At this time of year, there’s quite a clamour to make predictions for the year ahead. I’m happy to participate in this process, in the sure knowledge that nearly all so-called expert predictions in practically any field prove to be miles off the mark.

Normally, no-one remembers what the predictions were, so the experts get away with it. But, in a perhaps naïve spirit of openness, I offer up below last year’s predictions for workplace learning and development, so you can judge for yourselves whether I’m any good at this game. The benefits of hindsight are duly appended.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Of all the forces for change (the expectations of Gen Y, developments in neuroscience, increased pressures to respond quickly to needs, a myriad of new tools and devices, etc.) only one will matter and that is surviving the downturn.’ Now certainly this is the scenario that will have been played out in many private sector organisations, less so at this point for the public sector. In 2010, the pressure will continue to reduce in many areas of the private sector, as the economy starts to recover and fear ceases to drive decision making.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Most of the cool stuff (informal learning, social media, games and simulations, mobile learning) will have to stay on the back burner, because management will simply not be interested in experimenting. There will be enough exceptions to keep those already active in these fields going, but no big shift in corporate learning practice.’ A recent ASTD study certainly bears this out. While conferences, magazines and blogs continue to be dominated by next generation learning thinking and technologies, corporate practice is more conservative than ever. This is hardly surprising as things stand. If nothing has changed in a couple of years, then we can start to worry.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Classroom training will be decimated. Many classroom trainers will lose their jobs, become freelance and find that there is not enough work to go round, causing daily rates to tumble.’ Certainly many of those vendors that supply classroom training to employers have been having a torrid time over the past year and this situation is unlikely to improve in a hurry - some are wondering if it ever will. On the other hand, classroom training that is run internally is proving fairly resilient as, with pared-down budgets and staffing levels, there isn’t always enough capacity to plan for change.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Many organisations will look to e-learning to keep the essential formal training going, but mainly out of the desire to save costs. This will keep some internal trainers (those who have embraced technology), external developers and rapid tool suppliers busy, although everyone will be looking for the cheapest and the quickest.’ This has been the case. Companies providing bespoke e-learning services have been doing well enough (at least in the UK), although there continues to be a downward pressure on prices and a desire for ever quicker turnaround.
In 2009 I predicted: ‘We could see a big increase in the use of synchronous e-learning using web conferencing, primarily to save travel costs.’ As far as I can tell there has been quite a pick up of interest in the UK, although most trainers remain blissfully ignorant of what can be achieved in the virtual classroom, particularly for IT training. I’m going to stick my neck out and say that this year really will be the one in which live training goes online.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Governments will run up huge deficits to stimulate the economy and so the public sector may not be hit as hard in the short term. However, in a few years’ time, as the private sector recovers, the deficits will have to be repaid and there could be heavy cutbacks in public spending. So, those working in the public sector should use this time to adjust to a very different future.’ Although governments will be cautious about addressing their deficits too vigorously, because they don’t want to threaten the recovery, the public sector is preparing for the axe to fall, and hard. Anyone in learning and development who is relying on the public sector for business should start to shift focus fast.

In 2009 I predicted: ‘Those learning and development departments that are proactive in helping their organisations respond to the crisis will be rewarded by being allowed to survive. The sitting ducks will be shot.’ I was probably being too melodramatic here, although I do stand by my advice. You can regard the current circumstances as a threat or an opportunity. Whichever you pick, your prophesy is likely to be fulfilled.

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