Aligning L&D to global business

Bradley Honnor demonstrates how one company is developing its employees’ cultural competency and global agility skills in response to the changing business environment.

The ever more cross-border commercial environment has resulted in significant interest in, and an increasing requirement for, global L&D delivery. There is much in the way of writing and musings about ‘going global’, including specific courses on the subject. Leading organisations are now learning and delivering solutions 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Global demand and the activity this generates is continuous.

Infosys is one such company – a global leader in consulting, technology and outsourcing, with revenues in the region of US$7bn. The company provides services for clients in more than 30 countries. Its global footprint extends to 65 offices with 74 development centres in US, India, China, Australia, Japan, Middle East, UK, Germany, France, Switzerland, Netherlands, Poland and Canada. Infosys and its subsidiaries have 149,994 employees (as on 31 March 2012).

Its continuous global expansion is supported by heavy investment in its L&D function. With more than 900 staff within E&R (education and research), its L&D capability is both substantial and a benchmark for global industry standards. Global and cultural agility, and how these competencies are both developed and measured, is big business.

An informative article written in 2007 by Information Technology Services Marketing Association marketing strategist Meghann Wooster shows how Infosys differentiated itself from the market by levelling the playing field and offering a seamless global delivery through pioneering the Global Delivery Model. This model is based on the principle of taking work to the location where the best talent is available and where it makes the best economic sense, with the least amount of acceptable risk. In essence, the aim is to flatten the world in terms of the competition.

The article cites four forces ‘flattening’ every business environment today. These areas must be considered, understood and harnessed for successful and impactful global reach and the sustainability of existing market share for organisations globally. They are:

- the rise of emerging economies
- changing global demographics/redistribution of the global talent pool
- the ubiquity of technology
- increased regulations.

Each point is a major factor in all global commercial environments and the expeditious growth at Infosys is testament to this view. They continue to grow despite the unsteady global economy.
E&R have supported this expansion through segmenting training into four essential areas for driving global agility: domain (imparting knowledge of the specific industry employees work in), process, technical and behavioural. The focuses for this article are the behavioural area and point two above: specifically the ‘redistribution of the global talent pool’, the operative words being ‘global talent’ and its development.

Let’s take a look at the flat world concept and how global talent is cultivated. Most of us will know the story of Christopher Columbus (explorer: 31 October 1451 – 20 May 1506). At the time, people believed that the earth was flat. People would say that Columbus was a fool and that he would sail off the end of the world. As we now know, the earth is not flat.

Infosys understands profoundly that the ‘flat world’ of business is, in fact, a concept and, in reality, the global terrain can be bumpy and requires careful navigation. It can, in fact, be more like a global obstacle course. Infosys has had great success in flattening the technology, educational, process, systems and product worlds. A client can get access to solutions from the US, Europe or emerging economies and would barely notice any difference in these service areas. Therefore, to this extent, the world is indeed flat.

Would it surprise you to know that there is today a Flat Earth Society? It promotes and initiates discussion of Flat Earth theory as well as archives Flat Earth literature. Maybe less surprisingly, there are still practitioners and organisations operating as if the business world is flat or as if business begins and ends on the borders of their own geographies. Ever increasingly, the ‘whole–world’ is our commercial geography, whether we actively seek this dynamic of globalisation or not. What, then, are the challenges of embracing these opportunities and how can L&D play a key role in enabling companies and individuals to become globally agile?

It is my belief and experience that intercultural competencies and the integration of significant diversity on multiple platforms are the obstacles and challenges that businesses must now master to truly level the playing field once more. It is often within these cultural and communication challenges that ‘service’ differences emerge, less so with ‘project management’ or less ‘soft’ aspects of project delivery or client engagement. The increasing necessity of flexible soft skills is a hard fact. Ignore these sometimes subtle complexities, differences and similarities at your peril. Cultural agility and developing a global mindset are increasingly not just on the L&D agenda but at the top of it.

These realities are presented powerfully in the book *Put Your Mindset to Work: The One Asset You Really Need to Win and Keep the Job You Love*. The authors have pioneered the 3G Mindset as a uniquely potent and foundational factor for developing cultural competence. Demonstrating effectiveness is a global must and is no longer a nice-to-have. Global reach demands global standards and technology that is accessible as well as agile across multiple platforms for blended delivery.

Staff at Infosys travel the globe and work in professional environments that can be intimidating at the best of times for anyone. Add to this the dynamics of an unfamiliar culture and the challenges increase significantly. Picture the scene: Vish leaves India for the first time and travels to Germany to work within a commercial bank on an implementation project. He has to communicate with the offshore team, local team, management and client on a daily basis. Is he on a level playing field with a local hire? Is he operating in a flat world? The general consensus appears to support the view that this depends on his global agility and cultural competence. Ask yourself: in this environment, how important is global agility in his everyday communications and effectiveness? How important is his cultural competence to the client? Once again, the general consensus is that it is a key factor for performance at both an individual and organisational level. Typically, Infosys has met this challenge head-on.

Before we take a look at an example of the methodology utilised to address the essential development agenda outlined above, let us ponder a further increasingly demanded factor of the L&D solutions we deliver. More than 20 years ago, I participated in a debate within the
Probation Service about the measurement of soft skills training and challenged the view that it was next to impossible to measure many areas within this field. This view was not just within the public sector but was widely held.

