and networks will be fundamental to creating effective learning environments.

Recognising the value of learning

One of the challenges of a world in which more learning is on-going, independent, social and informal or just in time and bite-sized, is how to recognise that people have learnt new things. This is important both to help people acknowledge that they are already learning (and perhaps don't need to go on a training course) and also so that they can demonstrate their learning to other potential employers.

How can employers and academic institutions establish accreditation processes which recognise and value these new styles of learning? How can this learning be made portable to, and valued by, other employers?

Learning as a skill

A key message is the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their own learning and not expecting organisations to 'drip feed' them. Throughout the education process most people have a clear structure provided for what to learn and yet, in the world of work, there is not a similar clear path. Learning as a skill was identified as being very important and one that many people haven't been helped to

acquire. Situations where learning capability could be used as a key factor in recruitment selection processes for certain roles, equal to or more important than the knowledge to do the job today, are likely to increase.

Critical role of the line manager

Whilst helping individuals develop their learning capability is seen as a high priority, so is developing the ability of line managers to help in the learning process. Not everyone can learn totally independently and the coaching skills to help people think through what to learn and to reinforce the learning that has taken place will be essential to optimising the learning that occurs. The line manager also has the responsibility for focusing the learning on the skills and knowledge that are required for success and progress in the current organisation/role.

As many organisations are recognising, this part of the manager role does take time and needs to be valued. However, sometimes whilst the role is specified for the manager, the time pressures of the job mean that they are not able to give it the necessary attention.

Measuring the effectiveness of L&D

Measuring the effectiveness of L&D interventions is challenging at the best of times. As the focus of L&D shifts towards creating learning environments that encourage collaborative, informal learning in which it is the networked impact of different elements that makes the difference, this will become even more difficult. Certainly 'happy sheets' won't do it! Perhaps the answer lies partly in the blurring with OD and is in the measurement of overall capability and capacity of the organisation through understanding the behavioural drivers of business performance and using some form of balanced scorecard. Despite its difficulty, measurement will continue to be important as it may be possible to invest significant time and effort in initiatives which deliver no real business benefit. The challenge will be in isolating those that do from the ones that don't.

Opportunity for L&D functions

As learning becomes even more on-going, social and informal, and at the same time is increasingly being recognised as key to organisational success but needs to be delivered in a highly cost effective way, the nature of L&D changes to one which is much more integrated into an organisation's culture and ways of working. Organisations will need to be designed (structure, processes, technology, physical space and culture) to enable people's learning and to allow them to put that learning into practice.

For L&D professionals the shifts raise interesting questions about the skills that will be required in the future and possible career paths. As the HR function has been working towards over recent years, the L&D function will need to be able to think about how it can lead business changes through the application of L&D rather than just responding to specific business problems that are presented to them. Some practitioners will also require skills that will allow them to initiate and manage change to enable the organisation to benefit from the social, informal, networked approaches discussed earlier. This will require skills which are perhaps more closely aligned with existing OD roles but will also require the practitioner to understand the opportunities afforded by the latest ideas and thinking in L&D.

Finally

Whilst the future portrayed is one of evolution rather than revolution, the opportunity is there for all L&D functions to work with, or join with, the OD function to really focus on enhancing the capability of the people in the organisation and the organisation's ability to deploy that capability. When this opportunity is fully seized, the L&D/OD function can be a powerhouse of influence in organisations and be a major driver of organisational success. The question for L&D leaders is whether they want to seize this opportunity.

References

Fairhurst P (2008), *Learning and Development 2020 – Exploring the future of workplace learning: Phase I report – trends, scenarios and emerging conclusions*, Training Journal. See www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/report.php?id=tj2020_1

If you would like to talk further about dealing with the issues raised in this article then please contact:

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