

The Winds of E-learning Change

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I talk to a lot of learning functions and e-learning groups, and they are definitely trying to navigate some choppy waters at the moment; with some common issues and common decisions being made about their future. When I started this article, I wanted to focus on the organisational challenges I see affecting e-learning groups, but the further I got, the more I believed that the important discussion relates to the forces that are causing those challenges, the winds of change for e-learning.

In essence, I see five major forces commonly impacting upon e-learning groups within large organisations. These forces need to be considered individually, but they also need to be considered collectively. All of the forces are strong, but they are also complex and sometimes quite subtle. I don't believe there are any simple answers, but organisations ignore them at their peril.

Force 1 : More, now, easier, better!

Do staff in your organisation need less training than before? Do products change slower? Are they simpler? Do you care less about how they sold? Are staff in the office more? Are customers less demanding of the service they receive? Are you less regulated? Do staff have more time for learning? Are the consequences of poor behaviour less?

Go on, surprise me. Tell me the answer is yes to all of the above! Or even tell me it is yes to some of the above. I'm not sure if anyone works in an easier environment for learning than they did historically, at least I've not found them! There is a constant and growing pressure for more extensive, less intrusive, more timely, easier to deliver, more auditable training than ever before. This is ultimately driving the pace of change of learning within the business and therefore within the learning function. Like it or not, these challenges cannot be met without changing the way we think about learning, the way we deliver it, and the way it impacts actual performance in the workplace.

On-demand, 'e' and blended learning are integral parts of meeting these challenges; they are not optional or marginal. But many L&D departments still don't get it. They claim they do, but any examination of their actual behaviour contradicts this view very quickly. They do not recognise the magnitude of the challenge (I call this the learning complacency gap) and they are not recognising the magnitude of the transformation needed to meet it.

Force 2 : Specialist or generalist; Expertise is King!

Do you need e-learning specialists or don't you? History has taught us that: making e-learning projects successful isn't easy, subject experts don't do what they say they will, instructional design of content is even more important when you don't have a decent trainer delivering it who can compensate or contextualise, the techie stuff repeatedly kills you, e-learning standards don't work as standard, vendors aren't good at everything they say they are, and ... do I need to go on.

The e-learning experience of many most organisations strongly reinforces this list of challenges, each a potential minefield needing to be navigated successfully with new projects, new vendors, and new systems and technology. Good practice and process helps manage the risks, but ultimately it is proven expertise that reduces those risks and ensures successful outcomes. It is expertise that interprets what vendors and subject experts are really saying or really meaning. And much of this expertise is pretty niche; SCORM and AICC, e-learning production and design, technology platforms and processes.

Most organisations have learnt this the hard way, usually building a small specialist team within L&D/HR (or sometimes IT) to manage e-learning projects and work with vendors to ensure success. The trouble now is that much of this hard-won expertise is being dissipated or diluted at just the time (See Force 1) when it is most needed. Whilst e-learning is now more normal and more accepted in most large companies, significant pressure on HR and L&D budgets, and most especially headcount, is causing lots of problems for e-learning specialists.

The resultant trend is to devolve e-learning responsibility into mainstream L&D whilst reducing budgets for specialist resources. Whilst I agree with the first, I don't agree with second. Mainstream L&D is a long way from having the expertise to successfully manage e-learning projects without huge reliance on the suppliers. A reliance that cannot be managed given the lack of expertise to interpret and understand what they are really doing or delivering. Companies need to broaden their pipeline for e-learning and de-risk the process. Currently they are increasing their risks by diluting the very resource that can help them. Nice idea guys, but too early.

Force 3 : All hail the SME!

Analyse the bottlenecks on nearly any bespoke/custom e-learning project (or even training project) and you will typically come back to the subject matter expert (or SME) who is providing the content. I've lost count of the number of times that I've talked to e-learning people who are missing deadlines or not meeting business requirements because the SME doesn't do what they have agreed to, or changes their mind, or won't sign-off the content, or can't agree with a peer. Management of SMEs is a significant risk in most projects.

Why? Well, the main reason I believe this is the case is simple; SMEs have a day-job. They are typically integral and critical resources for the business to perform, and the business puts a lot of pressure on them to deliver. They are over-worked and over-committed, and being lumbered, often by someone else, with supporting an e-learning development project often turns out to be fairly low on their 'must-do' list.

