The Changing Landscape of Learning & Development

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Will 2016 be the breakthrough year for Learning & Development?

In recent years, there has been much talk about how learning and development (L&D) teams need to adapt their practice to meet the needs of a more agile, digital business environment - but there is no denying major change takes time.

Shifts in thinking need to occur – the pressure to move forward needs to become greater than the pressure to stand still – and people need to drive their ideas forward. Yet so far progress has been slow despite a hunger for change.

Will 2016 be the year that L&D professionals finally see the changes they are seeking come to fruition? Will we look back in 12 months’ time and see radically different approaches to L&D? It all depends on the willingness to forge ahead despite the inevitable challenges that will arise.

The evolution of learning

The business of learning is undergoing a transformation. Digital technology is making it possible for people to access learning content at a faster, more efficient and cost effective rate than ever before, by providing on-demand learning that meets specific skillset needs.

The ability to collect data is providing intelligence and insight into the learning process, cloud computing is enabling people from opposite corners of the world to learn together, at the same time, and mobile devices are offering more choice on how, when and where they do it. All of which means the way we learn and work has the potential to be transformed.

These developments suggest it is a very exciting time for L&D, however, many obstacles will need to be overcome before these opportunities can be embraced - not least a shift in thinking.
Most L&D professionals are well aware of the need for change. There is a prevailing sense that traditional courses, both online and face-to-face, no longer address the way that people learn at work.

And in today’s business environment, organisations need to be more responsive and agile than ever before, to find ways of building workforce capability at a much greater rate.

Toward Maturity’s benchmark study *Embracing Change 2015-16* shows that in 2015, 55 per cent of training programmes were still delivered entirely face-to-face, demonstrating that there is a long way to go before agile L&D practices are fully realised.

As the pressure for change mounts, there are signs that 2016 could reach a tipping point. This could be the year when L&D breaks through the confines of tradition and builds a culture of continuous learning to boost engagement and productivity.

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1 Embracing Change - 2015-16, Towards Maturity benchmark study
www.towardsmaturity.org/2015benchmark

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What has been holding L&D back?

On the face of it, the advantages of digital learning are clear. Compared to conventional training, online courses are flexible, agile, cost-effective and far-reaching.

And there is now no limit to what can be taught using digital learning. In his blog on workplace performance, Charles Jennings, a thought leader and practitioner in L&D and performance, states that recent advances in technology and communications have finally broken the so-called richness/reach trade-off - meaning rich learning experiences can be achieved, irrespective of where the teacher and learners are located.

Digital does not necessarily mean everything is on screen. Face-to-face and online learning, for example, are also being combined very successfully to produce blended learning packages, which provide better outcomes through a richer learning experience.

So what has been holding L&D back? Among the key factors is a lack of confidence – many L&D professionals are not confident in harnessing technology to increase the effectiveness of L&D interventions. Coupled with this there’s been a lack of organisational support – Toward Maturity’s Embracing Change 2015-16 shows that only 19 per cent of L&D budget has been channelled into learning technologies, a figure unchanged over the last three years.
The rewards are clear – using innovative learning creates positive impacts on organisational performance.

The latest industry benchmark report, *Embracing Change 2015-2016*, produced by Towards Maturity, identifies the top ten per cent learning organisations that have embraced new technology as part of their learning culture.

These organisations are over six times more likely to report that they are:

- Improving productivity
- Responding faster to changing business conditions
- Delivering greater value for money

It’s true that new developments in technology are driving change in L&D. But smart organisations are seizing the opportunity to not just react, but to shape their L&D approach to boost business innovation and growth.
Three key things you can do to ensure L&D success in 2016:

So what can we learn from these successful organisations? Well it goes without saying that each has a strong learning culture in place – one where employees are enabled to learn at the point of need and in the way that best suits their requirements.

If you are striving for this within your organisation, here are some of the decisive steps you can take towards making 2016 a breakthrough year:

1. Gain the digital skills you need to feel confident in making the right choices
2. Ensure you design quality online learning experiences, which focus on performance outcomes
3. Align L&D strategy and business strategy by winning support from the top

Let’s look at these one by one...
Many L&D professionals say they would benefit from digital training, as well as practice in using new systems. So equipping the L&D team with the right digital skills is the first place to start – after all, how can you build a business case for your L&D strategy, if you are not fully confident about your understanding of the technological capabilities available?

