

# Driving Performance Through Learning

# **What's in it for me? Discover how learning in the workplace is evolving.**

Think about your professional skills for a moment. How did you gain them – training courses? Chances are, your skills developed gradually over the course of your career. Perhaps training courses helped out in a few specific areas, but compare their impact to that of colleagues, managers, and even search engines. Learning takes place all the time. But when it comes to learning in the workplace, people often tend to have narrow horizons. It's time to embrace a broader perspective about what learning at work looks like, and in the following blinks, you'll learn how to do just that. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to analyze a company's underlying learning needs; why a quick fix is sometimes better than a perfect one; and how to encourage community and self-directed learning at work.

## **Employees often learn more effectively in-the-flow of work, rather than in a course.**

The world of work is changing fast. Competition is high, disruption is everywhere, and the pressure for efficiency and budget cuts is immense. People tend to have more varied careers these days, and the workplace is changing too, with home working increasingly popular. One thing, though, has stayed the same: employees need to learn. How can organizations, and specifically their L&D teams – the ones responsible for learning and development – best cater to this need? If you're like most people, two words probably spring to mind right away: training course. But is that really the best way? Most people have a lot going on, and it isn't easy for them to take time out of their schedules. Couldn't they learn just as much while still doing other work? Well, yes, they could. The key message here is: Employees often learn more effectively in-the-flow of work, rather than in a course. When people think of learning at work, they think of training courses. You've probably even heard coworkers complaining that they can't do certain tasks because they haven't been trained to do so. But this is an attitude that needs to change. A lot of the time, learning should simply take place when it's actually needed, while staff members are doing their jobs. This is learning in-the-flow of work, and it's a principle that's changing the way people think about learning and development. It's not a completely new idea. For a while now, the concept of 70:20:10 has been well-known among learning professionals. The idea is that 70 percent of learning takes place from experiences in the workplace, with 20 percent from coaching and other interactions, and just 10 percent from courses. That very precise-sounding ratio isn't that important, but the underlying principle is vital. The mindset in the workplace should be that learning is ever-present. What does that mean for L&D professionals? Well, they'll still have plenty to do – their role is to identify an organization's learning needs, track progress, and, of course, find solutions. Sometimes that's just booking a training course, but sometimes it means playing the role of facilitator, encouraging things like community interaction, coaching, and individual learning. And how can L&D professionals do that? Well, good news: you're about to do a little bit of learning

yourself.

# **Effective learning can only happen when needs are correctly diagnosed.**

Imagine an electrical components company – let's call it Electrix-stop. It's a bit of a mess. Staff turnover has shot up recently, and it's starting to affect customer service, so the complaints are pouring in. Plus, all those new members of staff still don't have a handle on the IT system. Pretty soon, the L&D team gets a request for an IT system induction course. And that's not all. It also gets a request for a management course, because with all those staff leaving, something is clearly wrong with management. There's a request for a recruitment course, too, because HR should be recruiting people who stay longer. So will three courses fix all of Electrix-stop's problems? Not likely. The key message here is: Effective learning can only happen when needs are correctly diagnosed. To run a truly effective L&D team, you need to go a lot further than just saying sure to requests and signing people up for courses. That means not only analyzing the staff's true needs, but also being forensic about it. You should do this via a learning needs analysis, which has several stages. First, ask what staff need to learn, and why they need to learn it. Second, scope out the scale of the project and work out some achievable goals. After that, it's a question of identifying and implementing solutions. That might sound obvious, but it represents a change in thinking for many L&D departments because this process is less about taking orders than it is about intervention, which enables the department itself to create value. So let's get back to Electrix-stop. How can L&D really help to solve its many issues? Well, it might turn out that the best way to deal with the recruitment problem is for HR to provide more support when managers hire new staff. To improve customer service, L&D could encourage experts within the customer service team to get more involved in helping out and coaching new hires. And rather than a specific new course in IT systems induction, a whole new induction program might work better, placing a stronger emphasis on IT right from the start. In brief, these are targeted learning solutions. Instead of simply responding to requests, the L&D team has shown that it understood the actual, broader problems the organization was facing and has found the most effective solutions. And as an added bonus, no one has to sit through a course.

