Learning Malpractice

Connect formal learning, support and social learning for success • BY CLARK QUINN

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Are you committing learning malpractice? Odds are your organization is failing your learners in a variety of predictable but inexcusable ways.

We know what good learning is. The ways that formal learning, performance support and social learning work best are well known. Unfortunately, they're not practiced reliably in what organizations deliver.

The reasons for bad learning aren't surprising but the overall outcome is. Old habits are hard to break and change is hard to sustain. The costs are real. When you invest in learning initiatives that follow old principles, you are throwing money away. Software training that precedes the launch by more than a day or two, typical content-and-a-quiz e-learning, the average training event, even social media initiatives in the wrong context, are time and money wasted. And that is a crime.

Our learning responsibility should be to support formal learning, performance support and social learning. Leaving any one to chance is a form of learning malpractice.

Our formal learning goals should be retention over time and transfer to all appropriate problems, and no inappropriate ones. What leads to effectiveness? Initial powerful awareness of the issue, models to guide performance, appropriately annotated examples and meaningful and sufficient practice. But rather than focus on those effective practices, we watch as the event approaches, leading to a lack of emotional engagement and a surplus of drill and kill. Lack of engagement obstructs learning, rote knowledge testing doesn't lead to transfer to real problems and insufficient practice means learning is gone by the time it's needed.

Performance support fares no better. We are concerned with providing the right tools, resources and information for performers to do their job well. Tools should be at hand, available when needed and easily found. Instead, we find a veritable maze of resources, like portals where resources are organized by providers, not by task. Search mechanisms are simplistic or opaque if they exist at all and there is no information architecture or management.

In this time of increasing change when answers are often irrelevant before they are formalized, people need to support each other. Innovation is a necessary key to survival and tight execution is only the cost of entry. Innovation is social and your worth is not just your skills but your network. Performers need to find undocumented answers, collaborators for emergent problems and engage in ongoing communication with colleagues and mentors.

Of course, what we see if social media are available at all is idiosyncratic deployment, policed with discouraging policies or employed in a context where contribution is risky. Culture eats strategy if your culture isn't supportive of engagement. You won't get the benefits of interaction.

Not taking responsibility for performance support and social learning is a mistake, but there's more. Learning components should be aligned with each other and with business strategy. Too often, initiatives are undertaken independently; job aids aren't developed in conjunction with formal training and vice versa. There's no connection between formal learning and social media infrastructure and no link between social media and support resources. Initiatives are not focused on real business objectives nor on capturing tangible and intangible metrics.

All told, investments are made in ways that stifle desired outcomes. We know better, we have the tools to do it right and the know-how and examples are out there.

We desperately need to stop perpetuating the status quo. The nuances between bad and well-produced design are subtle, yet the effects are anything but. We need to build good learning into instructional design, good information design into technology infrastructure and humanity into approaches using social media.

The problem is not technological. Buying a new tool will not solve it. We need to understand design processes, structure and culture first. Existing tools may be able to accomplish the tasks needed with appropriate new thinking.

Take the time to understand what has to change, put support for the change in place and follow through. The resulting processes likely will not be more costly or time consuming, but the outcomes will be far more valuable. Anything less would be, well, criminal. **CLO**