Have you ever noticed the communication chasm that exists between the L&D team and the business unit, and the glazing over of eyes that occurs when we, as practitioners, wax lyrical about the latest buzz in workplace learning? Little wonder, then, that there’s confusion and uncertainty about the role and future of the L&D function within organisations.

At the heart of this confusion lies the L&D premise that organisations care about learning per se: they don’t. They care about performance and how the performance of their workforce enables them to deliver on their business strategies and successfully compete in ever changing and challenging economic conditions. Yet many of us persist in communicating with business units using the vernacular and ROI metrics of learning rather than performance.

Organisations make business cases for new technologies by highlighting the affordances of such technologies for learning, but failing to indicate the potential of such technologies to positively impact organisational performance. And, despite the ever increasing volume of technologies to support informal, social, reflective and other types of learning at an organisational level, many L&D practitioners continue to consider the formal ‘course’ as the primary unit of learning deliverable, and to focus on implementing learning innovation at this granular level rather than at the macro organisational level. In doing so, L&D practitioners are in danger of viewing organisational learning in the narrowest of senses, limiting their own remit as practitioners to positively impact organisational performance and failing to acknowledge a growing body of evidence which suggests that formal learning accounts for very little of the learning that occurs within an organisation.

So how then, as L&D practitioners, can we extend the sphere of influence of the L&D function within organisations to ensure that we are speaking the language of performance and impact rather than learning and ROI?
team within organisations, exploit technology to drive real innovation in organisational learning and future-proof the L&D function? It’s time to re-imagine our future.

**MOVE UPSTREAM: DESIGN LEARNING ECOSYSTEMS**

For too long L&D has focused on formal learning to the exclusion of other forms of learning which occur organically in organisations. While this limited focus is frequently down to organisational culture, we need to take a step back to reconsider and re-position ourselves. Technology is now available to support, harness, channel and leverage the many different types of learning that occur within organisations. We now need to extend our view of learning to the organisational level and to focus on designing technology-enhanced learning ecosystems that support informal, social, formal, reflective and other forms of learning.

Such ecosystems would encourage and facilitate the type of self-directed autonomous learning we strive for, enabling employees to pull learning at their point of need in the workflow and to contribute to the ecosystem at their post-learning point of reflection. Employees themselves would be in control of their own learning, deciding on the learning type and format that best addresses their need at a particular point in time. In a well-designed learning ecosystem the various types of learning would be interconnected and fluid, affording the potential for one type of learning to feed into or become another.

In Figure 1, for example, local best-practice identified in a social community-of-practice could, with curation from the L&D team and the organisation, become formalised into formal learning. In the same way, lessons-learned and identified through reflective learning could be shared in social communities of practice. A serious digital game or simulation used to deliver formal learning could also be leveraged for experiential and social learning.

In designing such ecosystems, the role of the L&D practitioner would be that of a learning architect involved in identifying the types of learning to be enabled; the interplay and flow between the different forms of learning; the types of technologies and technology infrastructures to enable it; and the types of data which could be mined from the ecosystem to provide insights into learning and performance for L&D, HR and business teams. The practitioner would become a facilitator of organisational learning and a curator of learning content for the different forms of learning.

Adopting this holistic view of organisational learning would also help L&D practitioners to identify opportunities to leverage new technologies for learning (something they are currently struggling with). A recent report suggests that many L&D practitioners lack the knowledge and skills to integrate new technologies into their learning programmes. Yet perhaps it’s not only about the lack of skills but also about their limited perspective of organisational learning.

Confronted by the ever-growing volume of learning technologies, and constrained by their focus on formal learning, it is easy to understand why many L&D practitioners are confused and have a limited understanding of, and vision for, the application and deployment of these innovative technologies.

**TRANSLATE TO COMMUNICATE: ALIGN LEARNING WITH PERFORMANCE**

Maybe it’s conditioning, but all too frequently L&D practitioners passively respond to requests for new training courses and other learning interventions without first establishing the business cases and associated performance criteria underpinning the request. However, having an understanding of these would enable us to design and deliver more targeted learning solutions and to measure the effectiveness of the solutions, using performance rather than learning criteria.