# **Instead of chasing perfection, design agile, responsive learning solutions.**

The pace of life these days is fast. Next-day delivery is the norm, chatbots answer our queries in moments, and apps update weekly. Email, which people used to think was lightning quick, now seems old-fashioned and slow compared to instant messaging. Wouldn't it be nice just to take it slow and focus on quality instead of constantly chasing quick fixes? Well, sure. But if you're working in L&D, you probably don't have that luxury. You need to work fast, and often, that means giving up on the chase for perfection and implementing learning solutions that get the job done now. The key message here is: Instead of chasing perfection, design agile, responsive learning solutions. Prioritizing speed over quality might not sound ideal, But how quickly staff become competent is vital for a business's bottom line. And because work systems are constantly evolving, there's a danger that if you take too long to come up with a

learning solution, it'll be outdated by the time it's implemented. That's why an agile or responsive approach is best. That means an iterative way of thinking about the problem – one involving trial and error and squarely focused on getting the job done. An agile approach will probably come up with an initial solution that doesn't work. But then, it'll be adapted for another attempt, and do a little better. Eventually, you'll end up with a minimum viable proposition, a solution that isn't everything you might want it to be, but which does tick all the necessary boxes. Because this process relies on a continuous stream of testing and feedback, it's vital to involve the key stakeholders fully. It can't just be the domain of L&D – you also need to involve the staff who are affected by the issue. This shift to agile thinking does require a change in mindset, but it's an important one that's ultimately good for business. Perfectionism helps no one, after all, and the first version of a product is seldom the best. What does an agile approach to learning look like in practice? It depends – but it's bound to involve solutions that take place in-the-flow. It could even involve microlearning – short bursts of information that solve a specific problem. Once your agile learning solutions are up and running, how do you then improve them? As the next blink explores, figuring that out involves tracking their progress carefully.

## **Tracking the precise impact of learning on performance is difficult but vital.**

Why do people need to learn at work in the first place? Well, so they can improve their performance. But does this actually happen? It's all too easy to come up with some perfect-sounding learning solution, set it up, and then just forget about it. But in an age where metrics are more vital in business than ever before, that's not good enough. It's crucial to monitor the impact that learning solutions have on staff. One of the reasons this doesn't tend to happen much is simple: it's hard. When it comes to learning, ROI – short for “return on investment” – is often difficult to measure. But if you don't track impact, how will you ever know how successful your solutions have been? The key message here is: Tracking the precise impact of learning on performance is difficult but vital. Traditionally, L&D teams measured impact through the Kirkpatrick Model. This involves a host of techniques, most famously including “happy sheets” which ask people to evaluate their experience by checking boxes along a scale. In truth, this model isn't just overused, it's flawed; among other problems, “happy sheets” and other methods of self-reporting are inherently vague. What can L&D teams do instead? Well, even though it hasn't traditionally been the domain of L&D, you need to get comfortable with data. Data is fundamental to how businesses operate today, and it's vital to be able to use basic concepts like analytics and key performance indicators, or KPIs. Thinking about this should improve the whole of the process, so before you approve a new learning project, make sure you know what sort of improvement you expect to see, in terms of KPIs. Feedback from the learners themselves remains vital, of course. But quantifying impact, even when the measurements aren't that precise, is well worth it. One of the key measures it's useful to have, of course, is return on investment. But in the field of L&D, it can be especially tricky to pin specific numbers on exactly how much value learning has created. Even an approximate ROI calculation can go a long way, though, so it's worth giving it a try as best you can. A crowdsourcing approach can work well for this: simply ask staff what ROI they think they're generating as a result of their learning. With enough data, the results can be surprisingly accurate.

# Digital learning solutions can have a transformational effect.

Okay, you've probably heard this before, but it still bears repeating: technology is changing everything. The number of people with a mobile phone is north of five billion, there are three billion social media users out there, and it's clear that the trend is only getting stronger. So it's not much of a surprise that YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn are now some of the most valued learning resources out there – not to mention Google. How do you harness the power of these digital innovations for learning? Well, as long as you do it right, the sky's the limit. The key message here is: Digital learning solutions can have a transformational effect. Why are digital solutions so great? Well, first of all, don't get too carried away. A solution isn't necessarily better just because it's digital. It still has to have the right purpose and be a means to a particular end. But many digital solutions absolutely can enhance learning. Apps, for instance, have huge potential. Oil and gas company BP developed a custom app that replaced an online business leadership course, and it took off in a big way, attracting 6,000 users a year. Augmented and virtual reality, AR and VR, can also be great. Boeing uses AR to teach its trainees how to assemble aircraft wings. VR can be used to train workers to install energy meters, or even simulate work on a submarine or oil rig. And then, of course, there are the countless digital learning resources that already exist online, from podcasts to YouTube tutorials to Twitter lists of influential thinkers. You can make the most of these preexisting resources by getting serious about content curation. While this might sound like a lazy solution, it's actually anything but. To do it right, work closely with stakeholders to compile a detailed list of what's available, whittle it down so it isn't too overwhelming, and then make sure that the content is easily available to staff. Curation has been underexplored in L&D so far, but its time has come. It's a great example of an agile solution, as preexisting material is quick to deploy. Plus, it encourages a diversity of thinking instead of assuming that the best ideas always come from in-house. Even better, curated content points learners toward self-direction – encouraging them to think about their learning themselves.

