Learning tailored to people's needs

Personalised learning meets today's business challenges,
says **Thomas Berglund**

The world of work is rapidly changing. Technological advances teamed with an increasingly competitive business environment have turbocharged the speed of change. For enterprises that want to remain agile in a shifting global economy, keeping up with this environment is important. However, it's a challenge that many are struggling to meet, running fast just to stand still.

By delivering L&D rapidly to the front line, more often and with greater impact, businesses will be in a better position to comfortably keep pace with the speed of change. The use of archaic learning technology has produced a static, 'one-size-fits-all' approach to employee skill development, which quickly dates and slows learning.

For many employees, using old systems, impersonalised learning tools and content that is not tailored to their specific job role adds to a growing feeling of being overwhelmed by daily skill and knowledge demands. To further add to this problem, the explosion of new technologies and social media platforms has meant that employees are now expectant of more tailored learning on demand and across platforms of their choice.

To address these challenges, the L&D function needs to take a far more personalised and flexible approach to training, if it is to reap the benefits of a more engaged and skilled workforce. If successful in this approach, it will provide invaluable business benefits to help the organisation and its employees to adapt to today's fast-changing environment.

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Exploring the learning problem

A global survey of 769 HR and learning professionals, carried out by Lumesse in the summer of 2012, revealed the full scale of the challenge to make learning more agile and personal to the individual[1]. The survey was undertaken in order to understand whether the HR and L&D organisation is well positioned to deliver agile learning to the front line, in relation to the speed of change in their respective industries.

The insight offered in the survey is relevant to organisations both large and small: it covered SMEs with fewer than 1,000 employees to larger enterprise organisations with more than 50,000 employees.

The findings indicate the extent to which challenges are shared across the global economy. Responses were received from 24 countries, with the majority coming from France, Germany, USA and the UK. Additional responses were also sourced from Australia, China, Denmark, Poland, Singapore, Spain and Sweden.

The quickening speed of change

Has the speed of change really accelerated? According to the survey, 75 per cent of HR leaders agreed that change is happening at a much faster rate than it was just five years ago. This can be daunting and it's not surprising that HR leaders fear their organisations are unable to move quickly enough, to future-proof their employees' skill sets. Yet the need persists, with 80 per cent of survey respondents agreeing that improved, quick delivery of learning is key to ensuring employees are equipped with the skills they need.

Personalised learning: the key to success

We've all heard the expression 'you learn something new every day' but, for many employees, this is simply not the case. L&D functions are being faced with tightening budgets but higher expectations and, as a result, training and development falls to the lower end of the priority list, leaving employees stuck using traditional, static training methods to cater for multiple work scenarios.

The L&D function needs to take a far more personalised and flexible approach to training

As the uptake of e-learning in business grows, organisations have started to adapt and drive flexible and intuitive learning, through web-based applications. Yet many businesses still struggle to take into account the varying make-up of their workforce, its current skill set and ever-changing learning needs. The outcome is that L&D directors are unable to convince their employees of the benefit and value of their internal learning system or function. According to the survey, employees view their colleagues as a more valuable resource for acquiring new skills or knowledge, than their internal learning management system. Overall, the internal LMS was seen as only marginally more valuable than Google or an employee's own professional network, when needing to acquire new skills or knowledge quickly.

The need to provide learning for new skill demand becomes even more pressing in swiftly evolving, high-pressure industries. For example, financial or defence sectors, where employees are expected to learn new regulation and compliance rules regularly, need to be readily prepared to learn these new legislation changes almost overnight. L&D leaders with their fingers on the pulse not only have to understand the urgency of these training needs but also need to ensure that they minimise the gap between training 'need identified and learning deployed'. Worryingly, only 53 per cent of HR and learning leaders in large enterprises (10,000 employees or more) reported that they can

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currently provide relevant training and skills quickly enough, to keep pace with how their markets, competitors and customers are changing.

