

The Changing World of Work – implications for the Learning and Development Professional:

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Very few foresaw the economic devastation of the past months. The likelihood is that the corporate environment will never be quite the same again. For many of us working in the Learning Profession, this situation has placed us under tremendous pressure. We have declining workforces, business strategies are being formed and reformed to cope with surviving the changing times. Our skills development programmes have been placed on hold and then placed under pressure to accelerate change – just with far smaller funds!

So where does that leave the L&D profession? Statistically, the situation appears to be one where in the last months of 2008, there was general pessimism for Learning and Development. The area is seen as easy to cut without immediate damage to the business. However, as the recession is increasingly being seen as long term, e-learning and in particular collaborative learning technologies are being seen as a very attractive option. Indeed, the recession may well catalyse rapid growth in this part of the market.

The expectation of learners is also changing. People are increasingly comfortable and indeed, expecting, to learn collaboratively in their time and according to their 'just in time' need. This is partly a change in the average age of employees but also a change in the accessibility of technology in people's everyday lives. It is probable that L&D departments that fail to provide just in time, collaborative learning will be seen as failing. Not a great prospect! Corporates and other organisations seem to fall into three main categories – those who are largely virgin and have yet to try out the online revolution in learning, those who have made tremendous strides forward and are perhaps looking to structure their approach and those who were bitten by the first phase of e-learning and have suffered as a result.

The market

ASTD's latest online survey (January 2009) asked its members how their learning function was being affected by the current economic climate. 53% of respondents stated that they are being asked to do more with less. January's market update looked at reducing training expenditure, how organisations are doing more with less and the longer term impact.

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It appears that some vulnerable sectors such as retail and low margin businesses are cutting training budgets, and some are cutting training completely. The ASTD survey revealed:

- 35% of organisations have reduced their training budgets
- 49% of organisations have reduced training travel costs
- 28% have moved classroom courses to online courses
- 34% have frozen recruitment in training departments
- 13% have made training staff redundant

The latest poll conducted by Cegos of 254 learning and development professionals states that 36 per cent of businesses say they will be increasing their use of e-learning during 2009.

Other innovations in training behaviour include:

- Increased use of virtual classrooms including new innovative designs for virtual sessions
- Smarter blends to deliver cost effective solutions integrating low cost and open source software
- Streamlining of e-learning development processes to deliver much faster using Rapid Development Tools.
- Greater informal learning using a range of web 2.0 technologies

These innovations may become embedded and survive in the longer term.

The latest survey into learning technology adoption was undertaken by [Towards Maturity](#). The full report published at the end of February 2009, is the 3rd in a longitudinal research series looking at trends in the use of learning technologies in the workplace.

Amazingly, one of the main findings is the optimism of the learning and development profession. When asked if the current credit crunch was an opportunity or a threat, 56% said it was an opportunity as they will do more with what they have. Only 6% felt it was a threat.

This may be in part due to the potential benefits that learning technologies can deliver to organisations. The report's authors comment "learning technologies are starting to add some strong value in areas that are becoming increasingly important to organisations in a downturn when efficiency and competitiveness are key."

They point to feedback that shows learning technologies are helping organisations:

- Save time
- Reduce cost

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- Implement organisational change
- Improve the rollout of new products and IT systems

The findings on e-learning expenditure in the coming year were positive in that whilst over 25% expected training budgets as a whole to reduce, **64% expected the proportion of the overall training budget allocated to e-learning to increase**. Training managers in the US are gloomier with 35% expecting overall training budgets to decrease according to the latest ASTD survey in January.

Migration from classroom and e-learning to virtual classrooms

The main beneficiaries of this current recessionary trend according to Ambient are the Collaborative-Social Network Learning suppliers. “This product type will generate the second highest product revenues during the forecast period as organizational buyers migrate from physical classrooms and Self-paced e-Learning to virtual classrooms.”

The fact is that many industries were becoming increasingly complex and competitive places to work even without the recession. Much of this is driven through Globalisation and the pace of technology change. Balancing the drive to face the customer through excellent service and support with the need to innovate and compete in this changing and challenging market means the skills of people are the heart of success for these companies. HR and Training professionals must recognise this and instigate approaches that break the traditional mould and focus on business led, high achieving techniques. The expectations of learners too have changed. The concept of waiting to book onto a training course taking place in a distant location some time away does, on scrutiny, seem a faintly ridiculous way of meeting the skills needs in the web 2.0 age.

But few organisations are totally satisfied with a free for all either. The concept of totally informal learning with no influence or learning framework is probably a step too far for most. So how do we cope with supporting the wholesomeness of the collaborative working and learning environment, the desperate needs of the business environment and the falling budgets of the L&D dept?