By becoming digital learning role models, L&D professionals put themselves in the best position to inspire staff and influence leaders. The good news is you don’t need to become an expert in IT or get a degree in learning technologies to harness the benefits of the learning revolution.

What you do need is an overview of what’s out there and what’s new – as well as a firm knowledge of the benefits to argue your case. Also, it would be beneficial if you had some personal ‘hands on’ experience of online learning.

But as a busy L&D professional with a finite amount of time to invest in mastering digital learning, where do you start? Until recently there’s been a lack of quality resources designed specifically to address this need. But this is now changing.

Top tip:
Take a look at these free short courses on FutureLearn:
Blended Learning: Getting Started
Blended Learning: Embedding Practice

Get on board with digital

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Embrace quality learning design

Some organisations have tried to embrace online learning by migrating established training programmes to a digital platform, or by adding sections of online content into existing programmes.

The results of this approach rarely meet expectations, and go some way to explaining why some businesses and L&D departments remain wary of online learning.

For an online learning course or programme to be really effective, it is important that it’s designed with the performance outcomes and user experience in mind – which is true whether the learning is delivered entirely online, or as part of a blended programme using a mix of digital and face-to-face.

It is not the technology itself that is critical to success, but the way it is used and put together. Well-designed training courses rely as much (or more) on understanding how people learn, as they do on technological capabilities.

Finding quality learning material

With a wealth of L&D expertise and resources widely available, there are several ways to find well-designed learning material to meet your requirements.

Digital curation using existing material
There has been an exponential rise in the quantity of digital learning courses available. Some, although by no means all, are designed by learning professionals and are of a high quality.

Here, the role of the L&D department is finding, evaluating and selecting appropriate material, and combining various elements together into cohesive programmes.

That’s why digital curation – finding the best learning resources available to support staff development and sharing the content to encourage participation – is now a skill L&D professionals can’t afford to be without.

Work with learning and development solution providers
The best L&D solution providers don’t simply sell courses – they can design or adapt learning programmes to meet business needs; and also help in the process of identifying learning needs and developing learning strategies.

The flexibility of digital media makes it easier, faster and more cost-effective than before to customise learning material and create bespoke programmes and qualifications.

For more on the latest innovations in learning, download the OU’s Trends in Learning report.
Once digital capability is there, along with an understanding of quality learning design, it’s important to not just simply align L&D strategy with existing business strategy – but to actually influence business planning, to put L&D at the heart of the organisation.

This is an ongoing process that brings with it many rewards. Through building relationships, demonstrating an understanding of business objectives and being in a position to evidence the return on investment (ROI) of your L&D vision, you can really help your organisation to embrace innovation in 2016.

Creating an impact at leadership level
For L&D professionals to create real organisational impacts, they need to be seen as partners with the leaders of the organisation – of which building relationships is key to this process. Those who achieve the greatest success in gaining a seat at the top table, tend to:

- Proactively establish relationships with key stakeholders
- Have a commercial understanding and use commercial language to sell their ideas
- Design training interventions in collaboration with senior managers, line managers and different units and departments
- Demonstrate an understanding of, and capability for, measuring ROI

Through this collaborative approach, L&D programmes are more likely to meet the needs of the business, which in turn will increase their effectiveness and ability to demonstrate clear benefits to the organisation – increasing the credibility and influence of L&D at the top.
About The Open University

For more than 45 years The Open University (OU) has led the way in part-time education, developing workplace learning and development solutions for employers (across the private, public and voluntary sectors), as well as educating individuals.

Specialising in developing high quality learning materials, based on rigorous research and industry insight, the OU combines academic excellence with technological expertise to deliver flexible, results-driven and truly engaging workplace learning solutions.

The OU’s global reach enables consistent learning to be delivered at scale, across geographically dispersed workforces, through having an online delivery model that uses advanced learning analytics to enhance the performance of busy professionals.

This – coupled with a successful, well-developed blended learning approach – is how the OU has enabled employers to deliver learning that is responsive to both organisational and staff needs, therefore maximising their return on learning investment.

Which is why more than 1,300 employers, including IBM, BT and the NHS, choose the OU for their ongoing L&D needs.

For more information, please visit: www.open.ac.uk/business/
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http://www.open.edu/openlearn/

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http://www.towardsmaturity.org/2015benchmark

Charles Jennings
http://charles-jennings.blogspot.co.uk/2015/05/702010-beyond-blend.html

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