Change or perish: learning and development has to transform

Since the concept of Learning and Development entered the business world 80 years or so ago, the commercial landscape has changed almost beyond recognition. Today’s businesses compete within an immeasurably larger, more cost-conscious market. Their workforce has greater flexibility and mobility than ever before, and the inexorable advance of modern technology has opened up possibilities previously unimaginable. Throughout this time, however, the basic approach to L&D has remained largely unchanged: skills are imparted, with outcomes measured, if at all, after the training has been completed.

While this may have been sufficient in the past, it is inadequate for today’s business environment. Recipients of corporate education and the organisations they work for are not experiencing the outcomes they desire at anything like the rate they should be.

An altogether more agile L&D process is needed. In parallel with the agile approach to software development, the effectiveness of the learning and development is measured as they are taking place, and the training is adapted accordingly to ensure desired outcomes are achieved. Following this approach, there is no reason why success rates should not reach 100%.

L&D in a changing business environment

Business and commerce are becoming increasingly globalised and competitive. The last 20 years have seen:
- a 30% increase in globalisation
- emerging economies increasing at four times the pace of developed economies
- an exponential growth in multinational companies, projected to reach 100,000 by the end of the decade (according to World Bank data)

An escalating demand for new skills and knowledge and a shortage of competent executives in emerging economies have made learning and development increasingly essential for businesses wishing to meet the challenges presented by increased global competitiveness and technological change.

Despite recognising the unprecedented change in the ways business is done, and the proven impact of precisely formulated learning and development, the approach taken to delivery has changed very little over recent decades.

This unwillingness to evolve has brought the L&D industry to a crossroads. For companies to survive in the modern business environment they must transform their approach to L&D to become more adaptable and more responsive. Failure to do so will result in outdated L&D practices that are unable to keep pace with the changing demands of business.

Is agile the solution to successful outcomes of learning and development?

The conventional approach to learning and development typically begins with senior management identifying a need; it ends with selected personnel undertaking a training course. The more insightful human resources departments may want to know if the participants actually learned anything, but by this time it can be too late to do anything about it if they did not.

It is as if the guiding force behind learning and development is faith rather than the demonstrable evidence of what actually works. This acceptance of, at best, the barely adequate, should not continue. L&D needs to
focus on real, business outcomes, and the first step towards demonstrating the impact of learning and development is to create visibility through measurement followed by action based on that data.

We can learn lessons from changes that have occurred within the software development industry. Instead of developing a plan, putting it into action and hoping the intended outcome will materialise, project managers within the software development industry measure incremental progress and make small changes based on those measurements to ensure the resulting outcome achieves the desired objectives. This agile approach to IT programmes has enabled the software development industry to operate with higher quality and speed and lower costs, risks and complexity.

Can this methodology be applied to learning and development? Instead of putting an expensive learning and development programme in place and considering return on investment after the event, organisations need to be agile, measuring progress and intervening at all stages of the learning journey. Following this metrics-driven approach to learning and development will result in the same consequences as those experienced in the software development industry – improved quality, speed, cost-effectiveness and certainty.

**Introducing impact into learning and development**

Impact in L&D is defined as the power or capacity to produce a desired outcome. This means taking a rigorous, evidence-based approach to achieve optimum effectiveness.

How do you measure the impact of a learning and development programme? Until recently, feedback was typically only available from basic questionnaires completed after the training had been completed. More sophisticated systems may involve psychometric and 360-degree appraisals, HR metrics (sickness, absence, retention) and business metrics (ROI, market share, revenue). There is, however, an alternative method that effectively introduces the concept of impact into learning and development.

Incremental measurements obtained while the training is actually taking place provide course leaders with sufficient information to be able to make appropriate modifications to the course as it is being delivered and, consequently, affect outcomes. Continually gauging progress in this way enable leaders to predict with astonishing accuracy, very early in a learning and development programme, how effective the learning is going to be.

According to figures from Bersin by Deloitte, only around 10% to 15% of companies possess well-developed learning and development programmes that are properly aligned with strategy and outcomes. Despite the general lack of learning and development impact displayed by most companies, when it comes to optimising their programmes there are some notable examples of companies that are embracing the agile approach and measuring the impact of their training with proactive scrutiny.

Latin American bank, BBVA Continental, takes this different approach. After making a substantial investment in training for its sales people, the business was dismayed to discover that the course had had no impact on subsequent sales productivity. Recognising this, the head of HR changed the way the effectiveness of learning is measured by bringing in line managers to assess performance and provide personal support for those who need it. Following this change to a more agile style of training, an increase in sales productivity occurred which was directly attributed to the training programme.

**Applying agile learning and development across all industries**

If learning and development was evaluated by its success in transferring the newly acquired knowledge back into the workplace to generate business benefits – rather than by the familiar assessment methods of tests, projects and satisfaction surveys – it would provide users with a meaningful measure of effectiveness.
With a basis in improving the outcomes of individuals, whatever business they work in, agile learning and development provides a distinctly measurable form of training. But is it possible to apply it across all industries?

Looking again at the software development industry, a sector once well known for its failure to deliver required outcomes on time and to specification, it is clear that the sector’s rapid adoption of agile methodology has succeeded in transforming the industry. By constantly measuring and making changes along the way, organisations can ensure the desired outcomes. However, is the ability to achieve this so successfully down to the nature of the IT industry?

With IT, it is easier to measure ongoing progress as most work is carried out on a computer that facilitates the automatic recording of a wide range of data. In other sectors, this may not be the case. Nevertheless, there is barely an industry untouched by modern technology; so, where once large-scale data collection and analysis would be a cumbersome process, technology is making the task increasingly automated.

It is true that, in the past, there would have been some businesses where it would have been impractical to perform the necessary measurements for agile learning and development. However, internet-enabled technology has changed that. There is now virtually no organisation in which agile learning and development cannot be applied.

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