If you read any business magazine article or report on competing and winning in business today – somewhere near the beginning will be the issue of Talent or Talent Management. While this is a topic that the HR industry has focused on for some time, it is also becoming a topic of the boardroom. Nowadays CEOs and the executive leadership in major companies routinely talk about the ‘war for talent’ and the need to find and retain the best people. Yet seldom do we see Learning and Development departments taking a leading role. L&D is all too often seen as just another segment in the overall Talent Lifecycle. The problem is that this couldn’t be further from the truth. Far from being a sideshow in the Talent Cycle, or just another segment, L&D is the bedrock of not only many of the other Talent Management processes, but also for generating positive Talent momentum. L&D is the ‘Engine Room’ of an integrated Talent Strategy. This is because learning touches nearly every part of the talent cycle. Learning is a core enabler for delivering many of the other talent processes, whether others like it or not.

For example:

- Learning via induction is critical to on-boarding new recruits and reducing time to competency
- Learning opportunity is a critical factor in employee engagement and retention
- Learning is a key tool for raising performance
- Learning is core to developing existing staff and building future skills
- Learning is central to individual career advancement and for building organisational capability
• Learning is key to ensuring your people are capable and compliant

Given the value of learning, the question is why do so many L&D departments only play a minor role in the Talent Management Cycle – more of a willing contributor rather than a leader?

Fosway Group Talent Management Cycle

It’s partly because of the nature of Talent agendas. In Europe, our research shows that the ‘Talent’ is not ‘All Staff’, as it purports to be in the US. Talent on this side of the Atlantic often means a specially selected subset of executives and senior leaders, high performers, graduate intakes and fast-track specialist roles, which could be referred to as Critical Talent.

This often means that Talent Management in many European organisations is often not a suite of connected processes, but a fragmented landscape of disconnected Talent Silos, operating under an aggregating HR function. They function separately, and use different systems and data that isn’t integrated with L&D.

In addition, for many organisations (despite the management rhetoric) learning has never been a strategic tool. This lack of strategic identity in L&D is potentially holding it back from taking a more impactful role in Strategic Talent Development.

Given the increasing importance of Talent Management to the business, the time is now ripe for L&D departments to make a much more vocal and visible lead to Talent Management in their organisations. The workforce is one of the biggest assets in the modern business and ultimately people are key differentiators in the marketplace.

TRIPLE WHAMMY

Inevitably, greater attention will be focused on Strategic Talent Management. Even if attracting, developing and retaining talent is already important, it will become even more critical as the need to recruit and retain high calibre people increases. The beginnings of an upturn in the UK economy brings a growing impetus for people to seek new careers and for organisation to step up recruitment.

This brings a triple whammy for those without effective Talent Management and Development strategies: losing the best people, lacking the people to replace them, unconvincing employer brand to attract the best new candidates.

L&D is one of the central elements of the employee value proposition for attracting and retaining key talent, as well as being the central pillar of Talent Development. This includes on-boarding new team members faster and more effectively, raising current business productivity and performance, filling current skills gaps and developing strategic capabilities to succeed in the future.

So, while L&D is often perceived as a junior partner in the HR hierarchy, there’s never been a better time to secure recognition of its wider role. To make this happen, L&D professionals must re-calibrate what they do in the Talent Management space. They must be more vocal and proactive in positioning where and how they can strategically shape Talent for business success now and in the future.

In the Learning Technology space, the impact of this wider Talent oriented view is becoming more visible. In particular it is a consistent feature of the buying decisions behind the LMS and other learning systems. Frequently, learning departments are one of many voices behind the platforms used to manage corporate learning. The need to link capability, performance, compliance and development planning, succession and talent pools, is now such an established part of the HR agenda that the Learning Department is frequently not solely in control of learning solution decisions.

HR Transformation Programmes combined with strong HR leadership offers employees and businesses a strong HR proposition of joined up Talent Management, most obviously in the optimisation of internal talent. That’s to say – having the best people, in the right roles, being the best they can be.

