



White Paper

Three ways learning and development must prove itself today

Meeting the challenge of economic and technical change

Executive summary

Learning and development professionals are facing challenging times. The economic climate rewards businesses that provide outstanding customer experiences, and future expectations will likely be even higher. Meanwhile, the systems we use for learning are evolving rapidly, along with the expectations of our users.

Today there are three areas in which L&D must prove itself:

- Impact
- Performance
- Innovation

Impact

Demonstrating value has always been part of the role of the L&D department. In the past, though, the metrics used were measures of activity: the number of days of training completed, for example, or the sign-up rates for online courses. When budgets are tight and the focus on performance is sharper than ever, these measures can look to the rest of the organization like a department obsessed with itself. They may be important to the L&D department, but the organization is interested in outputs, not inputs. It wants to know the effect of learning programs.

In the recessions in the early 1990s and even in 2001-2, training departments were remorselessly axed to trim budgets. The good news is that this is no longer the 1990s. Senior managers and executives now know skills are vital to organizational success. The bad news: they expect the L&D department to submit the same measure of effectiveness as everyone else. That means L&D professionals are expected to show value for money.

This is not something L&D has been explicitly asked for in the past but is essential today. This will involve L&D professionals learning some new skills. And they will have to learn them fast, as the demands to show value will not be slow in coming.



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How can L&D show value for money? It is always possible to use in-depth Return On Investment (ROI) calculations, such as those of Jack Phillips' ROI Institute. While accurate and rigorous, these take time to complete and are not suitable for every learning intervention.

On the other hand, it is simply not enough to say—for example—that training increases employee morale and teamwork, or encourages the spread of company culture. While this may be true, these are benefits which are attributable but non-measurable. We know the link is there. We just can't say how much of the effect is down to the learning/training. And for management to take any claim to a benefit seriously as a measure of impact, L&D must show benefits that can be measured.

Measurable benefits can be either indirectly or directly attributed to the effects of learning interventions, and in either case L&D can put together a good case for some—or all—of the benefit coming from the L&D intervention.

Well-designed e-learning systems usually generate a slew of benefits, many of them directly attributable and measurable, and many revolving around cost savings. These cost savings could be due to lower travel costs in switching from classroom to online training, for example, or the reduced cost of generation and translating learning materials in a well-designed global system.

The calculations for the indirectly attributable benefits of training are more complex than those of cost-saving. For example, following health and safety training, workplace accidents may decrease, but this will only be partly due to the training. Some of the effect will be due to other activities—in particular the role of management. Nonetheless, it is usually quite possible to make an estimate of the contribution of learning interventions. Such estimates must be backed up with explicit numerical assumptions and should be under- rather than over-estimated in order to sustain credibility.

However, most L&D departments not only do not make any estimate for any of the indirectly attributable benefits of training, they fail to measure the directly attributable cost saving benefits. In the past this may have been acceptable. It no longer is. L&D can now expect to be asked to show the value of what it does and must have its answers ready.

Performance

Demonstrating the impact of L&D is part of a general trend toward an emphasis on performance at work. There is a trend to reconnect L&D with performance. Originally, learning was absolutely coupled to performance. Indeed, it was the only reason for learning at work. This was before there were any complex workplace training programs. In the pre-industrial world, learning at work largely consisted of watching others. This was not efficient, but the learning took place entirely in the correct context—in the workplace. The richness of this learning experience was largely lost in the industrial era when workplace learning moved to training delivered largely through courses in the classroom, removed from the context of the workplace.

When this happened, the focus of many training departments shifted from the performance of the organization to the internal efficiency of the department. How many courses could the department deliver, to how many people, over what period? Over time, many departments also became separated physically from their organizations. They were located in the basement of the building, or even in a separate building. The idea was to increase efficiency. The effect was to increase the distance between training and most people's daily working life.

Innovation can mean improving what is already taking place, but this year it is more likely to mean radical innovation to make L&D more widely accessible.