Ultimately, learning strategies will need to become much more agile, in order to support employees of varying levels in feeling equipped to respond confidently to industry change. This means L&D directors need to look at vastly improving the way learning is delivered, tailored, published, scaled and managed. Yet without the right tools and technology to support the L&D function, personalised learning can seem a near-impossible task, no matter how necessary the need. Agile personalised learning, supplemented with the right technology, is just one strategy that can have a positive impact on the way in which employees view an organisation's investment in training and how they regularly engage with, and retain, the subject matter.

With more than 70 per cent of HR and learning managers globally believing that employees view HR (which includes the L&D function) as providing little to no learning, or just the minimum skills for them to succeed, it's a call to action for L&D departments that cannot be ignored.

Collaboration is critical to personalised learning

Collaboration is a critical component of creating and deploying an agile learning strategy and function. Collaborative efforts enable L&D

functions to stretch their training budgets and make the most of the technology, in-house experts and communities available to them in a shorter time.

In larger organisations, L&D functions can often provide 'generic' learning from an external source or online training provider, which caters to multiple departments, roles and employee groups. More often than not, the general sentiment towards tailored learning is that it's time consuming, resource draining and expensive: three key areas of challenge with which L&D directors are increasingly becoming familiar.

While a mass approach to learning goes some way to improving transferable skills such as communication, the learning is often not detailed and specialised enough to provide any practical application for the unique challenges of most day-to-day roles. More than 50 per cent of HR and learning managers admitted that they (HR/L&D in their organisation) are not delivering to their full potential when it comes to providing employees with the right training and knowledge for their role. What was even more striking was that this figure rose to more than 60 per cent when looking at the HR and learning departments' impact in larger enterprise organisations.

L&D leaders can overcome this perception by utilising and bringing together centres of excellence, to realise the potential of the internal learning strategy and investment. Using resources such as hands-on experts or 'communities of practice' can help to readily design, create and deploy learning geared towards today's diverse working culture in a more impactful way. Thanks to new technologies, a collaborative approach to learning and sharing is now more possible and straightforward than ever, with little need for the disorganisation of yesteryear or management by committee.

Historically, organisations have outsourced almost all their online learning and e-learning content creation, amendments and updates, which leaves a widening knowledge gap on more technical skills and tool areas internally. More recently though, the learning technology market has shifted towards empowering in-house knowledge experts, with the real option to maintain and update their own

References

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courses and content. This adds an enormous amount of flexibility to the way content is managed and updated. L&D leaders who choose to take the collaborative route can benefit from real-time control of content internally and, in the longer run, lessen the dependence on external experts and specialists.

With a full support team of in-house and external 'collaborators' to design the look, functionality and content of a learning programme, the focus is put back on individual training requirements. Ultimately this helps L&D directors to deliver tailored training with real, tangible business impact on budget and on time.

The social and mobile opportunity

Analyst firm IDC recently reported that almost 154 million smartphones were sold worldwide in Q2 2012[2]. This, alongside the 'bring your own device' trend, is giving rise to the use of tablets, smartphones and apps for both work and personal means. As a result, L&D functions need to ensure that they begin, or continue, to optimise their learning for these devices to enable employees to access this content on the go and at any time. It's through this approach that L&D leaders will help to cater to preference and learning style.

For many employees, traditional teaching means an instructor-led lecture, a written test or focus group sessions. Even within this approach, employees will be exposed to high volumes of dry subject matter, which is likely to affect engagement levels and lower the likelihood of improving knowledge. While this traditional approach to learning may work to a certain degree, L&D now has the opportunity to take advantage of the popularity of social channels and digital tools that employees engage with and trust.

Social collaboration should also be considered as a tool to aid the adoption of learning among the workforce. By doing so, employees are empowered with the opportunity to learn in their own way and across a platform they feel works best for them, which is likely to have a positive impact on the

adoption, and success, of internal learning programmes.

