HOW TO BE A LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

BY JEFF GRAY AND BEN ORTLIP

In 1990, Peter Senge introduced us to the concept of the learning organization. Ever since, it has been the holy grail for CLOs and HR managers. Evangelists for the concept have been busily authoring leadership models, installing turbocharged LMSs, investing in knowledge management systems, building repositories for best practices, tweaking performance management systems, and fostering cultures of trust.

But Senge never warned us about the Internet. Or mobile devices. Or how Flash won't work on an iPad. He also didn't mention that vast portions of our human capital would begin drifting in and out of contact as they dog-paddled their way through a sea of new technologies in a workplace gone virtual. Somehow, the tools designed to link us together haven't quite patched the personnel holes that have sprung up since setting sail from the harbor of the traditional workplace. Many of the companies that were role models for learning and development in the 1990s have struggled. And the number of truly effective learning organizations has grown shockingly small. But lately, they're making a comeback.

The companies that are leading the resurgence have successfully integrated the latest technologies into their internal communication framework. In the process, they've proactively opened up the diverse channels that enable information to flow within the company. Here are six principles that outline the process.

RE-THINK THE SCREEN.

In the beginning, people came to the screen. Therefore, whatever got published in an email, a website, or a corporate video went directly into the consciousness of the worker, either through the ever-present desktop computer or the television in the front of the

The Six Laws of E-Culture

meeting room. Then along came mobility. Instead of going to a screen, the screen now fits in your pocket or slides in that little outer pouch of your carry-on bag. To put it bluntly: If you build it they *won't* come. Today as much as 90 percent of digital consumption takes place over a four-inch screen. It's like rolling up a 50-page PDF and jamming it into a tiny square hole. It's enough to deter the best employee from pursuing continuous improvement or going blind trying.

02

KNOW THY WORKER. In marketing speak, each person in the organization is like a customer. These

days, they no longer watch prime-time TV or listen to the radio. Our job is to find out where they live and reconnect them with our message. We work with several franchise groups whose people are as role-diverse as they are geographically dispersed. And yet, they're able to maintain a vibrant centralized culture. It all starts with a mini-ethnography of the entire company. We find out where they live, how long they commute, what technologies they embrace, and where they're most likely to find and share information. That enables us to design a channel mix and a media mix that meets users where they are. Until you understand their *natural* behaviors, you can't influence *learned* behaviors.

03

CONTENT IS KING, BUT INFRASTRUCTURE IS GOD.
Only when information is accessible do ideas become adoptable. If your people can't get to it, then it might as well not exist. Accessibility is an expectation today. But in the corporate arena, few global companies are on par with the accessibility their workers experience in their personal lives. In the U.S., more than a quarter of all mobile Web users are mobile-only. Accessibility and mobile are converging quickly into one common idea. The worldwide culture is expecting to use its mobile device to connect to information.

We're not saying everything is going mobile. We're saying everything is going ubiquitous. In the future, important content will be broadcast with redundancies that ensure all flavors of ice cream are available when requested. Just as learning styles impact a person's engagement with content, *device styles* impact his or her access to the content in the first place. We get the tragic phone call almost once a month. The company did an exhaustive search for the right platform. It designed a flawless support system for the launch, populated with the best courseware in the business. But it's a ghost town. In most cases, those people didn't think through device management and the modality changes that would be required for effective learning across each user type. You can design the coolest product in the world, but it doesn't amount to much if you can't ship it.

DON'T BRING A KNIFE TO A GUNFIGHT.

04

Content that's killer in one environment can be lifeless in another. It all depends on the "context." With the majority of the learning being driven by context (at work, at home, in the field), technology can be leveraged to allow people to stay in their workflow while providing them with just the right support resources. Things like performance support, formal learning, social learning, mentoring, networks, communities and tools can be optimized for the context in which they are called up. This allows learning to happen faster, more effectively, and more efficiently. It also allows for learning to be more user-focused with the characteristic of pulling information and knowledge rather than a federated push model that has been in place traditionally.

GIVE ME THE ANSWER, NOT YOUR LIFE STORY.

05

The need for information today is surpassed only by the need for relevance. Relevance is the difference between calling up data and calling up *pertinent* data. Just because you're looking for best practices doesn't mean you've got

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time to read 50,000 of them. Technology can use basic information about a user to filter appropriate content and present it in a very timely manner. Connectivity, activity patterns, historical data, outside influences,

taxonomies and information forensics allow us to customize and automate queries that keep people functioning at the speed of business.

KEEP IT REAL.

06

Finally, information must be authentic and accurate. This means a couple of things. First, it must be current — or it must be retired. Outdated content erodes credibility and user confidence. Second, authorship matters. A suggestion posted by a fellow practitioner may be perceived as helpful, whereas the same idea posted by a corporate voice can be seen as manipulative.

Technology represents a whole new discipline for learning organizations. And a new advantage for those who master it first. **!**

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