

Learning Business Process Outsourcing and the Journey to High Performance

What's on the minds of learning executives today? An exclusive Accenture Learning research study has found that a single, common goal dominates the learning field today: leveraging the learning function to make a business impact and achieve high performance.

Corporations and governments alike have high expectations for their learning organizations today. As companies focus on growth and innovation, learning and other human capital capabilities are going to make a difference. Organizations want a learning organization that is aligned with overall business strategy; they want to see measurable returns on their learning investments; and they want learning executives who operate as general managers of a business unit. In this environment, it is no wonder that increasing numbers of organizations are turning to external firms such as Accenture Learning to collaborate with them to ensure their investment in learning provides tangible business results. Nearly half of the organizations in our research study, "The Rise of the High-Performance Learning Organization," either plan to or are currently outsourcing one or more of their learning functions to a comprehensive outsourcing company.

Learning business process outsourcing, or learning BPO, is on the rise. In just a few short years, the use of external, comprehensive service firms in the learning and development area to drive high performance has grown dramatically. Learning is now second only to the information technology function in terms of the prevalence of outsourcing relationships. Learning BPO can be a significant element of a talent-multiplier system—an essential ingredient of the performance anatomy of a high-performance business, as determined by other extensive research by Accenture into the characteristics of high performance. With a learning BPO strategy, organizations can achieve superior business results versus their peers per dollar of investment in their workforces.

For many organizations approaching learning BPO for the first time, however, questions may outnumber answers: ideal timelines, contractual issues, choice of collaborators, managing the relationship, deciding which processes to focus on first, working to drive business performance with a more effective learning strategy, and so on.

At Accenture Learning, we are pleased to bring together, in this Chief Learning Officer magazine supplement, some of today's leading thinkers and practitioners in the area of learning outsourcing, as well as major companies that have collaborated with Accenture Learning to achieve high performance through their learning collaboration strategies.

"Achieving Business Results with Learning Outsourcing" is based on exclusive Accenture research, implementation experience and the lessons from companies that have pioneered the creative and effective use of learning BPO. This supplement shares knowledge and insights along the spectrum of outsourcing strategies: from planning to implementation to managing the relationship to helping employees make the transition.

In the centerpiece article, "Breaking Through to High Performance: Unleashing the Power of Learning BPO," Hap Brakeley, president of Accenture Learning, discusses the potential of learning BPO to make a transformational impact on the performance of organizations today. Accenture Learning has pioneered a number of significant innovations in the learning field that are helping organizations from all industries, all over the world, achieve growth and high performance through a learning function that is cost-effective, flexible, aligned with the most pressing needs of the business and capable of producing impressive business results like improvements in the close rates for salespeople introducing a new product.

Because the outsourcing phenomenon was really born at a time of global economic recession, however, many organizations still mistakenly look at outsourcing as primarily a cost-reduction opportunity. It is much more than that. With a learning BPO strategy, organizations can leverage deep industry and technical experience, as well as innovative approaches to learning, to deliver a significant impact in measurable business terms: increased productivity, revenue growth and net income growth.

Achieving this transformational impact and using it to drive high performance may require overcoming areas of resistance within companies. Organizations have a dual responsibility here: to deal with that resistance openly and honestly, but also to clear up some false assumptions that may be fueling the resistance. In “Learning BPO: Overcoming the Misconceptions,” Doug Harward, founder of TrainingOutsourcing.com, deals with several of the most prevalent areas of misunderstanding. Will organizations lose control? Will learning executives damage their careers? Should companies try to clean up their business processes first, before pursuing outsourcing? In each case, the answer is, “No.”

In detailed case-study interviews, we focus on three market leaders—A.G. Edwards, Avaya and Sun Microsystems—that have collaborated with Accenture Learning in their quest for high performance. We are especially grateful to those executives for sharing their experiences. In each of these cases, the company has gone far beyond its initial expectations about outsourcing as primarily a cost-reduction strategy. These companies are now using learning BPO in a number of innovative ways to serve customers and business partners, in addition to their employees.

Avaya has been a true pioneer, outsourcing its entire learning function to Accenture Learning to meet the accelerated training needs the company had to enable rapid market uptake. As Avaya’s Suellen Roth noted, there’s much more to learning BPO than just transitioning learning administration functions to a third party. “The power is in using learning to transform the business proposition,” Roth said. She added that a pilot of Avaya’s sales certification program last year demonstrated that the company could increase the sales funnel by about 10 percent and improve its close rate by about five points.

A.G. Edwards looked to augment its existing training staff to assist with a critical business goal: reskilling the IT workforce as part of a more comprehensive IT transformation initiative. Trust and communication have been keys to the successful collaboration between the company and Accenture Learning, built on a commitment to delivering value on time and at speed.

Sun Microsystems has used learning outsourcing to help deliver vital customer education programs. One of the big successes for Sun has been ensuring the continued high quality of its customer training programs while managing the transition of these programs to Accenture Learning in a way that was totally transparent to the customers themselves. In the end, increasing numbers of companies are going to be asking the same question that Sun senior management did: “Why aren’t we, an industry leader in using business partners to drive our business strategy, also using this model for corporate learning?”

Finally, “The Personal Side of Outsourcing” shares the experiences of four people who transitioned from their companies to Accenture Learning as part of a learning BPO arrangement. What stands out in these stories is something too rarely noted: Organizations cannot reap the full value of learning outsourcing unless they support the people who are vital to the success of the strategy. Each of these four learning professionals was able to work through initial feelings of apprehension, supported by thoughtful and well-executed transition services from Accenture Learning. In the end, they have found fulfilling work, less prone to the budgeting ups and downs of internal corporate training departments. These stories are exemplary in that they show how the people of two organizations—a client and an outsourcing collaborator—can create a learning and development function that is not only more efficient, but which is also being used as an essential

engine for innovation, high performance and more energized career opportunities for people with a passion for learning.

In every industry, executives are discovering the power of external learning services and learning BPO to dramatically reduce the elapsed time to implement learning solutions that deliver measurable business value. Accenture Learning is helping organizations to become more efficient, but also helping them tap into a source of innovation and experience that is helping to propel them along their journey to high performance.

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