

Learning and development: perspectives on the future

Paul Fairhurst

As we have seen in stark reality over the past two years, the future is no longer predictable (if it ever was). The ability of organisations to adapt and to learn to operate in changing circumstances are critical capabilities. And yet, when times get tough one of the first things to be cut is the learning and development budget. Why is this? Do organisations think that they no longer need to learn, or is it because they actually think that the investment isn't delivering value to the business; in which case why were they doing it in the first place? Recent estimates by a number of commentators and researchers have suggested that between only 10% and 30% of learning occurs through formal development and yet 80 to 90% of the L&D budget is spent on this. Are L&D functions spending their money in the right places and on the right solutions? In 2008 and 2009, in conjunction with Training Journal, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) undertook a study exploring the future of learning and development through the use of scenario thinking. The work sought to address how the L&D community should be learning, and developing its own capability to serve the organisation better.

The Research

As more organisations are realising when thinking about the future, their markets and their workforce, considering a simple linear extrapolation from today is not enough. This is equally true when thinking about L&D, both from the demand side in terms of what skills, knowledge and capabilities people will require, and also from the supply side in terms of how learning and development interventions can be delivered effectively. Adapting the classic PESTEL analysis (Politics, Economics, Social, Technological, Environmental and Legal) the

research began by considering four areas; Society, Work and business, Technology, and Brain and mind. Within these, thirty six sub-themes were identified including drivers such as changing demographics, flexible working practices, positive psychology and artificial intelligence. The full set of drivers is described in the Phase 1 report.¹

From these, three potential future scenarios were developed:

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 ongoing 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.

Engaging with L&D professionals at workshops and conferences, it was clear that most believed, and certainly hoped, that the profession was moving mainly towards 'L&D is Queen'. However, that was back in 2008 and, showing the usefulness of scenario thinking, 'organisational necessity' is the environment in which many are now operating. Through this process of engagement a number of views about the direction of travel for L&D emerged. The research was then grounded in a number of case studies with organisations who were exhibiting some of the characteristics that had been identified in the work to date; these were the Civil Aviation Authority, Legal & General, the Department for Work and Pensions, and Rolls-Royce.

Summary of findings

First, L&D professionals need to recognise the importance of continuous, informal, social learning, which is likely to continue to grow, and will require L&D professionals to become competent in creating the conditions for this to occur. People learn from their colleagues by asking questions and through watching others' successful behaviour, following role models. We all remember that we didn't learn to ride a bike or to speak by reading a manual or sitting in a classroom, but by watching others, trying it out and getting feedback from an observer or through our own senses about what is working. Much L&D activity is focused on giving people knowledge about what to do but is less effective in helping people actually learn to internalise and use it. People are beginning to learn through online activities; they gain knowledge and answers to their questions from searching and through social networks that can extend outside their company and across international boundaries. The boundary between work and home is blurring and people are often looking to learn at different times of the day and in different places; they want to be able to learn when they need it, not in some programmatic way.

Interestingly, people are natural learners; it is almost impossible for us not to learn things. The question for the organisation and its L&D professionals is whether people are learning the most useful things to take the business forward and in an efficient way. The challenge for L&D professionals is to harness this range of informal and social learning processes to make it easy for people to learn quickly and easily in a way that supports the organisation's goals.

Clearly, new technologies are an important part of the way people work and how they learn. Some L&D people think that new technologies are just ways of delivering the same content differently. They are much more than this though, they open up new opportunities for people to learn and to share their own knowledge and experience. How do you capture the tacit knowledge of experts in the organisation who may be retiring or who may at some point leave the organisation? Perhaps encourage them to capture their knowledge on video or in an online wiki. Social networking ideas allow people to connect with experts anywhere in the world to get answers to their questions, and to answer other people's questions.

Often the answer emerges through discussion or debate; perhaps this used to be at the coffee machine or water cooler where some of the most useful creative ideas emerged. Now this can be online with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. The potential for the development of creative solutions and rapid learning are enormous. But in many organisations this requires a cultural shift for people to feel comfortable networking and sharing knowledge and experience in this way. The L&D community needs to understand the psychology of networks and how they operate and be focused on how to maximise the benefit of collaborative learning that always on connectivity allows. The key is that the solutions produced are designed to tackle real business issues and deliver real business benefit, not just be sharing for sharing's sake. Even when technology is just delivering the same content in new ways, it is also opening up the time and place that people can learn through the use of mobile handheld devices, so that they can perhaps learn on the commute home, or in the hotel when travelling; or actually wherever and whenever they want to. Why should it have to be during normal office hours? L&D people will need to work closely with their technology colleagues to deliver effective and practical solutions to business problems.

