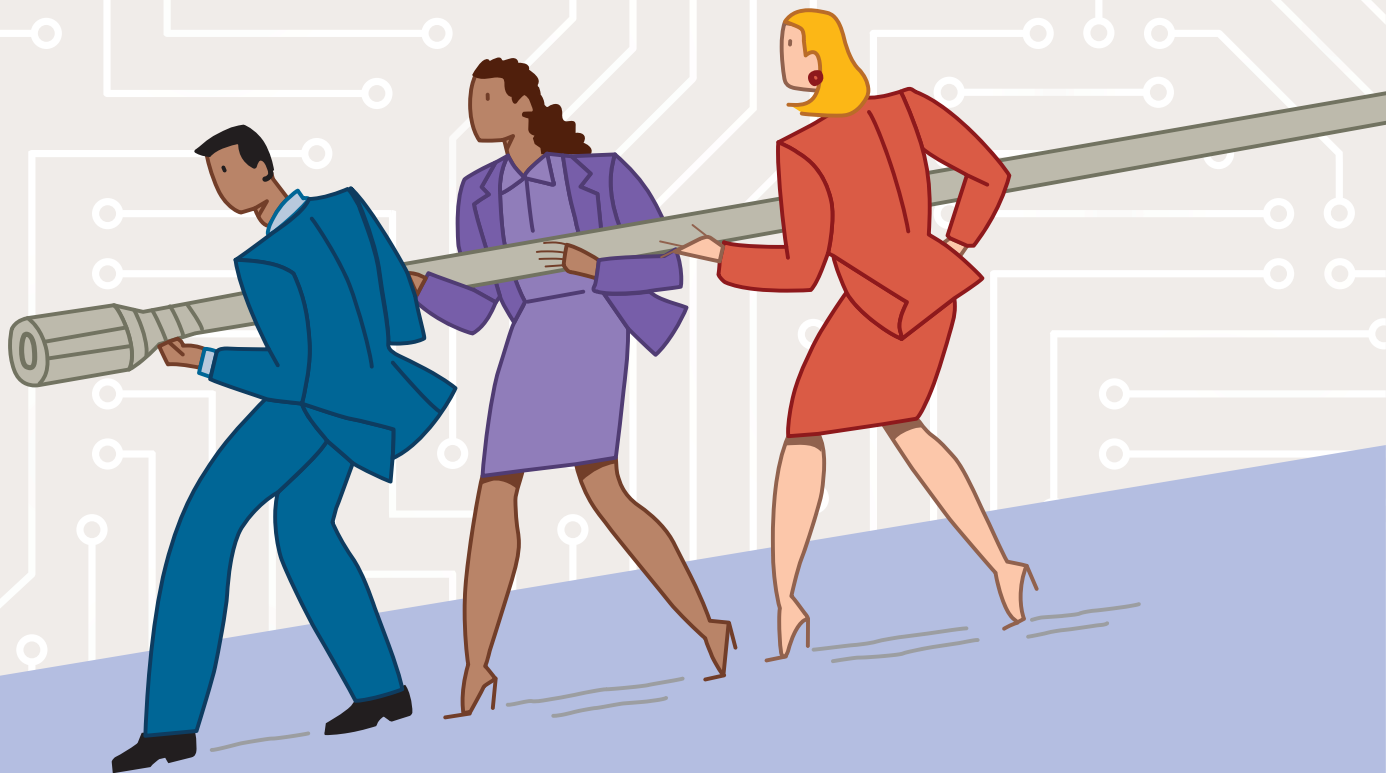


Leave Learning to **EMPLOYEES**

BY KATE EVERSON

Employees can share knowledge more rapidly and widely than ever before, which means learning leaders have a new challenge ahead — letting go.





In “Looney Tunes” shorts, no matter how many ditches he digs, anvils he drops or rockets he launches, Wile E. Coyote never catches the Road Runner. Meanwhile, he completely ignores the fact that his skill set, which includes painting tunnels that become real for the bird to run through, could be monetized so that he can buy as much road runner meat as he wants without breaking a sweat — or, every bone in his body.

This observation is precisely what drove education company Kaplan Inc.’s director of learning technology and development, JD Dillon, to reboot the organization’s internal programs. “People can walk right around us because they have access” to learning, he said. “We have to step back and let go of the concept that we own this function in our organizations, and ask where I can have an impact based on the people I have, skills I have and the context in which the work is done.”

Employees have more venues and methods that allow them to share their knowledge without the chief learning officer’s blessing. Learning executives have to not only shift their mindset, but also set the stage for constructive,

employee-made learning that can benefit an organization's culture and bottom line.

The process isn't without its challenges, but many of these come from CLOs who are unwilling to adapt to the increasingly *laissez faire*, or "allow to do," learning environment.

"The biggest mistake you can make when talking about social learning or content created by learners themselves is you want to control them," said Kasper Spiro, CEO of EasyGenerator, a Netherlands-based e-learning company. "You can't."

Developing an Ecosystem

Spiro said the CLO's duty is no longer monitoring a learning management system, but developing an ecosystem where employees have room to share their knowledge and explore what their co-workers know.

That's what Dillon did at Kaplan. When he was in a different learning role, he said he realized how difficult it was to find the information he needed to build the content his job required him to create. If he was having this problem from behind the scenes, what was happening to employees trying to access information while doing their jobs outside the learning department?

'No one's really hired to learn; people are hired to do their jobs.'

—JD Dillon, director of learning technology and development, Kaplan Inc.

This sparked a conversation within Kaplan's learning team. But before Dillon could get the team talking, he had to get it thinking differently. The process began by accepting that the learning function did not own learning. Employees no longer had to come to Dillon and his cohorts to improve their performance. The Road Runner learners had too many ways to elude their Wile E. Coyote-esque learning department.

