



White Paper

# Speed up to business-led learning

## New ways of working

In business, winning or losing is often as close as the milliseconds that separate Olympic medalists from the rest of the pack. In the Olympics, the winning ingredient is less time. In business, when products are interchangeable, and performers are equally talented, the winning currency is timely, fresh, and contextually relevant knowledge. People buy from people who intelligently articulate the superior benefits of their offering versus that of their competitors.

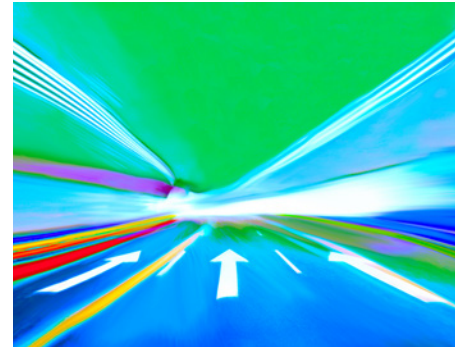
In competitive and complex business situations, the winning formula is highly knowledge-centric and to retain the label “winning formula” it must adapt relentlessly. The business critical quest for fresh knowledge is most evident with customer-facing workforces whose constant need for new intelligence is driven by shorter product shelf life, and continually increasing frequency of product launches. Consequently, the knowledge required to win is as fleeting as a moving target.

Since business-critical knowledge is an unpredictable moving target, how should it be managed? This demands answers to many questions:

- How do we keep this type of knowledge fresh?
- How do we make sure it remains relevant?
- Who in the organization is best suited to manage this knowledge?
- Are HR-led corporate learning platforms fast and flexible enough to manage such content?

Most C-Level executives do not realize the business risks of relying on learning platforms not designed to manage the dynamic nature of product-related knowledge, and its distributed audience.

Traditional learning functions within HR and the systems at their disposal are simply too rigid, and too slow to address the need of business.



## Table of Contents

1	New ways of working
2	The end of a world of work
2	A VUCA world
3	Two types of learning
5	The contrast
6	The need for supporting systems

## The end of a world of work

Something big is happening. The way the world works is coming to an end.

It seems today's professionals move between tasks, often shifting from one loose team to another as they go from one project to another. They adapt to the work at hand. They don't fit the work to their jobs. They can't. The demand for an agile, responsive organization is too high.

This change is international. It is happening fast, and it will dramatically alter the way your employees perform at work today and—crucially—how they learn to perform better tomorrow.

Are you ready for it?

Technology is a big driver in all this. We are connected with more people and have access to more information than ever before. Organizations are looser and more agile. Through contingent workers and associates they can respond rapidly without incurring the overhead of fully-employed staff. Just-in-time inventory has removed the need for carrying weeks' worth of stock. Consumers once waited four-to-six weeks for delivery of items that now arrive the next day.

While organizations are adapting to 21st century modes of work, too often their learning is a 20th century perfection of a 19th century model of training.

If training were an unchanging administrative function, like building maintenance, this might not matter. But it is not. The way we used to prepare employees for work—assuming that we could train them so that they knew everything in advance—is inadequate for success in today's complex, fast-changing business environments. An additional form of learning is needed: business-led learning.

## A VUCA world

Today's commercial world is increasingly fast changing; so fast changing that it can make detailed planning difficult or impossible. In the terminology of the U.S. military, this is a VUCA environment—one of Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. Coined to describe a post-Cold War world without the clear dividing lines of the two super-powers, VUCA describes a new business environment familiar to today's corporations.

A VUCA environment occurs when several interrelated variables change rapidly, leading to unpredictable results. In today's business world, lower barriers to entry and an increasingly international business world mean more competitors than ever. Just-in-time supply chains and rapid development methodologies lead to more products and services being released more quickly. In turn, the individual and corporate consumers of these products and services are able to access and comment on products faster than ever before.