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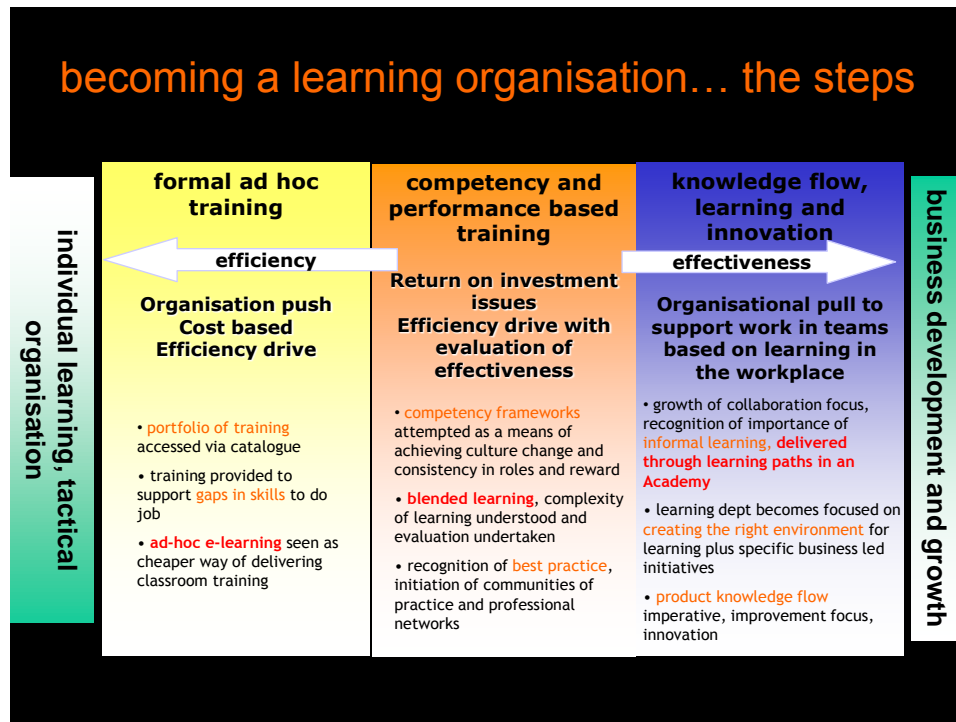


Fig. 1 – evolution of learning in organisations, copyright WillowDNA

The fact is that most companies are travelling from left to right in this diagram – a representation of the evolution of the L&D approach to learning. We have all been through the cost cutting promise of the first generation of e-learning only to be largely disappointed. The competency approach meeting the development needs of the individual according to some performance criteria has had some success, but very much dependent on the rate of change in organisations. Unless you have many people in the same roles which remain largely unchanged for reasonable periods of time, the whole approach feels unworkable. The reality is that many of us are now embracing the final stage – meeting the needs of business development (not so much growth right now!) through highly collaborative learning with a balance of structure and just in time nuggets of learning. It is now more about creating the right environments and opportunities to learn in a way that suits the now need of our people.

Orange is an example of a rapidly changing work environment, due to a number of key drivers. Continuous advances in technology put pressure on the cycle time of product design through to market deployment. In Orange, the reality of over 90 new product and services releases into the UK Call Centres alone in one year exemplifies the rapid rate of up-skilling required to meet the changing needs of the customer. The need to meet the demands of a global marketplace requires collaboration across organisational and national boundaries. The changing nature of management and work through virtual teams and projects requires new skills and management techniques and a greater

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emphasis on the ability to build successful teams rapidly, regular review of working practices and transfer learning to up-skill others and reduce their time to competency.

In the past, Orange handled training as a functional activity within each of the operations of the operating companies. However, there is now an increasing trend to link training to specific business targets and projects. There are many examples where bespoke programmes have been created via training needs analysis or content produced in house to complement or replace off the shelf solutions. Management Development schemes are being tailored to reflect urgent needs via gap analysis. There are also some specific examples of excellence in true Learning and Development approaches with involvement of the relevant business managers, critical analysis of the working environment, learning lessons from the way we work and feedback of those lessons into the training of others.

