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Opinion Piece

How to leverage training to empower the creative leaders of tomorrow

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Abstract

Learning & development (L&D) is a dynamic field that is currently in a state of great transition. At present, organizations are faced with the task of managing the economic, technological and social shifts revolutionizing every facet of business. It's now more necessary than ever for L&D teams to look to the future and take tangible steps to prepare the new crop of leaders for the reality that awaits them. With a global, multi-generational workforce and new tools and technologies being developed all the time, it has never been more important to understand the forces driving these changes and to use them to create more effective and innovative programmes that will enable future leaders to excel.

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Management summary

To garner insights on the learning & development (L&D) environment of today and tomorrow, we asked leaders from a wide variety of industries to share their thoughts on L&D. Using an online questionnaire, which included multiple-choice, ranking and open-ended questions, we were able to gain a high-level strategic view of the most important trends and issues in L&D. Our pool of respondents represented all levels of managers at both small and large companies across a broad range of industries.

Perhaps, the single-most important finding we uncovered was that the majority of respondents foresee that learning will become the number-one competitive advantage for organizations (see Figure 1). Imagine for a moment the far-reaching implications of that prediction: What will it mean for an organization's performance? For its ability to attract top talent? What do organizations need to start doing today to ensure their viability in the future?

Over the past few years, the role of L&D practitioners within an organization has transitioned from 'education specialists' or 'career

L&D environment

Number-one competitive advantage

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Figure 1: Respondents believe that L&D will become the #1 competitive advantage for companies in the future

builders' to that of strategic business partners. This is an early indicator of the growing realization that effective learning programmes are incredible assets to the organizations that foster them. As L&D groups achieve higher profiles as strategic partners, we've seen them regain budgetary control over training programmes, something that had diminished during the recession.

Training the organization of the future

As L&D grows ever more important as a competitive advantage for organizations, HR leaders can't afford to be late to the game. Regardless of the state of your current L&D programme, there are tangible initiatives any organization can implement to get started on the right path.

Make soft skills mandatory

Soft skills are increasingly viewed as tangible assets that set top-performing companies apart from their peers. In a survey of more than 1,500 chief executive officers from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, IBM's 2010 Global CEO Study¹ found that today's CEOs view 'creativity' as the most important leadership quality for success.

Smart organizations will recognize this shift and act accordingly. One way to ensure that your workforce is well versed in creative leadership is to make soft skills training mandatory. Creative leaders are more agile, open to change and highly adaptable. They are better at finding new ways to approach and solve problems. Creative leaders depend less on 'the way things were', and are instead excited to imagine entirely new realities.

Integrate gaming principles

Game mechanics are simple elements (such as points, leader boards, badges and levels) that are used to encourage desired human behaviours. Think of Foursquare, the mobile application that awards users for 'check-ins' to locations such as bars and restaurants via their phones, earning points and unlocking badges. The true utility is a

'Creativity' important leadership quality

Game mechanics

Table 1: Potential gaming tactics to integrate into courses

Gaming tips to try:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Instead of going around the room with the usual 'Hi, my name is' icebreaker, start a course with a <i>quick competition</i>: everyone must find a partner in the room whose first name ends with the same letter as theirs. Can't find a match? Try middle or last names. The last few standing have just become volunteers for the next exercise 2. Create '<i>badges</i>' for employees who've completed all of their training requirements within the first 3 months of next year 3. Harness the power of <i>location-based check-ins</i> to encourage groups to visit one another, breaking down silos and sharing ideas 4. Assign <i>point values</i> to each activity within a session, and set levels with rewards for different point levels. Employees don't have to participate in every single activity (giving them choices, which enhances engagement) but the more they participate the more rewards they'll gain, redeemable for prizes at the end of the session (small gift cards, free lunches, etc.) 5. Grant a title to the <i>team leader</i> who successfully motivates his/her department to attend two elective courses

GPS-based city guide and friend finder; however, the game elements make it 'sticky' and keep new users engaged long enough to discover the app's value.²

Currently, companies of all stripes are thinking up ways to incorporate such elements into their offerings. We see this as a major opportunity for L&D to combat one of the biggest reasons training doesn't work: it's boring. Employees are busy. They don't have time to waste, and when deciding how to allocate their time sitting in a lecture hall and being talked at doesn't rank high on their priority list. Knowing how precious time is, course developers often try to pack as much information into sessions as possible, resulting in information overload and leaving no time for application of these new skills.