Providing access to learning materials across social platforms such as external or bespoke social networks, private groups and even Twitter, provides employees with the benefit of connecting, and sharing experiences and best practice, with peers and internal trainers on both a local and global level. L&D directors also have the opportunity to monitor opinion, content gaps and additional skill needs in real-time, to ensure best practice is maintained and evolved according to the current need.

Other popular social platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo help to mix learning formats, keeping content fresh and visual. By taking an integrated, traditional and social approach to learning, the L&D function will be able to better engage with employees and, importantly, secure their interest and participation in their development.

Changing the learning culture starts with HR

Implementing agile learning is not as simple as buying new tools and devices – it demands a new skill set and a whole new mindset from the HR organisation too. As Bersin & Associates has observed, "it's a whole new way of thinking about the problem… you have to remember that your job is not only to train people, but to put in place programmes and strategies which create a continuous learning environment"[3]. Those who can move from merely delivering learning to creating a continually-nurturing learning culture are likely to be ideally placed to deliver real learning with tangible benefits.

With this new mindset in place, the L&D function must also be open to continually improving the delivery of training. By reviewing important data, reports and feedback from the LMS, they can better understand how learning should be enhanced and modified for future needs.

Analytics is just one way of understanding and monitoring training needs and progression, but it's essential to find ways to capture and measure the most valuable suggestions for improvement, through either social channels or verbal assessments.

A global approach tailored for local impact

Often the L&D function is charged with delivering learning on a global scale. While global programmes are of value to any business, they should also be tailored to have local relevance. This can often be where existing training – especially for larger organisations – falls short. Each employee's

learning needs is shaped by regional factors, from understanding competitor products and innovation in their market to more practical language and cultural needs.

However, there are many differing learning requirements at play on local and global levels that need to be juggled carefully. On the one hand, a multinational organisation needs a workforce working to a high level of consistency – they often need to be taught to do the same things in the same way. Equally, many industries (particularly in which knowledge-based businesses operate) also need a detailed understanding of local markets to succeed. One size doesn't fit all and global learning programmes have to be underpinned by an appreciation of what works 'here'.

Therein lays the problem. It's a tall order to expect that learning content developed centrally can be delivered credibly at the speed and accuracy required on a local level every time. Many organisations have looked to overcome this by encouraging, or at the very least allowing, regions to develop large chunks of their own bespoke learning content. But what almost always happens in these circumstances is that learning becomes highly inconsistent, or efforts are duplicated.

To help overcome this global/local challenge, L&D functions should stop acting as the primary (or in many cases, the only) source for learning output, but instead provide a framework that allows appropriate content to be developed regularly and locally.

In practical terms, L&D managers need to set direction and objectives for learning output from the outset, and then give the local teams the autonomy and tools to produce their own content. They need to strike a balance between overall corporate consistency and tailored, local output.

In this situation, we find again the value that collaboration can add when tailoring global content for local needs. While global L&D directors may need the final say on training and development programmes, outsourcing the personalisation and localisation of content to regional experts can add an enormous amount of flexibility to both global and local learning programmes.

Agility fuels true competitive advantage

L&D leaders looking to keep pace with the speed of change need to become more agile in their learning strategy to be able to future-proof their workforces' skill sets. Traditional learning no longer meets the workforce skill need of today. An agile, more personalised, LMS that capitalises on the benefits of collaboration, technology and social media is key to agile learning success, employee engagement and adoption.

L&D directors and managers who fail to recognise the benefits of a more agile approach risk widening the gap between the training need identified and learning deployed. Over time, if this is left unaddressed, employees will consistently feel overwhelmed by, and ill prepared for, the speed of change in their day-to-day roles. These combined factors will leave employees feeling insecure in their job roles, as confirmed by Lumesse's survey, ultimately, having a negative impact on the business and its ability to perform in today's shifting economy. **TJ**

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