Practically, this means having a coherent single view of organisational skills, knowledge and expertise – frequently referred to as capability. For example, if you are a global services provider and you want to build the best global project team, you need a global view of that Talent Pool. This includes skills, depth of understanding, licenses to operate with different products, qualifications to work in different regulations across different geographies, as well as their performance ratings in their previous assignments.

While this might seems like simply a resourcing issue, actually it bites much deeply. This is because the opportunity to offer global mobility to employees can be a big attraction to the best talent inside and outside your organisation. It is a visible aspect of employee brand, which has a massive impact on attracting the right employees to your company in the first place.

This desire to have a joined up story on this and many other HR opportunities, is at the root of many Learning Technology decisions in larger corporates. Increasingly, this is taking the corporate decisions for learning systems out of the learning department and away from learning leaders, towards the leaders of HR Transformation.

This movement has been recognised by vendors for a long time, especially in regard to Learning Management Systems. It is difficult to find an enterprise class LMS provider who hasn’t already broadened their offering to include some elements of performance and succession management. The evolution of players like SuccessFactors, Cornerstone and IBM demonstrate this pressure to diversify, either by broadening their suite or being a target of acquisition from the HR providers. But the dash for joined up Talent Management may yet be overtaken by the dash for unified Human Capital Management systems – especially in larger corporates. Companies like Workday, innovators in Cloud HCM, have recently announced they are building modules to support learning. Though it is still too early to understand the scope and sophistication. But it’s this sort of evolution that is likely to create even greater challenges for the learning team to have a standalone learning architecture. The pressure to operate in a more integrated talent suite has a strong momentum.

However, this move to consolidation is not the only trend at play, and learning agenda is
not only being driven by the HR view of strategic learning and talent. There are other practical and, dare I say, operational and business views of learning, that occasionally pull systems decisions in completely different directions.

**OPERATIONAL APPROACH**

In this context it’s not the story of Talent that comes into play. It is the pragmatic drivers of new systems, new starters, compliance, and new processes driven by organisational change. This learning agenda is often short-term but essential for organisation’s day-to-day survival.

In this world of **Operational Performance**, long-term capability is not as important as immediate high performance actions. In this operational world, agility and performance support are as crucial, if not more so, than learning courses. Rapid cycles of performance feedback are often more important than performance appraisal processes. Immediacy and capturing continuous improvement are more critical than managing learning for collaborative cohorts.

What makes this operational approach so important from a technology standpoint is that it can drive very different requirements, and therefore very different selection criteria, behind an organisation’s learning architecture. This in turn creates drivers for very different systems and can be a real point of tension, even fragmenting learning into solutions that support Talent Development and those that facilitate operational business projects.

This means that, just as the forces behind the ‘talent view’ of learning systems and consolidation are reaching their strongest, there are already disruptive forces at play – counter to the vision of unified Talent systems. Not because the **Organisational Development** view is wrong, but because occasionally the systems that support it, are not sophisticated enough to meet the challenges of agile learning required by operational projects – especially in the field of performance support. As a result, we are seeing pressures for more targeted learning solutions – for example, focused on retail sales.

**THEREIN LAYS THE CRUX OF THE MATTER**

L&D is struggling to serve two masters. And unfortunately too few learning solutions are equally good at serving the needs of longer term Organisational Development and agile Operational Performance improvement. Considering the growing pressure for a strategic view of learning linked to talent, the solution is not a simple as some might make it sound.

One problem is, that as the decision making for Integrated Talent based approaches grow, the system’s decisions tends to move away from the Learning team to the Talent/HR transformation team. But as it does so, the understanding of what is practically needed operationally also starts to diminish. This is why L&D’s role is so very important and why L&D needs to take a proactive role in the Talent Management debate.

In order to succeed, organisations need to have a vision for both the Organisational (Talent) Development and the Operational Performance. In many cases L&D is the only part of HR that understands operational learning. L&D is perfectly placed to argue for both sides. But all too often L&D lacks the insight into Talent Management to vocalise the argument for both agendas.

That needs to change and change quickly. It is time for L&D to have strategic vision for talent management and operational learning! Without it, L&D and the business are missing some massive opportunities.

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