There is a need for clearly defined scoping processes whereby an L&D team meets with departments requesting a course or other learning intervention, to identify the business case for it and agree performance criteria to evaluate whether the course or learning intervention has addressed the business challenge. However, at these meetings a modicum of restraint on the part of L&D practitioners is advised; there is no need to explain the learning science behind the proposed solution – they’re not all that interested in the learning, just the application and impact of it!

The learning design language and magic should happen behind the scenes with performance improvement indicators informing the design and being explicitly defined so that they can be articulated at the roll-out and evaluation stages. It’s all about having a first-hand understanding of the problem that you are trying to solve for the business – and determining and articulating, using the agreed performance indicators, whether the learning solution has succeeded in solving the business problem.

**EVALUATE THE BUSINESS IMPACT OF L&D INTERVENTIONS: BROADCAST SUCCESS**

L&D teams can be reactive and learning-
focused rather than proactive and business-focused when identifying and quantifying their organisational impact. However, rather than waiting for the next request for the team to demonstrate its ROI, L&D practitioners should consider evaluation as a core activity of their learning intervention design and development process (see Figure 2). This would serve a dual purpose; enabling the team to continuously disseminate their successes and impact to the wider organisation; and, internally, to iteratively evaluate the effectiveness of their own learning approaches, strategies and technologies.

EXTEND THE L&D SPHERE OF INFLUENCE: ALIGN STRATEGIES AND TECHNOLOGIES
Moving from designing modular courses to designing technology-enhanced learning environments would require that L&D teams become more involved in technology infrastructure decisions. Not only in relation to technologies that would enable them to support, harness and leverage various types of learning within the organisation, but also in relation to other technologies to which learning and performance are aligned, such as HR and Talent Management technologies.

However, because technology decisions should be driven by organisational strategy, alignment of L&D, HR and Talent Management at the strategy level would need to occur first. Such alignment of strategies and technologies would facilitate collation, analysis and interpretation of learning and performance data.

OVERCOME THE BARRIERS: REAP THE BENEFITS
There are many barriers to effecting L&D change within organisations – some at the organisational level, some self-erected by L&D. Whatever their origins, in order to diminish these barriers they must first be identified along with the benefits of overcoming them.

At the organisational level, the barriers to change are cultural and infrastructural in nature. The role and remit of the L&D team is generally perceived to be that of providing formal training for the organisation’s employees. Organisations frequently embed the L&D team in, or align it with, the HR function. The potential of the L&D team itself to influence organisational strategy and to impact organisational performance in the wider sense is poorly understood and rarely realised. However, effecting change at the L&D level requires support and commitment at the organisational level.

Another organisational barrier is that of legacy technology infrastructures. While it is understandable that most organisations do not want to incur the expense of a radical technology infrastructure overhaul, it is very difficult to implement and reap the benefits of innovative learning architectures such as organisational learning ecosystems using a collection of disparate, minimally integrated systems.

The benefits to organisations of effecting L&D change would seem to outweigh the barriers. Innovative learning architectures such as learning ecosystems would enable them to tap into the collective intelligence of workforces and harness and preserve valuable corporate memory. Alignment of strategies and technologies for business, HR, Talent Management and L&D would provide organisations with a better data analytics capability to inform business decisions and deliver business impact.

At the L&D level, the barriers to effecting change are mainly to do with moving beyond the traditional remit of L&D as providers of formal training onto one of enabling and overseeing organisational learning in all its forms through technology. While most practitioners can see the organisational benefits, many are concerned that there may be an element of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, and that well-designed formal learning may be negatively impacted by the broadening of their role.

However, in order to extend the sphere of influence of the L&D team within an organisation, to drive real innovation in organisational learning and future-proof the L&D function, this broadening of the role needs to happen. And while this may be pushing L&D out of their comfort zone and requiring that they actively keep abreast of new developments in technology, it would enable L&D practitioners to move closer to realising their vision for self-directed, autonomous learning within organisations.

References

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