Nearly everyone is trying to work out how to get more out of their SMEs more easily. They are focusing more on the problem, they are templating story-boards to make it easier for them to provide the content, and they are even now providing them directly with easy-to-use tools to allow them to create the content directly. All of these have some potential and value, but they also have limitations, and the pressure on SMEs from the business is increasing not decreasing (See Force 1). This problem is going to get worse, and at the same time, we will have less time and greater consequences of not getting it right.

Force 4 : HR out-guns Learning!

Learning functions and e-learning groups are frequently now located within a larger Human Resources or Human Capital function (I will use HR as the generic term here). I have already talked about the pressure for headcount and budgets that these groups are under, but there is another, more subtle force I have detected in many organisations. Basically, HR is typically the parent group and typically more powerful. HR reorganisations massively affect learning functions, and investment in HR systems and processes typically dwarfs that in learning systems and processes.

The trouble is, although simplistically HR and learning look like good bedfellows, in reality they are not. Most learning in a business is driven by decentralised technical business requirements and projects. HR is driven by centralised policy and process. The mind sets are different, and the relationship with the business is different. Yes, they need to integrate coherently in certain areas (e.g. Leadership and Talent Management), but other areas have very little in common. So if HR wags learning rather than the business wagging learning, we have a problem. And that is what is happening.

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One specific manifestation of this problem is the systems discussion. Most large organisations have large HR or ERP systems supporting HR. The investment in these systems is huge, and the de facto assumption from their masters to any HR-related problem is that the HR system is the answer, and of course, that applies to learning. Decisions on learning systems (especially learning management systems – LMS) have mainly been driven by learning specific needs, but that is changing. Learning functions have been embedded in HR functions, and now learning systems are being viewed as embedded within HR systems. This is a hard political battle to fight, especially when the investment in HR systems is 10+ times that of learning systems.

Is this actually a problem? Well I believe yes. I see this force exerting greater pressure in most organisations, but don't believe HR and the HR systems are able to well-serve the needs of learning. If Force 1 is making us reinvent and reengineer how we deliver learning, the risk is that Force 4 is trying to lock it in concrete, centrally defined processes just at the point it most needs to change. I think Force 4 magnifies the risks and negative implications of the learning complacency gap in Force 1, disabling the very change it claims to be enabling. Time will tell.

Force 5 : Merge, merge, merge!

No analysis of the macro-forces impacting e-learning within companies can be complete with understanding the forces exerted from the supply-side, in particular, the rapid consolidation and maturation of the suppliers, driven by market forces and corporate need.

We have been talking about consolidation in the market for a number of years and it has slowly been happening, but has maybe been outweighed by the growth of new entrants, new products and services. Now that consolidation has moved to a new level with a rash of mergers and acquisitions amongst e-learning technology suppliers and content providers. Recent activity in the LMS space is a good example, with Click2Learn and Docent becoming SumTotal Systems, then Saba acquiring THINQ, and now SumTotal acquiring Pathlore. Oracle's acquisition of PeopleSoft has also created major waves in the learning systems market as well as HR.

Consolidation is largely driven by the desperate desire to achieve critical mass, market share and viability in a still highly diversified, non-standardised market. It is also trying to address the financial weaknesses of nearly all the suppliers. Compared with the mainstream IT and HR markets, none of the suppliers is that big or that stable, but that is now changing.

Consolidation will not just be confined to US technology companies either. We've already seen some of this within the e-learning content providers, but I am also looking for much greater consolidation within the services companies and integrators too. Huveaux's recent approach to Epic, may be such an example.

Consolidation in the market is a positive force for corporates seeking stability, but it will also challenge them as they are forced to consolidate or update their existing technology platforms to keep pace. And whilst consolidation may deliver stronger, more rounded vendors, it may also marginalise niche suppliers and products that are business-critical for some organisations. Consolidation also creates greater potential for internal organisational conflict outside the learning function. Saba and SumTotal's increasingly head to head conflict with Oracle/PeopleSoft, and the whole Force 4 discussion, is a good example of that.

In Summary

So how are these forces affecting your e-learning group in your organisation? I am fairly confident that at least a couple of them will be a current conversation, and maybe all of them are. If so, that's good. At least there is some realisation of magnitude of the effects of those forces, as well as maybe their complexity.

If not, I think you may have a big problem. Life for e-learning groups will become more challenging going forward. Navigating through these turbulent waters will need strong capability and determination, as well as of course, an understanding of which way the winds will blow and why!

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