And all of these variables interact. Company A's product development will change mid-stream as a result of new releases from Company B, and they will both change with the reaction of consumers to Company C's latest products. In this interrelated mesh of complexity, change in one place precipitates a cascade of changes elsewhere.

The change is so fast that it is impossible to keep employees abreast of new developments using traditional training methods. There is, however, more than one way to learn at work.

## Two types of learning

In any organization there are—and always have been—two types of learning: process-driven learning and business-led learning.

### **Process-driven learning**

Process-driven learning is set up, administered and run by a specialist function—typically the training or HR department—and it has a clear remit: to get employees up to the level of skill they need for a job. This training stretches from the most basic to leadership training for the highest echelons of the company, and it is not confined to the classroom. It might be delivered by simulations, workshops or any other means.

While process-driven learning is not defined by its level or its delivery mechanism, it does have some clear characteristics. First, it sets out to build skills and knowledge to a known schedule—the aim is to give people the competencies they need to do their jobs. Second, it is usually concerned with the mid-to-long-term, using talent management techniques to support the organization’s current and future operations.

It is this relatively long-term view, distant from the daily application of skills and knowledge, which makes this approach driven by process rather than results. The activity is prescribed: training will occur to boost skills and knowledge in given areas; the only question is how efficiently that can be done. Process becomes all—how many classes have been delivered, how many personal development plans completed. This sort of training typically lies in the ambit of the HR department.

### **Business-led learning**

Business-led learning is entirely focused on business outcomes and its focus is not skills or knowledge, although these may be developed through the learning. The focus of business-led learning is applying a company’s proprietary intellectual property for success. In the past this “secret sauce” was something that changed little over time, and it was possible for employees to learn it during their working lives, through experience, in addition to their process-driven learning.

When a sales team gets together informally, or employees of any kind gather before or after a meeting, some informal learning always takes place—largely through conversation. The war stories come out about particular problems met and overcome. These conversations are invaluable learning for many reasons. First, they may help the listener understand a specific incident they might need to overcome in the future—perhaps this is a good example of how to sell a company product against a competitive product. It may be more general learning, such as alerting the listener to the idea that Company B is now selling competitive products. And it may be something that the listener can extrapolate from—if Company B is now selling competitive products, what about Company C, which is very similar?

This very simple example shows some of the key characteristics of business-led learning:

- It answers an existing, or imminent issue
- It is directly relevant to an individual's daily work
- It is available fast
- It can be built on

But whereas in the past it was enough for these conversations to take place around scheduled meetings or chance encounters at the water cooler, it is now possible for them to take place almost continuously online, and it is possible for them to be stimulated and prompted.

Not only is it possible, it is essential.

In a world where information is effectively free, and where speed of action is paramount, knowing how to capitalize on your intellectual property quickly is a core competency for any organization. Facilitating these conversations online, and stimulating them with the right core information does not require complex systems. On the contrary, the systems must be simple to use and accessible on any mobile device (as well as on laptops). They must be the natural place people turn to for support at work.

As well as supporting conversation, these systems must give immediate access to the core information needed at work. This is not so that people can learn this information. They may do so, but it is only important that they use it. Whether it is sales information, competitive insight or a new organizational initiative, putting shared, proprietary intellectual property to use rapidly, before it changes, is what gives today's organizations the edge.

For that reason "business-led" learning could equally be called "strategic" learning. It is this type of learning that will truly help organizations differentiate and succeed.

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	Business led learning	Process driven learning
Focus	Business impact—revenue and customer satisfaction	Building skills and knowledge for the job
Stakeholders	Executives, managers, employees, partners and channels	HR/training department, managers, employees
Time scales	Immediate and short	Medium and long term
Role of employee	Contributor/receiver	Receiver
Role of L&D department	Building systems and processes to supply knowledge at the point of need	Writing and delivering training interventions and facilitating learning
Measurement	Business KPIs	Efficiency of L&D operation
Occurs	Where it is most convenient for the learner	Where it is most convenient for the delivery process

## The contrast

Both of these forms of learning are important, but they are very different in their focus and outcomes.

