



Ara Ohanian points to three areas where L&D will be tested in 2010.

RISING TO THE THREE LEARNING CHALLENGES OF 2010

Make no mistake, 2010 is going to be a dramatic year for Learning and Development (L&D) professionals. On one hand there is the challenge: tighter budgets, the demand to do more with less, and an increasing risk that L&D is seen as irrelevant by employees, especially the younger workforce, who are adept at using existing electronic media to find the information they need when they need it. How can we do more with fewer resources in this increasingly demanding world?

On the other hand lies the opportunity. Senior executives now see the need for skilled people, including those outside the enterprise – partners, and even customers. At the same time, learners' ease with social media and other electronic tools means that having to persuade them to use their computer or the internet for learning is no longer an issue. Together these factors should make this a fruitful year for L&D.

In this complex arena, there are three key areas where L&D must prove itself in 2010.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGE

If 2009 was the year when the world woke up to Twitter (tripling its US base to 18 million users), then 2010 is the year when L&D will be expected to put it to use. Social media is undoubtedly one of the most important tools we have for learning. It helps us learn in the way that is most natural to us: by asking a question and receiving an answer. However, it only works well when used in the right way. If 'build it and they will come' is poor advice for a regular e-learning implementation, for social learning it is a recipe for disaster.

Simply creating a place for people to chat online, but providing no context and limited search, is retrogressive. It takes us back to the undisciplined anarchy of the early days of the internet. That's fine for ad hoc

socialising but not for quality learning. Likewise, creating a repository where anyone can dump whatever information they want, with no structure and limited search is not aiding learning. It's just adding to people's existing information overload.

Good learning with social media should be about making available the best quality information and expertise, and then reducing the time taken for users to find exactly what they need from that collection of people and data. This is done by ensuring that people create and add the right information in the first place, that its quality is maintained over time, and that the context of using it, and the search tools for querying it, are as sophisticated as possible, while being simple to use.

As US learning expert Clark Quinn puts it, with social networks in particular it's necessary to **seed, feed and weed**: seed your network with the right people and

collaborative culture, ensure you feed your network with new information and ideas, and weed out the older versions of material to make it easier for learners to see the wood for the trees.

The social media challenge of 2010 is not whether social media should be used for learning (it already is) and it is not what tools we should use (important, but a technical detail). The challenge is this: are we ready to change what we do as L&D professionals to accommodate this new method of learning?

We will still need to provide courses, but we will also need to enable our learners to search materials created by fellow learners, too. We will still need to provide the infrastructure for learning, but we can no longer expect to create and police every last byte. We used to be the experts, now we facilitate access to experts elsewhere in the workforce. We need to be the curators as well as the creators of content, and guides to learning as well as gurus and experts.

The great news about social media is that L&D no longer owns the keys to the kingdom of learning. People are learning more, faster, now than ever. Can we make sure that what they're learning is accurate, and that they find what they need as fast as possible?

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

Mobile technology has evolved massively in just a few years and 2010, according to UK journalist Victor Keegan, will be **The Year Mobile Comes of Age**. Why? Two reasons: first, functionality has expanded and matured, putting great processing power within the reach of most users. Second, users now expect their phones to have applications beyond telephony, and they know how to use them.

The impact on learning and development in 2010 will be tangible – expect employees to be using their phones to learn in a variety of ways. They will use them as performance support devices to find, call and message experts they value. They will access the internet on their phones to answer questions. They will use social networking and other community resources to find shared knowledge pools inside work and outside.

This is already taking place, and will continue to take place over the year, leaving L&D with two challenges. First: to make the mobile learning already occurring as valuable and as effective as possible. Second: to add mobile to L&D's existing delivery mechanisms. This is no longer a nice-to-have. If your employees already have computers they are effectively knowledge workers and an increasing number of them will have mobile devices



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capable of content delivery. They expect to be able to learn over these devices. If they can't get what they want from the L&D department over their phone, they won't wait until they get back to the office, they'll find another source for it.

Mobile learning, like social media, presents L&D departments with the risk of being sidelined on one hand, and on the other hand with the opportunity to expand its reach even further.

If it sounds unlike that mobile learning can be made a success, take heart from Rob Sharpe, Director of Sales Training and Recruiting at Black and Decker, who has a field sales team learning over their smart phones. "They absolutely love it!" he says. The reason: they can get key information fast, when they need it: "Just enough information, just in time," says Rob.

BUDGETS, VALUE AND ALIGNMENT

The issue of money has never been far away for the L&D department. In these tough times, though, budgets and value are more important than ever. Managers and executives are facing cuts, but also know that their people need specialist knowledge and skills to do the job. This means that learning is seen as important. It also means, though, that the L&D department is more under pressure than ever.

The challenge for L&D here is simple: are you focused on organisational impact? That is what your executives want. They don't want a list of the courses you provide. They don't want a complex ROI calculation for a few training interventions. They want to know that L&D is having a positive impact on their business priorities at a reasonable cost.

In other words, they want L&D to be aligned to the business.

How can learning technologies help? They can't help you with the most important thing – talking to managers and executives to discover which business priorities can be aligned to learning – but they can help with everything else. They can help with providing sufficient reports of the right data to prove that what you're doing is working. And – if used correctly – they help by not getting in the way.

'Not getting in the way' simply means that your learning technology should do its job. Fast. And with as little intervention from you as possible. Make sure that whatever technology you use it is as easy to integrate as possible, or – better still – already integrated and as fully functional as you need. And if you're already using widely available tools such as Microsoft SharePoint, make sure that your other tools can work seamlessly with them. The heads of the business are not interested in how the plumbing works in their headquarters. Neither are they interested in how much time you have spent patching different systems together, and nor should you be. You are not a plumber.

Learning and development's role is just that: learning and development. Stick to that, aligned to the business and using all available delivery mechanisms – including mobile and social media – and 2010 will be the year that L&D makes its mark in your organisation.

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