



White Paper

3 major challenges facing learning and development

How the world of workplace learning is changing dramatically and how L&D needs to respond

Executive summary

Training at work was once carried out according to a schedule of events. It was predictable, part of the calendar. Following an initial period of intensive induction training, employees received regular training that was usually measured in days or even weeks per year. Today, given the frequency at which information changes and the speed at which it flows, this method of delivery is no longer a viable way for the Learning & Development (L&D) department to support workplace learning. The result is a challenging environment for L&D, but there are three key ways in which L&D can respond and thrive in this environment.

First, the speed of change of information means it is not possible for the L&D department to be subject matter experts in all areas that it trains in—perhaps it can only be an expert in a minority of them. Instead, it must develop methods of working with subject matter experts in the business and development content in conjunction with them.

Second, L&D must support the wide-ranging learning activities already taking place in the workplace—whether they are explicit or more informal learning taking place using social networks. Such workplace activities are usually timely, focused on business need and backed by management.

The third change that L&D teams must make is internal. In terms of personnel, they must dedicate themselves to specialization rather than generalization and they must follow structured career paths and explicit training and development plans. They must also find the tools to take away the routine administrative tasks that add little value to the departmental role.

These three things have always been core activities for the Learning and Development function, but today's greater speed of technological change combined with the increased importance of learning to the modern organization means that these three facets of the modern L&D department are crucial to its success.



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In this respect, the L&D department is a microcosm of the modern working environment in which individuals are increasingly focused specialists in their field. In this L&D microcosm, the department is staffed by specialists in certain areas of learning practice. They add value to the enterprise in collaboration with fellow workers and use technology to ensure that they are focused on high-value work as often as possible.

How speed and technology change everything

In the recent past, training was a process almost disconnected from the daily operations of the rest of the organization. Sometimes this gap was literal: training was often confined to a separate building. At the same time, however, training's value was seldom questioned. It was understood to have a positive, if usually unmeasured, effect. In those less hectic times it was possible to set a curriculum in advance—often annually—that accurately reflected workplace requirements; L&D was typically removed from the daily thrust of the work. The role of training was 'building capability'—giving employees 'just-in-case' knowledge and skills for use at some point in the future.

Today, however, the way people learn in the workplace has changed. The amount of information people need to carry out their jobs has altered; there is more of it than ever before and it changes quickly. Part of this change springs from the nature of today's service-based knowledge work and part of it from today's rapid communications technology.

The result has been a shift in the role of L&D. In the past we specialized in building capability, particularly at the beginning of an employee's career or at the start of a new assignment within the organization. Now we are increasingly also asked to provide ongoing performance support to help employees tackle new tasks in their daily work.

The result is that L&D must change the way it operates in today's world, in three ways in particular:

- 1. Develop content collaboratively**—the L&D department can no longer work as one removed from the rest of the organization. While trainers in the past could develop deep expertise in a given subject matter, today's urgent need for information makes that impossible. More than ever, L&D needs to establish strong ways to develop learning content in collaboration with workplace subject matter experts (SMEs).
- 2. Support current practice**—a great deal of learning takes place in the workplace without L&D's intervention. However, the department has a role to play in supporting this learning, whether deliberately organized by managers or informally arranged between colleagues.
- 3. Maintain and build your department**—It is no longer possible to support the wider demands of workplace L&D with a generalist skill set. Instead, it is essential for L&D staff to have both a good general grounding in L&D and specialist skills in particular areas.

Develop content collaboratively

In contrast to the past, L&D professionals are no longer the subject matter experts in an organization. Rather, they are specialists in good learning practices. The speed of change in the workplace together with the complexity of modern work knowledge makes this inevitable.

For example, suppose a company regularly updates its field sales people with information on a competitor's products. In the nineties, it might have brought them all into HQ once or twice a year for a briefing lasting several days.

As the time between a competitor’s product releases decreased in the early part of this century, the company would have wanted to reduce the lag between the launch of a competitor’s product and distributing a briefing on that product to its sales force. Probably it would have analyzed the competitor’s product centrally, produced detailed information for the sales force, and distributed it as e-Learning.

In recent years, however, it has become clear that a field sales force is potentially under-informed while they are waiting for this detailed briefing. L&D departments continue to produce these briefings, but many also distribute short, quick-to-produce videos of key information on a competitor’s products in just a matter of days. Who produces these? Anyone in the sales team who has used the product. The L&D department acts as the editor, distributor, and curator of these videos.

Some organizations have adopted this approach of collaborative development of materials. This view of developing training materials is about more than just adapting the traditional ADDIE method of Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation. It is about incorporating non-learning specialists deeply into the learning process in a variety of roles, particularly in effectively engaging SMEs and in ensuring wider distribution of their knowledge.

	Traditional approach	Contemporary approach
Speed of production of learning materials	Longer—often measured in months	Shorter—often measured in weeks or days
Center of expertise	L&D aims to bring substantial expertise into the department	L&D works with subject matter experts in the business
Core expertise	The production of complex, deep learning materials; ‘Push’ training (via e-Learning or the classroom) using the materials	Understanding what makes good learning materials and distributing them quickly for self-service learning
Model of learning materials production	Centralized production	Two models: ‘Distributed’ production and ‘Hub and spoke’ production
Good for...	Areas of slowly-changing information in which L&D has expertise, especially those key to the business	Areas where knowledge changes quickly and where expertise is likely to reside with employees or partners
Examples of materials	Induction training, compliance training	Product updates, sales ‘war stories,’ and practical ‘how-tos’

Under this new, less-centralized collaborative method of creating training materials, there are two models of production: ‘distributed’ and ‘hub and spoke’ production.