With this realization came an understanding that employees shouldn't be chased at all. "No one's really hired to learn; people are hired to do their jobs," Dillon said. "While we're chasing all these people down, we could be helping people who want help."

So Dillon and his team created a Wikipedia-style space where employees could search and contribute information. It was safe, informal and required a low level of technological know-how so that everyone would be comfortable using it.

Then they got employees to participate, which was easy considering how many people were already sharing content they created with their teams, co-workers and managers. Soon, the site was filled with information from high performers, informal coaches and team leaders. Dillon's team asked them to share with the whole organization what they had already sent to 15 to 20 people.

What started as 500 pages grew over 3½ years into a 70,000-page wiki. As the program continues to mature, Dillon said there's more work to be done, such as integrating first-person screen capture abilities to better illustrate procedures and incorporating video.

But not all content has to be employee-created. Ian Gover, co-founder of development delivery organization Everwise, said CLOs also can populate the learning space with outside content, provided they tag it correctly.

The free market concept dictates the economy corrects itself without exterior influencers. Similarly, an employee-created and -curated learning system also can be employee-policed. If one worker puts out a how-to guide that doesn't work, chances are colleagues will speak up.

But no one can possibly sort all exterior content brought into an organization from the outside, Gover said. Instead, CLOs have to make sure employees understand what materials the learning organization endorses or trusts by tagging content with an approval rating or providing employees with guidelines on how to determine if information is in line with the organization.

"We're at a period right now where we can use data and technology to do all the sifting through all the learning assets, tag and categorize those appropriately, and make sure they get in front of the right people at the right time," he said. "We can make sure they know if it's something from a known and trusted source or the equivalent of a funny cat video on YouTube."

How Hands-off Helps

If executed properly, a free market approach to learning has benefits that appear in organizational performance, employee engagement and company culture.

Dillon said that although exact numbers were tough to tally, he knew of several occurrences when customer experience improved because Kaplan employees had the information to boost their own performance. Employee engagement also has increased within the company.

"Employees are tired of hearing from their bosses what they should be learning and what they should be getting better at," said Joe Carella, managing director for executive education at the University of Arizona. "They want to be more empowered. If I learn what I

want to learn, it's much more likely that I'll be motivated and therefore create greater impact."

Carella said giving employees the chance to seek and create their own learning materials with less control is also a way to bring fresh perspectives into an organization. Not that employees aren't already doing

Big Brother? No, Big Data

Netflix knows more about its customers than they know about themselves. Every bit of data it collects on an account — what the user watched, rated, binge-viewed, stopped five minutes in, and what others like that user watched and liked — goes into creating a profile that can make eerily accurate recommendations that keep consumers coming back for more.

Now apply that to a learning leader's job. Chief learning officers who monitor rather than control employee-created content can devote more time to collecting data from informal learning, a tactic once thought impossible because of informal learning's improvisational nature.

"If all that data is captured, it gives us the ability to become like Google," said Kasper Spiro, CEO of e-learning company EasyGenerator. "We can analyze all that data to build a profile, see what they want to learn and act on that."

That profile can come from individual learning paths, monitoring what employees want based on what they search and where the results take them, to map out what groups of employees in the same functions or situations seek out.

For example, first-year senior managers not only get instructor-led training from a centralized authority but also can turn to peers who are new to the role and those who have gone through the transition before. They also need access to people who have expertise in the situations they deal with as they experience them.

"Use technology and big data to connect individuals to the knowledge assets at the right time in the right situation," said Ian Gover, co-founder of learning company Everwise. "They'll have less of a challenge separating signals from noise."

In the end, however, learners need to control their own data. Spiro said they should be allowed to determine what elements to share with the company, much as users have asked Google for the opportunity to decide which searches are recorded and which ones are anonymous.

"On the one hand, you can track learning results," he said. "On the other hand, it gives you a Big Brother opportunity, but you can use it in a good way."

—Kate Everson

that without a learning leaders' knowledge.

Even if CLOs monitor learning closely, workers will still send around links to TED Talks and *Harvard Business Review* think pieces — as Carella said, it's better to encourage and monitor informal learning to drive conversations than to find out an organization's development function has been hijacked, and potentially derailed, by viral content.

Meeting the Challenge

Not everyone is on the same page with employee-created or shared content.

Laura Smith, president of Laura Smith, PhD Associates, an organizational change and learning consulting firm, said she tries to minimize the use of employee-made learning materials in her clients' programs. "The content is limited by the proficiency of the employee who created it. It may only help employees at the same level with similar functions."

Smith said the biggest problem with employee-created content is it doesn't always align with the corporate learning strategy, which often dictates learning as a top-down endeavor. Top-down structure also makes it important to get executive buy-in, which can be difficult to clinch. This is a culture change, two words that can frighten C-suite members set in the old ways that got them to the top.

Those executives can include CLOs. Learning leadership "is a continuous exercise, and to think you're going to have this set in stone and codified is not where it's at," Carella said. "Learners are coming up with new sources, new ideas all the time, so you have to have stamina to keep up with the learning experience. As the leader, that has to be your first job and not an afterthought."

Carella said learning leaders also have to be clear in what employees need to learn and what skills or experiences are indispensable or negotiable. Once those expectations are set, CLOs have to make sure the channels hosting employee-created or shared materials are congruent.

But Dillon sees it differently — this push for employee-driven learning signals a change in the overall CLO job description.

"At the end of the day, I as the learning professional am not going to change how the business runs," Dillon said. "I can help influence it, but management owns the day, employees own their day. They're going to do what they need to do to accomplish their objectives, so how do I fit into that and help shift that if I want to try to nuance it, as opposed to ask them to meet me where I'm comfortable?" **CLO**

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