Twenty years on, looking at training organisations en masse and discussing, practising and reading about L&D, this view is still held as an acceptable position for providers to take and clients to accept. Obviously there are pockets of exception and organisations specialising in measuring certain areas but I am referring to the overall approach taken by a majority. This simply must change if L&D is to keep up with the rapidly changing dynamics of business. Today this means the inclusion of technologies that can enable geographically-spread delivery and demonstrate success through measurement on a global scale.

There are some first-class tools to support training in these global competencies, offering both systems and methodologies for delivery and measurement. These market-leading, psychology-based products are often extensively researched and are at our fingertips. It is not enough to just deliver training in these areas. Infosys and its clients are demanding evidence of effectiveness as a norm. The expectation has become: “Prove it!”

Methodology for engagement

At Infosys, cultural competence and global agility development is addressed from multiple angles, beginning with graduate training at the development centres, throughout the client project life-cycle and formulating part of the staff learning journey itself. This drives intercultural personal effectiveness, business enablement and client integration and enhances relationships built on understanding, transparency and trust. Generally the interventions are implemented through a strategically-aligned road map. Good practice has brought about the utilisation of measurement tools as I mentioned above. These both identify complexity levels for the interventions and provide evidence of development along a continuum of cultural maturity or global agility.

Infosys works with global brands worldwide. E&R are tasked with supporting the project engagements across the world in building cultural competency and global agility skills. Below are examples of the approach taken and the cross-section of participating teams.

First steps

Following the consultation sessions, training needs analysis, agreement on methodologies, measures and sign-off on the road map, specific groups are identified to represent a cross-section of the delivery personnel. Each group is invited to complete a pre-intervention assessment to benchmark understanding prior to solution engagement. Following the completion of these assessments, we can benchmark and target interventions for individuals and groups. To be clear, the overall aim is to develop further cultural competence and global agility with the groups that drive international project delivery.

The client team

Being a predominantly Indian company with a client base mainly not in India, Infosys has become skilled in facilitating flexibility in working practices and culture. Sessions are delivered face-to-face and online. Clients and staff find the forums extremely beneficial and report that relationships are strengthened in each case. This is seen as a significant value-add for the client in working with Infosys. Understanding grows and assumptions are challenged on both sides. This is measurable emergent blended learning.

The Infosys on-site team

Staff considering a transition to a client site outside their country of origin (lateral hires) undergo an in-depth induction into the local culture and corporate culture in which they are going to be operating and immersed. We utilise local expert knowledge and first-hand experience from within the setting to deliver relevant and impactful learning. This is available as group

References

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sessions and supported by online modules and coaching through online forums. This works as a powerful way to orientate staff effectively and enable them to quickly become agile within their specific set of cultural circumstances. This learning is accessible for anyone, anywhere and any time and is both formal and informal.

**The integrated team**

After the project transition stage and initial implementation stages, both client and Infosys teams are bought together to review their actual experience and explore the dynamics on the project through the lens of global and cultural considerations. This offers opportunities to work with actual situations and issues in an arena that is open, safe and productive. We witness real quantum leaps for people in these sessions as the ‘penny drops’ about why situations unfold the way they do. Post-session information and discussion forums are effective in embedding learning and supporting transfer into the workplace. The experiential learning is delivered face to face by expert facilitators.

**The Infosys offshore team**

These teams are based in India. Geographic distance, time zones and, of course, cultural differences can all have an impact on relationships, understanding and performance. Requests, objectives, expectations and deliverables need to be mutually understood despite geographical and cultural challenges. Their role is to receive a hand-over each evening (in the client time zone) and hand back over to the on-site team each morning to support the 24-hour GDM offered to clients. The soft-skill priorities for these teams are to understand the client business practice and be aware of any cultural aspects that may impede or warp that understanding. This learning can be imparted with the client team present or delivered via video call by senior project managers. This is competency-based and role-specific learning.

**Induction base hire**

Base hires are employed from the client’s geography. We operate a buddy programme for ongoing support as part of on-boarding. As part of this support, sessions are conducted to outline and increase awareness of the culture at Infosys as well as the specific client culture. The focus here is clarity regarding what to expect, differences and how to operate most effectively in a multicultural global business operation. Harvard ManageMentor is used here, also, to ensure a collective understanding of standards and terms. This is blended learning through coaching and peer support.

The above approaches towards learning vary in intensity, complexity and duration. Due to geographical spread and hire volumes, the L&D teams have driven a blended approach that is accessible to everyone everywhere. Throughout the solution delivery cycle, the groups are required to write a case study demonstrating how they have implemented/utilised their learning in the workplace. They gain credits for completing it, which feeds into their rewards and bonuses. This is evidencing the learning transfer.

Following this period of multiple intervention spanning three to six months, it is possible to re-evaluate understanding and learning against the benchmark taken before it began. The areas of growth and next developments are clear from reports generated as well as the complexity levels needed for the intervention for further ongoing development. The second phase will generally include focus areas such as language courses, ongoing peer coaching and role transition or career advancement. Essentially, the culture is one of continuous development and flexibility as staff rotate across different projects and grow into increasingly more senior roles.

In summary, the investment in global agility and cultural competence at Infosys is significant and data shows that there is a correlation between client satisfaction and this investment. The ROI is clear. The progressive L&D function continues to drive innovation, measurement and results globally. The drive for learning agility has underpinned the development of further platforms such as apps and m-learning, and will continue to meet and beat the challenges we face.

As business enablers, those of us working within L&D can and must do more in supporting people and organisations with sustainable and scalable models. You can be sure that businesses will continue to strive to increase their global footprint. The question is, will we lead, just keep up or be left behind? *TJ*

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