



Canadian Management Centre

Workplace Learning: Managing the Present, Anticipating the Future

Meeting the Need of the Modern Learner Series



Executive Summary

Learning happens differently today but has never been more critical for retaining the best employees and preparing them to meet the imminent challenges your business will face. Rapid development of digital technologies and automation, changing organizational structures and evolving global competitive dynamics are just some of the factors to contend with, and many business leaders are not ready.

Modern employees value professional development opportunities and learn continuously, online and offline, formally and informally. Furthermore, both employers and employees understand that different strategies are required for acquiring skills in leadership, communication

and innovation than for learning hard skills. The task for leaders is to enable high quality learning experiences that add strategic value to the organization while supporting employees' development goals. To do that, we must harness the advantages offered by technology as well as preserve the value of face-to-face training.

This is the first of three articles exploring challenges and opportunities in modern workplace learning. Our next article, ***Best of Both Worlds: Blending new and proven approaches to workplace learning***, looks more deeply at developing effective and innovative blended learning strategies.

Challenges for Businesses

Most industries are feeling the effects of current or impending technological disruption; however, few businesses consider themselves well-positioned to meet the challenge. According to the Deloitte Human Capital Trends report, 90% of CEOs believe their industry is facing imminent disruption, while 70% believe their organization lacks the skills to adapt. Moreover, 45% of executives cited the need for a transformation of corporate learning as urgent or very important, and that number has increased in recent years. The need for rapid, agile skills development is underscored by the brief half-life of most hard skills—about 5 years on average (Deloitte 2017)—and the increasing relevance of soft skills across all departments.

Another trend impacting workplace learning is the dramatic realignment of working groups taking place in many organizations. Successful companies are shifting from independent, largely self-contained departments (“silos”) to

networks of cross-functional teams comprised of individuals with distinct professional skills: marketing, human resources, finance and IT, for example. These teams leverage talents and perspectives from across the organization to solve complex problems or produce breakthrough insights.

Though strikingly innovative when functioning well, working in a multi-disciplinary context requires well-developed competencies in areas such as leadership, communication, team-building and adaptability. It also entails a broad familiarity with the skills of colleagues from diverse sectors. Finally, multidisciplinary collaboration means that, to stay competitive, marketing, HR and customer service professionals are developing hard skills such as data analytics, while employees from technical departments are increasingly pursuing soft skills. Finding effective, timely strategies for filling these various skill gaps is where Learning & Development professionals play a vital role.

The Employee's Perspective

Modern professionals are eager to learn and accept continuous learning as a feature of their working lives. This is particularly true as working lives become longer and the average age of retirement recedes. People entering the workforce today, for instance, may see their careers span up to 60 years. Most workers do not expect, or even desire, to stay in the same role indefinitely. In fact, 4.5 years in a given position is now the average, though this varies by generation (Deloitte, 2017). Millennial employees tend towards shorter tenures, while Gen X and Boomers typically stay longer. Across all generations, career paths have become more fluid; ascending the organization's hierarchy is no longer the only acceptable direction and many workers now move laterally to new positions and departments within the same company as their interests and skill sets develop.

Employees are also conscious of the impact of technological disruption and the potential threat of automation. Many see skills development and expansion as the key to staying relevant in their organizations. For hard skills, many employees favour on-demand, just-in-time training, which they consume in short bursts rather than longer courses. Today's employees are adept at sourcing this information themselves rather than waiting for the L&D department to provide content. Popular sources include:

- seeking support from colleagues
- learning socially through team collaboration
- searching how-to content on Google
- viewing video demonstrations on YouTube
- consulting with peer networks through LinkedIn or other social networks
- accessing MOOCs or other online courses for a deeper dive into a topic of interest.

Workers of the Future will spend more time on activities that machines are less capable of, such as managing people, applying expertise and communicating with others. The skills and capabilities required will also shift, requiring more social and emotional skills and more advanced cognitive capabilities, such as logical reasoning and creativity.

McKinsey and Company, December 2017

However, like their employers, employees increasingly value skills such as adaptability, critical thinking, leadership, emotional intelligence and communication. In addition to being highly transferable from role to role, these abilities are exclusive to human beings; jobs which depend on them are unlikely to be overtaken by machines!