As part of the re-focus on performance, L&D departments will continue a current shift towards delivering training through a range of options. And all of these solutions—including courses—will have at their heart one aim: developing workforce performance. This approach is epitomized by the 70:20:10 model popularized by Charles Jennings in which only 10% of the learning is formerly delivered training, 20% from coaching and mentoring and 70% is learnt on the job.

This shift in the focus of L&D to performance will not necessarily result in a reduction in the number of courses delivered. After all, courses are a useful and valuable component of learning—especially of the 10% of formal learning. There will be a shift, however, to shorter courses more focused on immediate performance support, delivered not in the classroom or at the desk, but over mobile devices.

In addition, we can expect L&D to be asked to support a far wider range of activities—including those in the areas of coaching and mentoring and on-the-job learning. This will mean that L&D will have to expand its understanding of the business and—crucially—its relationship with managers. While L&D may rule the classroom and the e-learning environment, supporting coaching and on-the-job training means working closely with managers and focusing not on the activity but on the output of the activity: performance.

Innovation

This need to expand learning activity beyond the ‘push’ of classroom or online courses demands that L&D innovates. Innovation can mean improving what is already taking place, but this year it is more likely to mean radical innovation to make L&D more widely accessible. Indeed, with the emphasis on performance, it may be that we move from “learning and development” to “knowledge and performance”. After all, if employees can receive just-in-time performance support through a mobile device that tells them what they need to know, when they need to know it, does it matter if they learn it, as long as their performance at that moment is supported?

As well as innovating to support just-in-time performance support through new technologies, L&D will also be expected to innovate in support of coaching and on-the-job learning. Most of this is already occurring in the workplace through the daily work of managers. They will welcome informed, sensible, innovative support to help them, for the driving reason behind so much: they want increased performance.

Such innovation could include steps such as those taken by some employers to make work-based assignments easier to focus, monitor and deliver. Rather than leave these to hard-pressed managers to organize, the employers collect work assignments already used, add further ones created by subject matter experts, and make them available to managers to assign to employees. Managers can oversee these assignments themselves, or ask the subject matter expert to do so. The assignments are stored and the results tracked on the corporate LMS. The innovation here is technological, it is methodological. It involved the L&D department being proactive with managers and supporting them in boosting performance.

As well as the demands of the existing workplace, the need for innovation will also be fuelled by the changing workforce.

New generations always bring with them new ways of working. Today this means a new approach to learning from the Millennials, those who came of age at the turn of the century. With numbers currently climbing in the workforce, Millennials will be a dominant employee demographic for the foreseeable future. And their influence is already being felt. This is the first generation to grow up immersed in the internet. They are used to being always connected, and it shows. Their brains aren't different from everyone else's, but their attitudes are, and this has brought with it a different—innovative—approach to workplace learning.

This innovation includes a shift to mobile learning. Already underway, this is now a recognized trend due partly to the ubiquity of handheld devices. People using these devices don't call it learning when they search on the internet for information, or discuss a work issue with a friend on the phone either verbally or via text—yet learning is exactly what they are doing. This is what the move to mobile learning is all about—it is much more than simply making courses available online, it is about making performance support materials and access to networks of experts available online.

And this move to portable learning begins to remove the separation that has too long existed between the L&D department and the workplace. Now it is possible for L&D to do a number of things very differently compared to the past. Yes, it can create short courses for delivery online, but it can also set up systems where learners in the workplace can create and distribute materials themselves. This shift from being at the center of production and distribution of training courses to largely curating other peoples' content will be a large trend now and in the future.

And underpinning this move to mobile will be software-as-a-service. SaaS seemed like an obscure technical detail years ago, when it began to gain traction. Going forward, it will be the dominant way of delivering learning services. SaaS is the only way to ensure a smooth software upgrade path, the easiest way to deliver software services across multiple sites and the method which involves the least IT overhead from your own organization. SaaS has become the incumbent method for learning delivery.

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