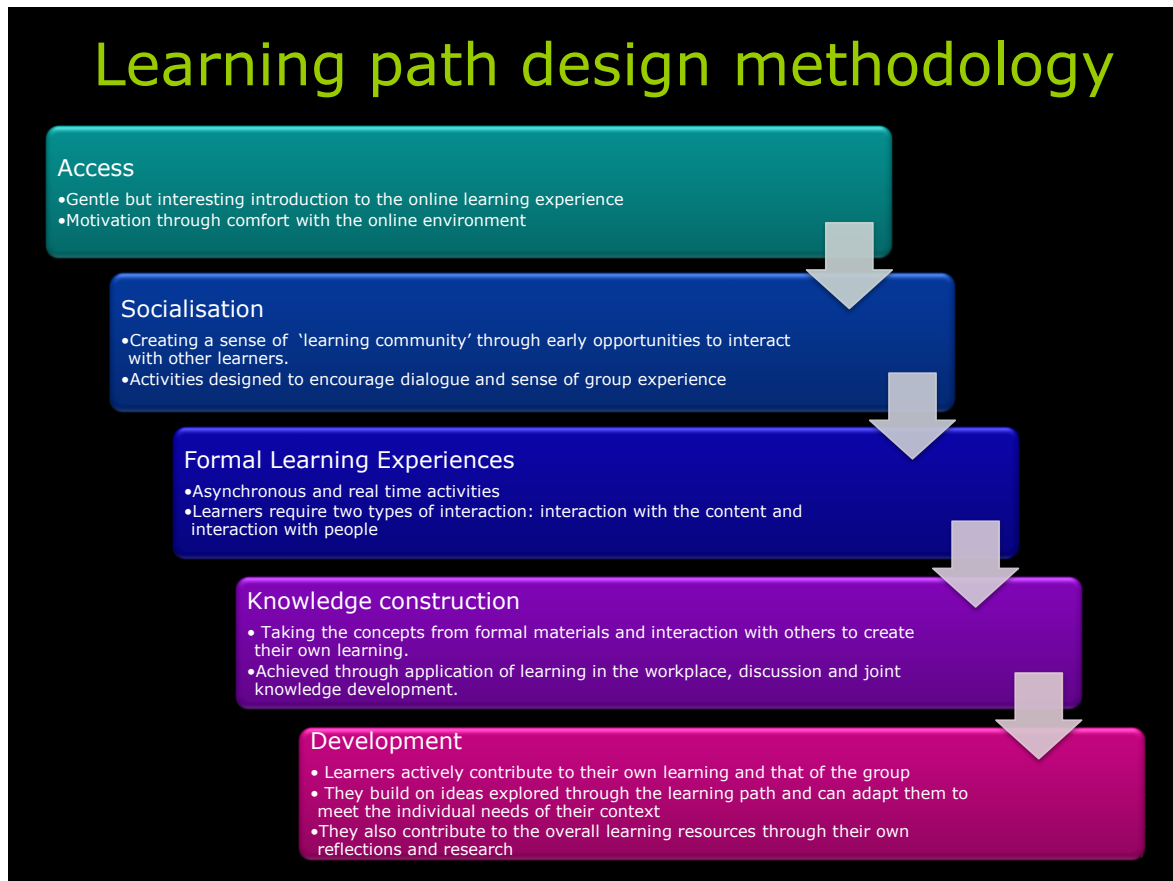
Many businesses have recently transformed the role of the learning department in a move away from a 'training shop' where managers and staff book training from a published training catalogue, through to a business partner model. And they are now considering changing again. Cutting costs of learning is a given requirement and finally, many L&D professionals are recognising that a well considered approach to online learning thoughtfully applied with deeply embedded and supported opportunities for learning as we work is not only feasible but is probably going to be the way we will all deliver a better learning experience for our companies with a better ROI than we have ever achieved before.

The drivers behind this transformation are to ensure training and development is firmly aligned to business need and adaptive to the rapidly changing and complex work environment. This change in the way organisations look at training has created a huge opportunity to maximise the development, creation and sharing of learning in the workplace.

Within Digital Learning , our team welcome the changes in the learning environment. In many respects, DLC was formed because of the frustration with traditional approaches to elearning and "blended learning". It is hard to imagine that the learning environment will ever go back to majority face to face with no online support with or without the recession and indeed, organisations that do not embrace this change are doing their companies a great disservice. We have learnt that some steps assist in getting the change underway. The following diagram illustrates our methods in combining the formal with the socialising aspects of learning.

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Oddly enough, this format also guides us in working with organisations to learn how to best construct learning programmes when the topic area is challenging and not thoroughly understood. Perhaps, for the first time, we have the opportunity to extend our approaches beyond the provision of traditional training. We can utilise the internal knowledge and contextual experience of our own people to connect learning and working in real time. Not only does this speed up time to competency and innovation but it also adds the all important contextual or collaborative understanding that is simply not available through our traditional history of training.

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