Spark engagement

Integrating gaming principles into courses sparks engagement, and creates opportunities for learning through applied knowledge, instead of lecture. Employees don't realize they're 'learning' until they've already engaged in the desired behaviour due to another motivator. It can be tough initially to demonstrate the value of training to an employee (eg, the ROI or career advancement that results from any particular course may be months or years down the road), but 'sticky' rewards and hooks provide enough up-front motivation to clear that hurdle and get started (see Table 1).

Must be relevant

For gaming to be a successful element of training, it must be relevant — not just gaming for gaming's sake. Even if it's very engaging, if an activity requires a lot of time and the payoff could have been delivered more efficiently, employees will reject it. In addition, if a game is too 'silly', it will turn employees off and they won't take the programme seriously. Used properly, gaming techniques are powerful tools that can enhance learning, but they must be incorporated strategically and not simply thrown into the mix as part of the latest training trend.

Encourage social learning where appropriate

Value of social learning

While many organizations use 'trendy technologies', such as Facebook, Yammer and wikis, the true value of social learning lies in

Collaboration

the potential for collaboration — not simply in knowledge sharing. When these technologies serve to foster collaboration, they become truly ‘social’. There is a wealth of value locked up inside your employees right now — knowledge that they could be passing on to their colleagues. Often, the most useful and important information is shared this way — as employees have already distilled it, and they loathe to waste their time or a colleague’s time with unnecessary details. What’s more, this type of interaction is developed within and tailored to your organization and it doesn’t get more custom than that.

**Peer
knowledge-sharing**

Another benefit to social media is that you won’t have to hire outside trainers. In fact, often, employees respond better to the instruction from the peers they consider knowledgeable, instead of from outsiders who they assume don’t understand their business realities. If you can tap into pass-it-on learning within your structure, you stand to reap huge rewards.

Target learning to the individual and enable self-direction**Individual value of
training programs**

Instead of churning out a one-size-fits-all solution for learning, provide individualized training programmes that resonate with each employee in a meaningful way. Individuals can choose from a selection of courses based on previous experience, current level, future goals and so on and determine the combination that’s most valuable to them. Not only will the training be more relevant, but the learners will be more interested because they had the opportunity to choose the courses for themselves.

‘Smart’ course

This movement has serious potential to reconfigure the idea of tailored training. ‘Smart’ courses use technology to assess a series of factors about an individual to generate courses suited precisely for him/her. Knewton, an online learning start-up, does this for admissions test prep by using an adaptive learning engine that tracks a student’s every interaction with the course and dynamically produces custom content, exercises, quizzes and the like (<http://www.knewton.com/>). Could your organization take cues from their innovation?

Make L&D part of the everyday**Micro-modules**

L&D needs to follow employees long after they have left the training session and must be something that they can integrate into their daily work-lives. One method for achieving this is to create micro-modules that administer and apply short doses of learning each day. Creating an environment of continuous learning puts progress back into the real world of functional tasks, instead of leaving it in the classroom as merely an idealized process.

McKinsey touches on this, as well in their recent *Quarterly*, where they write: ‘The most significant improvements lie in rethinking the mindsets that employees and their leaders bring to training, as well as the environment they come back to afterward ...’.³

Commitment to invest

Promise and deliver investment in your employees

In the end, one of the most important things an organization can do to prepare their leaders for tomorrow is to make a commitment to invest in their growth. The leading organizations of tomorrow will nurture their up and comers with the innovative techniques and tactics that reflect the real-world situations they will face in a flexible, current and prevalent way.

Make 'top-notch Learning & Development opportunities' a well-known benefit of working at your company. When talented individuals are looking for a place to contribute, they'll seek you out as you rise above your competitors.

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