

# Moving Toward 2020 – The Learning Decade

By Sam Herring

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## THE BIG IDEA

*Four hundred years ago, British philosopher Francis Bacon declared that “Knowledge is Power.” And, until recently, many corporate leaders would have wholeheartedly agreed with him.*

*But, today, as we struggle to cope with an uncertain economy, complex globalization, and unprecedented technological transformation, executives on just about every continent increasingly believe that “Knowledge is Survival.”*

*Companies around the world responded to the Great Recession by cutting and controlling costs to reap new efficiencies. The next challenge is growing the global economy; and corporate and government leaders now realize that learning-driven innovation is the most promising way to generate much-needed top-line revenue and the jobs that result.*

*Indeed, learning has gained new prominence as a critical lever for performance. And it has seeded new strategies that are creating competitive advantage and differentiation in boardrooms, conference rooms and work environments all over the world.*

*To be sure, not every company is a learning company; but more and more organizations recognize that learning can help solve the most vexing economic and financial problems of the day. As a result, we predict that the years leading up to 2020 will be known as “The Learning Decade.”*

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## THE REASONS WHY IT’S HAPPENING

Four hundred years ago, British philosopher Francis Bacon declared that “Knowledge is Power.” And, until recently, many corporate leaders would have wholeheartedly agreed with him.

**Top-Line Innovations** – Budgets were sliced to the bone during the downturn, often to the point of organizational anorexia, and companies now know that they have to think their way out of the economic doldrums. This requires big ideas and bold dreams – the kind of breakthroughs that are inspired and powered by learning, and the kind of innovations that show customers, prospects, partners and employees what it takes to deliver growth again.

**Disruptive Technology** – Social media, digital games and mobility are three of the galvanizing technology forces of our time, and they present both a challenge and opportunity for knowledge-centric companies. The challenge? Finding innovative ways to facilitate learning (via smart phones and social tools like Yammer, Twitter and Facebook) that will add revenue growth. The opportunity? Never before have so many people been so connected and

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so receptive to collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

**Competitive Pressures** – Shrinking demand and the prolonged downturn have ratcheted up the competitive intensity in a number of markets; and this, in turn, has heightened the importance of knowledge value chains across the extended enterprise. It's all about just in time – getting the right knowledge to the right people inside and outside the organization at the right time. Learning agility is everything, and innovation and revenue generation will continue to depend on it.

**Increasing Speed** – The Internet has exponentially increased the pace of business, and that's why the concept of relevance is constantly changing. Acquiring knowledge that has momentary value is critical to the top line, given quickening commercial cycles; but substantial learning must augment this momentary knowledge to ensure lasting innovation and sustained sales over time.

**Beyond Commodity** – The Internet has overloaded us with terabytes of information that are readily available to multitudes of people; to compete over the next decade, companies will need to figure out how to efficiently synthesize this fungible data in order to obtain the incisive clarity required to drive genuine innovation and growth.

**Virtuous Circle** – With customer relationships so critical, many companies are acquiring knowledge and then packaging and distributing it to clients as a way of cementing loyalty and boosting revenues over the long haul. Knowledge will become the new value-add, and the ultimate growth differentiator, as we approach 2020.

**Emerging Markets** – Innovation and growth is happening offshore, in rapidly expanding and changing markets like Brazil, Russia, China and India; to gain sales velocity in these dynamic but unfamiliar commercial environments, companies must get up to speed in a hurry – and that requires new insight and intelligence.

**Industry Change** – New regulation is dramatically changing business models, rules and processes in health care and financial services; and the pervasive spread of all things digital is forcing a sweeping global transformation in technology. The only way for companies in these industries

to keep increasing revenues is to efficiently increase the consumption of knowledge and the transfer of new skills that drive performance change and innovation.

**Industry Consolidation** – The ravages of recession have forced a host of mergers in a variety of industries. This wave of consolidation means that surviving workforces will be operating on vastly new terrain; consequently, they need the roadmaps that come with fresh knowledge and perspective in order to sustain and grow market share.

**Brain Drain** – Baby Boomers are set to retire in droves. When they leave their jobs, they'll be taking years and years of experience, expertise and innovative know-how that will cost companies dearly. The only way to compensate is to help subsequent generations who will be stepping into the breach gain necessary knowledge and skills.

**Failing Grade** – Companies are finding that many of the graduates they hire need additional education and preparation in order to optimally perform their jobs. For companies to perform at their peak, this extra learning needs to happen.

**Return to Growth** – Unemployment remains high, and there isn't a sustained job-creation trend yet; but when companies start hiring those who have been jobless for an extended period of time, skills-upgrade programs will have to be instituted.

**Future Jobs** – We don't exactly know what the jobs of the future will look like. The press of day-to-day business often prevents us from assessing what skills will be needed to compete 10 or 20 years from now. But an increasing number of forward-thinking and growth-driven companies are now indicating that they want more clarity about the knowledge their workforces will need to succeed in 2020.

**Knowledge Workers** – Knowledge workers have established their place in the global economy over the past 20 years; but in order to maintain and enhance their corporate influence during the next decade, they will have to raise the bar, consuming and offering new knowledge that drives smarter innovation and creates higher value and margins. The new profit-driven mantra is: master new things efficiently.

**Leadership Vacuum** – Companies and industries around the world are desperate for new leadership that can invigorate innovation and growth in the 21st century. Continual learning is essential to inspiring the next generation of corporate leaders.

**Culture Change** – More and more companies realize that their values directly affect employees, partners, prospects and customers; this, in turn, has a significant impact on sales. That's why there's now a growing enterprise-wide emphasis on acquiring knowledge that enriches and enhances corporate culture.

**Unanticipated Conditions** – If we've learned anything during the first decade of the 21st century it's that the world is ambiguous and gray. The new certainty is uncertainty. Knowledge doesn't provide all the answers. But learning and the application of newly acquired knowledge provide us with a framework for co-existing with the unknown and for keeping innovation and hard-earned revenues flowing, even when difficult conditions exist.

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## WHY IT MATTERS / HOW IT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD

*Achieving prosperity in "The Learning Decade" will present companies with many challenges. The good news is that learning and its derivative, enhanced performance, can help us innovate, grow the top line and emerge from the recent economic downturn stronger than we were before.*

*Clearly focused learning that imbues information with meaning and that gives people the opportunity to reflect upon and apply new knowledge can become the ultimate problem-solver and innovation-spark for organizations of all sizes. And the sooner corporate leaders fully embrace this notion, the sooner they'll be ready for the future – whatever it holds.*

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For more information about Intrepid Learning Solutions, visit [www.intrepidls.com](http://www.intrepidls.com) or call 877.866.4457.



### Sam Herring

Sam Herring is Co-Founder of Intrepid Learning Solutions and leads the company's marketing, product management and major account management functions. Sam is the 2011 Chair of the American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) Board of Directors, and is recognized as a "Who's Who" training industry thought leader by TrainingIndustry.com. Sam regularly consults with clients on strategies related to customer and employee engagement, learning technology trends and best practices, learning innovation and more. He is a frequent speaker at leading industry conferences, seminars, universities, and global corporations. He can be reached via email at [sherring@intrepidls.com](mailto:sherring@intrepidls.com).