While acquiring programming, accounting, web design or other hard skills can sometimes be an independent endeavour, interpersonal skills cannot be learned by rote. The process of learning leadership, for example, or communication, requires expert guidance, reflection, feedback and practice, all of which indicate that face-to-face training needs to be a component of the learning strategy.

Given the value that the modern professional places on learning, it is unsurprising that a company's ability to enable such opportunities impacts the success of its talent retention efforts. In fact, lack of opportunities for growth and development is one of the top reasons that employees leave their company, according to LinkedIn's 2018 Workplace Learning Report. Conversely, having a

Leaders and Learners

- 90% of CEOs are concerned about technological disruptions.
- 70% do not believe their organization is prepared for the changes ahead.
- 94% of employees would stay in their jobs if offered learning opportunities.
- 64% feel they have too little time to learn on the job.
- 56% would spend more time learning if encouraged by leadership.

high-performing learning strategy is a major incentive for employees to stay, and correlates strongly with engagement and job satisfaction. LinkedIn's survey found that 94% of employees would stay at a company longer if given opportunities for career development. Offering engaging, relevant learning experiences is an essential element in ensuring that an organization has the necessary skills and personnel for success.

Despite the generally high levels of motivation to learn, successful engagement of employees in a culture of learning requires time, encouragement and recognition from management. The managers and talent development professionals surveyed by LinkedIn cited the fact that employees frequently do not make time for development

as their #1 concern in 2018. At the same time, 56% of employees participating in the LinkedIn research claimed they would make time for study if their managers directed them to. Likewise, the majority of employees (63%) surveyed by research firm Towards Maturity (2015) named lack of time available for self-study as a major obstacle in their professional development.

Managers can and should take the lead in promoting workplace learning. They must make space available in work schedules for employees to acquire skills that stick and positively impact performance. This means face-to-face training sessions, especially for soft skills development, just-in-time microlearning via mobiles or tablets, or self-paced modules teaching programming or software applications.

In addition to time, employees also want recognition in the form of new responsibilities and opportunities to put their new skills to use (Towards Maturity, 2015); immediate applicability is a key component of motivation for the modern professional learner. This is particularly true of Millennial and Gen Z employees.

In short, meeting employees' needs and matching their learning preferences is the key to inspire, engage and retain top talent. Successful organizations know that transforming workforce learning is crucial to stay competitive, not only in the constant scramble to keep skills up to date but also to retain top talent by offering employees attractive development opportunities.



The Changing Landscape of L&D

How is the learning professional to make sense of their role in a context where skills development is ongoing, interpersonal and leadership abilities are top priorities, and merely delivering content is no longer the central role of the L&D department? These changes correlate to the rapid evolutions underway elsewhere in the organization and must keep pace with them. The major factors to contend with include: the transformation of learning from discrete event to ongoing process, the availability of on-demand content, and the renewed focus on promoting leadership development, adaptability and innovation in the organization.

While these changes are profound, they offer an opportunity to move beyond compliance training and periodic interventions and towards creating strategic value and building the business' enduring capacity. There is an intersection between what employees and employers seek—rapid, on-the-job learning for technical skills, deeper acquisition of behavioural competencies such as leadership skills, and a modality that is social, experiential and accessible. Learning professionals can facilitate learners and leaders meeting these mutually-beneficial goals by designing blended learning strategies which integrate on-the-job experiences and formal learning opportunities.

There are many questions to consider. These include, but are not limited to:

- How can we choose the best tools and strategies, making sense of a multitude of new options such as mobile learning, eLearning, microlearning, gamification and virtual reality?
- How can we ensure that learning is sustained, continuous and creates lasting change?
- How should face-to-face, classroom-based training support the overall learning agenda?
- How can we leverage brain-friendly digital tools in combination with classroom-based training for maximum flexibility?
- How can we ensure that our strategies produce the long-term Return on Development we need?

We will explore the development of an effective modern workplace learning strategy in more detail in the next article in this series ***Best of Both Worlds: Blending new and proven approaches to workplace learning.***

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