In **distributed production**, the L&D function is to take learning materials created in the business itself, check their quality of content and production, and ensure their rapid distribution to the workforce.

In **hub and spoke production**, the L&D department is closer to its traditional role of producer of content but the method of production is decentralized, with L&D closely involved with SMEs out in the business. Here the expertise of the L&D department is in gaining the most from the SME while, at the same time, producing materials suitable for learning rather than suitable for references (often a risk when working with SMEs).

One key step to L&D decentralization is to get out of the department and talk to managers. If they approve it, it will happen. Without their endorsement and support, any learning initiative will fail.

Support current practice

This trend towards the decentralized approach to learning is not another way of saying that the classroom is defunct—for some training needs the classroom remains the best delivery mechanism. Instead, it is an adaptation to the reality of learning in the workplace today.

Charles Jennings, former global head of learning at Thomson Reuters, breaks learning into three categories and roughly assigns them the following percentages of learning: Learning on the Job (70%), Learning through Coaching, Feedback, and Networks (20%), and Formal Learning (10%).

Importantly for Jennings, ‘Learning on the Job’ means more than simply picking things up at random. Most learning on the job, he contends, is the result of deliberative intervention and much of it is encouraged or fostered by managers. This may include expanding an employee’s role, giving them stretch projects, deliberately encouraging contact with senior managers, external experts, and consultants, swapping them into other departments for wider exposure to the business, and a host of other activities in which managers who are mindful of development systematically engage their employees.

This new decentralized approach to learning is a matter of taking the L&D department into the business and engaging it with current experts—not only in the 10% of formal, course-based training, but also in all the other ways that the workforce currently learns.

In practical terms, this means a number of things:

- 1. Work with managers**—one key step to L&D decentralization is to get out of the department and talk to managers. If they approve it, it will happen. Without their endorsement and support, any learning initiative will fail.
- 2. Cover all the bases**—Bob Mosher and Dr. Conrad Gottfredson identify five moments of need felt by learners: “when learning for the first time; when learning more; when remembering and/or applying what’s been learned; when things go wrong; when things change.” Ensure that your learning materials cover all these moments. If necessary, conduct an audit to see where you need to focus development work.

The world of work is changing and the L&D department must change with it. Regular classroom schedules are no longer enough to support the enterprise with the skills it needs. The speed of development of informal learning means that adapting to these changes has become essential if the L&D function is to survive.

- 3. Support social learning**—for traditional ‘push’ L&D departments, the idea of supporting social networks that enable people to learn from each other without any intervention can be difficult, but there is a huge role here for learning specialists. Without our assistance, people will continue to learn socially—often successfully, but sometimes with variable results. With L&D’s support, good material can rise faster and the required infrastructure can work better.

Maintain and build your department

Going out into the business is crucial for the success of L&D in the modern era—whether it is talking to managers to support their current learning activities, supporting the grass-roots social learning that is already taking place, or engaging with SMEs. Doing these things effectively, however, relies on a team with the right breadth and depth of skills as well as on the right systems and processes.

The IT systems you use should be your servants, not your masters. They should support your work with as little intervention as possible—whether it’s major maintenance from the IT department or minor workarounds from the L&D department. A necessary part of this is an integrated approach. Any time spent transferring data or materials from one system to another, spent reformatting, editing, or recompiling is wasted time. The L&D department is there to support learning, not to support IT. Any IT system you choose should allow you to carry out your core activities on one integrated platform—these activities are likely to include courseware creation, distribution, and usage tracking. In addition, to ensure that your IT systems require little technical attention, consider a SaaS solution, which requires minimal intervention from your IT department.

As for your personnel, the demands on them have definitely increased. In the past it might have been possible for a training department to be a collection of experienced L&D generalists, all capable of turning their hands to most things. Today, however, it needs a far wider set of skills than ever before to deal with a far wider set of responsibilities.

Old L&D	Traditional approach
Centralized	Involved with the organization
Classroom/face-to-face delivery mechanism	Multiple media, including the classroom; both synchronous and asynchronous; online and offline
Content experts	Experts in: how people learn working with SMEs to get the best from them
'Push' delivery style	Multiple styles: 'Push' delivery where appropriate, 'Pull' for performance support information
Minimal technical expertise	Technical expertise in e-Learning
Course writing expertise	Expertise in writing courses, blogs, wikis
Design and set up courses requested by management	Curriculum design expertise and performance consultancy expertise to determine whether courses are actually required

This wide range of skills means that the modern L&D department needs specialists in specific areas of L&D practice to function effectively rather than the generalists of the past. It is no longer possible to complete the sorts of tasks described above by picking up the skills they need on the job.

The clear ramification of this is that L&D departments will need clear career paths and development methods for staff, with choices and development options made explicit and—ideally—recognized externally.

Conclusion

The world of work is changing and the L&D department must change with it. Regular classroom schedules are no longer enough to support the enterprise with the skills it needs. They have not been for some time. The speed of development of informal learning, however, and the increased pace at which the information required for work changes means that adapting to these changes has become essential if the L&D function is to survive.

Not only can L&D survive, however, it can flourish if it bears in mind the benefits of working with SMEs and employee managers and if it places a deliberative focus on L&D team members by both developing them and by supporting them with the right systems.



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