

## **“A sustainable strategy for learning”**

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The trouble with writing a column called “e-Talk” is always being expected to talk about ‘e’. Or more likely, being read by people that think ‘e’ is part of the answer. I do worry that the audience is a bit too self-selecting, and that, by definition, I’m not ‘talking’ to those that aren’t at least partially interested in ‘e’ already. Why worry about this? Well because, whilst I admit a certain evangelical spirit to my regular rantings on technology-enabled learning, my real concern is not on e-learning, but on learning as a whole.

Developing a broader perspective for learning seems to me to be vital to all organisations. As the pace of change increases and value-add increasingly comes from knowledge, having a sustainable strategy for learning becomes even more critical. The increasing rate of change of markets, organisations and products is leading to growing pressures for more and more learning, across the whole organisation. But at the same time, globalisation of business and mergers and acquisitions make companies more distributed and diverse, with strong pressures on managing margins and reducing costs of operation.

We’re in a vice. Increasing pressures on already inadequate training budgets and approaches are resulting in a decreasing ability to fulfil. The conclusion; we need a more comprehensive perspective of learning activity within companies, we need more effective ways of channelling and managing learning, and we need more options for delivering and supporting it. And all of this has to work in more scalable, more dynamically changing and more distributed organisations.

Organisations need a more holistic view of learning with clearer objectives and more comprehensive strategies for meeting those objectives. So what will some of the key characteristics of this holistic approach, and what are some of the key factors influencing the strategy required to deliver it? Here are some ideas.

1. We need to increase the priority of learning. Whilst most organisations talk about this, reality is often different, with learning activity being fit in between ‘real work’. Middle management is often the key to this in practice, but they are being squeezed to make their numbers from above, and dealing with the realities of the limitations and constraints of the organisation below. Just creating statements about the importance of learning is not enough.
2. We need to link learning to performance - a subject worthy of a book in its’ own right! One of the primary reasons the training and learning receive such mercurial support from the business is the lack of a tangible and measurable linkage between learning activity and improvements in performance. Many organisations have introduced a performance management framework but this probably doesn’t link to learning activity. Performance objectives must drive learning more directly, and investment in learning must be linked to resulting improvements. In many organisations, this will explicitly integrate with development planning and competencies.
3. We need a coherent way of accessing, tracking and managing all forms of learning activity across the organisation. Most organisations are miles away from this. Whilst they have introduced organisational-wide business processes and management systems for core business activities, finance and HR, they don’t have them for learning. These systems will provide the bridge into broader HR and developmental processes as well as performance management.
4. We need a range of flexible options for delivering learning. Delivery has to deal with an increasingly distributed organisation, changing on an everyday basis and cover a huge range of skills and knowledge. Core programmes will inherently become blended as we seek to use all forms of learning intervention and support

to maximise the value of the learning process. Programmes will increasingly be supported electronically. Ultimately scale, cost, time to market and flexibility demand a shift from face-to-face only.

5. Ad hoc learning related to everyday skills, knowledge and tasks will become threaded into the everyday job with continual access to small, discrete learning objects wherever you are. The need to access now will mean these objects have to be delivered electronically. Logistically, this is the only feasible way in a large, fast changing organisation.
6. If people and knowledge are really our biggest asset, we need to much more effectively maximise their ability to learn from each other. This means building a learning community to support the learning organisation. Learning communities take over after the formal programmes as well as supporting learners during them through expertise networks, formal and informal knowledge sharing, and coordinated community-based learning activities.

All of the above will become key components in the long-term strategy for learning within companies. Current models don't scale, don't evolve fast enough and increasingly don't meet the needs of the business. If that's true now, how could it ever work in the five or ten years time, given the increasing magnitude of the pressures for change. We need a strategy that recognises these limitations and future challenges. Ultimately this will be impossible to do without significantly expanding our aspirations and our approach.