As a result of the rapidly changing world and the recognition that the most effective learning happens informally, socially and often unconsciously, the skill of learning will become increasingly important and people will need to be helped to become more effective at

learning for themselves and with others. A number of participants in the research observed that our education systems and early work experiences tend to spoon-feed learning to people and so they never really learn the skill of learning for themselves. Yet more than one organisation now recognises the ability to learn as a key differentiator for highly successful people – which is fine for those people that are able to do it, but L&D professionals need to think about how to help people to ‘learn to learn’.

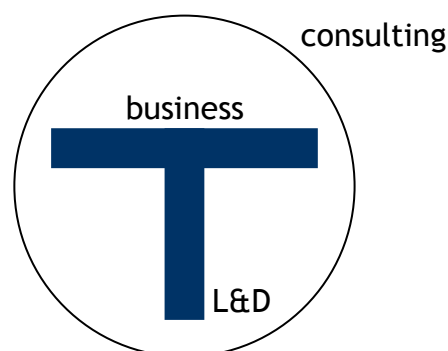
As with much else in organisations though, the critical role in helping people learn most effectively will be the role of the line manager in focusing and reinforcing learning. Managers have a lot else on their plate, but getting the best from their people (and not getting in their way) is one of the most important roles, and helping their people learn and develop will be critical to future success. The challenge, as always, is how to create time in their schedule to be able to do this. L&D people need to help their management community become excellent facilitators of learning.

Whilst there will always be formal learning programmes and courses, as informal and social learning grow in importance individuals will increasingly look for ways for their informal learning to be recognised (accredited) to demonstrate their value in the market. As one participant in the research observed, ‘I don’t have time to do a Masters degree, but I have learnt so much in the last year anyway. How can I get recognition for this?’ The L&D community needs to think about how to acknowledge the value of the learning that people achieve at work, and also to communicate that learning is not just about going on training course. How often do we hear the cry that someone has not had any development just because they have not had any formal training? This perception needs to be changed as most learning and development does not happen in this way.

One of the interesting things about the emerging conclusions described so far is that, whilst there will continue to be some formal programmatic development, there is much more to be done with the informal and social learning models which need to be embedded in the organisation not just something that people are sent on from time to time. As a result of this, it seems likely that the boundaries between L&D and OD will blur further as learning is embedded into the way organisations work, and change programmes become about how organisations and people learn to do things and think differently.

As a result of these changes, there will be a continuing shift in the balance of the L&D professionals’ skill set towards greater business understanding, change management, organisation development and use of new

technologies. A simple model, which has been borrowed from the management consultancy and advertising industries, is that of the T-shaped L&D person:



In this model, the horizontal of the T, suggests that L&D people need to have a broad understanding of the whole of the business that they operate in, coupled with an in-depth understanding of their L&D (the upright of the T). They then deploy these two sets of skills and knowledge to the outside world through what might be called consultancy skills. This is a simple model, yet one which strikes a chord with many people when the role of the L&D person is discussed. It makes it easy for an L&D person to know what is required of them; it gives a clear sense of direction and doesn’t need a whole set of in-depth competencies to bring it to life (though many organisations will of course do this).

With this simple framework and a focus on business outcomes, L&D people will (in the spirit of all that has been written before) find ways to learn for themselves what is required to deliver successfully.

Conclusion

It is easy to look at the emerging conclusions and to say that these have been said before (and for many years) but there is a real sense now that some of them are finally happening, and that this is a continuation of the recent direction of travel, but perhaps at an increasing rate. One of the biggest differences though, which came through in all the case studies, is that there has been a shift in focus from individual learning to learning and development that supports business outcomes. The focus becomes less about how do people learn more things, and more about how they apply this learning in their own organisation for organisational benefit.

Many organisations have already started to make this shift in focus and also in building the capabilities of their L&D community, and yet many still remain stuck in a model that is about delivering training programmes, and take little or no responsibility for the learning that occurs as a result. Perhaps finance directors and chief executives are right to withdraw the budget if this is the case.

References

- 1 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

Paul Fairhurst is a Principal Consultant in IES's HR Research and Consultancy team, specialising in organisation strategy and development, learning and development strategy, and strengths-focused development and coaching. Paul is co-author of the IES' report *The HR Agenda for 2010: Ten top trends as we come out of recession*. Visit www.employment-studies.co.uk for more information.

E: paul.fairhurst@employment-studies.co.uk
T: 01273 763419

Originally published in *People Bulletin*, 30 June 2010

About IES

IES is widely respected for its knowledge, insight and practical support in HR, OD, L&D and people management issues. The Institute combines expertise in research with its practical application through our consultancy work. Our approach is based on:

- building, exploiting and sharing the evidence base
- independence, objectivity and rigour

- considering the whole people system, not just the individual parts
- delivering practical, sustainable business benefits
- building our clients' capabilities rather than their dependence.

Whatever your professional and HR needs, get in touch:

T: 01273 763419

E: paul.fairhurst@employment-studies.co.uk