## Enabling community involvement is a great way to encourage workplace learning..

Technology is great – but how did people learn before computers? In fact, how did they learn back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? How did people learn in prehistory, even before language developed? One word: community. Social learning was vital around the campfire when people traded hunting tips. And learning through community has been around ever since, from the guilds of the Middle Ages to the bustling coffeehouses of Georgian England. So it's a little weird that L&D teams don't think about community-based, social learning so much when they're trying to come up with solutions. Because they probably should. The key message here is: Enabling community involvement is a great way to encourage workplace learning. Enabling community-based learning doesn't mean the L&D department can just take the day off – just as with content curation, it still has a vital role to play. L&D's role is to subtly shape the ways in which community learning can take place so that others feel in a position to



support each other. What's so great about community learning? First off, it's another responsive solution: staff members can ask each other for help in-the-flow of work, meaning issues are resolved quickly. Second, it's targeted: the questions staff ask will directly relate to the problems they're having. And, finally, it's good for the team as a whole, encouraging thought leadership and building trust among peers. So how do you do it? One great tool is technology. Online social spaces can be ideal for this – either a customized professional one or a private community within a familiar platform like Facebook or LinkedIn. To ensure these online spaces don't become desolate, you'll need to do a little legwork. Encouraging senior leadership to get involved can help, as others will follow where they lead. And here's another way that L&D can be effective through encouragement rather than intervention: supporting self-direction. If you can get staff motivated to learn something, they'll also be motivated to put the effort in themselves. To do this, think about COGS. This acronym reminds you to foster curiosity, which leads to ongoing commitment. This encourages a growth mindset and leads to self-awareness – learners will reflect on their own progress and understand what they need to do moving forward. But it's not always possible for individuals to do everything themselves. Sometimes, a more familiar technique comes in handy: coaching.

## **Coaching is a time-honored method of learning, but it has to be embedded in-the-flow of work.**

Coaching in the workplace is a mainstay of development – it's been around for a long time. But does it always work? If it doesn't amount to more than occasional, obligatory appointments on the calendar, then probably not. For coaching to have real impact, it needs to become more broadly part of workplace culture. Rather than both coach and learner having to take time out from their schedules for fixed one-on-one meetings, coaching that occurs in-the-flow of work has the potential to be much more effective. The key message here is: Coaching is a time-honored method of learning, but it has to be embedded in-the-flow of work. What's so great about coaching in-the-flow of work? Maybe most obviously, it encourages talent to develop within the organization, helping people make the most of their abilities and get ambitious. It's also good for performance support, and it can make staff more engaged, leading to better workplace performance overall. Coaching can be quite a formal process, like mentorship. But it can also be informal. Encouraging informal peer coaching can yield great results too, if the right people are involved. But all of this is dependent on coaching being embedded within an organization's culture, not something that's just tacked on. And of course, it's also dependent on your organization's leaders being effective coaches. Some do this naturally, but others doubtless need a guiding hand, which you should be there to provide. Not that it's a disaster if they – or you – make a mistake. In fact, that in itself is a valuable learning opportunity – which is the final piece of advice for transforming L&D. Stop automatically thinking of mistakes as bad things: they actually offer a fantastic opportunity to learn. Penicillin, cornflakes, Velcro, cellophane – all of these well-known products were created by mistake. So next time you get something wrong at work, look at the upside: what can you learn from it? Mistakes are just one example of how learning opportunities abound in the modern workplace. It's the job of the L&D team to harness those opportunities and make sure that everyone in the organization is learning as much as they can, all the time – not just when they're sitting in a course.

# Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Learning and development is vital to any modern organization, but too often L&D departments fall back on familiar options like sending staff on courses. A more dynamic and varied approach to L&D encourages learning to occur in-the-flow of work. Targeted, agile, and well-measured learning approaches include everything from augmented reality to coaching. Taken together, these approaches can transform the way learning in the workplace drives performance. And here's some more actionable advice: Reflect on your current context. On each step of the way along your journey to more effective L&D, take some time out to reflect on where you currently stand. Only by understanding your current context will you be able to improve in the future. So let's start at the very beginning: how is L&D currently organized within your organization? Do you encourage learning in-the-flow of work, or do you rely on courses or seminars? How can you integrate some more innovative solutions that come closer to meeting the precise learning needs of your team?