It makes sense for process-driven learning to be run as an administrative function. The curriculum is slow-changing; it does not need to adapt with great speed and it lends itself to being run as efficiently as possible. This is the “facilities management” approach to skills, and it is important for any organization. But although it is important, process-driven learning is not sufficient for organizational success. The learning that really has an immediate impact on success is business-led learning.

Business-led learning uses an organization’s proprietary intellectual property to differentiate it from agile competitors. How can a corporation make sure that it distributes this proprietary intellectual property to employees? Not by training. In a fast-changing, VUCA world, even “just-in-time” training courses are insufficient. By the time it has been created, structured, checked and distributed, there’s a fair chance the course will be out of date.

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**Business-led learning helps organizations succeed in an environment that is inherently unpredictable, which is why it cannot respond well to a process-driven learning approach based on instructional design, content creation and knowledge transfer.**

This is not to put the two types of learning in opposition. Process-driven learning gets employees to a base camp of knowledge from which they can then build their knowledge and hone their skills. By encountering and overcoming obstacles, and by sharing their experiences and others, they take part in business-led learning, which is further stimulated by the provision of core information. Unlike what they may learn in process-driven learning, this core learning is likely to change rapidly, and is provided to be used, rather than learned.

Business-led learning helps organizations succeed in an environment that is inherently unpredictable, which is why it cannot respond well to a process-driven learning approach based on instructional design, content creation and knowledge transfer.

## The need for supporting systems

Both these forms of learning have always existed in organizations. Once, process-driven learning, along with some informal, ad hoc business-led learning, was enough for corporate success.

That is no longer the case.

Process-driven learning alone cannot deliver success in today's VUCA world. Organizations need systems and processes in place to support network-driven, business-led learning so that it is always available to employees, and does not rely on chance encounters, or happening to know where the right person or piece of information is.

How should the learning and development department support this sort of learning? Absolutely not by making it part of a curriculum that fits the slow, proscriptive, process-driven model. Rather, the way is to set up the systems that make the learning possible, and then to get out of the way, intervening only to ensure that employees can access the knowledge and the experts that they need.

There are three possible approaches to setting up systems for business-led learning. One is to work with a collection of ad hoc tools. Another is to set up a new system, separate from those for process-driven learning. And the third is to aim for an integrated system that allows for both process-driven and business-led learning to be supported in one place.

Working with ad hoc tools often has the advantage of simplicity. Perhaps there is one tool for networking between experts, another for providing feedback on new products and a third for finding core information. However, what this approach gains in simplicity, it loses rapidly when the approach becomes popular with users—because the real power of business-led learning is in the ability to deliver learning quickly, when needed. If users have to switch between applications to find what they want, that is not only inefficient, but it is also quite possible they will get lost on the way.

Using a separate system just to support business-led learning can sound attractive, but it fails to exploit the synergies of supporting both forms of learning from one system. Using a single system, it is possible to share data on employees, as well as proprietary company information and other resources. The alternative is that at some point the L&D department gets involved in arranging the technical side of data transfer between systems—almost always a time-consuming procedure that is never satisfactorily completed.

A platform which supports both process-driven and business-led learning is ideal. This enables both efficient delivery of the core learning that gets employees skilled up to the level needed for their work, as well as providing the rapid knowledge sharing around products, services and processes that modern businesses need.

And if proprietary information needs to be shared rapidly, then usually it needs to get to where it can make the most impact—to the people connecting with the customer. Often these are not direct employees, but part of the “extended enterprise,” an organization’s supply chain, and sales, distribution and support channels.

Most corporate learning infrastructures in place today were designed to manage the past. Tomorrow’s learning platforms need to support process-driven learning, but also to deliver crucial business-specific information to the user in whatever way works best for them—whether that is through a course, a conversation or a video, and over a workstation, a tablet or a smartphone. Learners learn best when they learn in their own way.



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