

Learning Content Strategy

How the next generation strategy should be

By Chris Osborn

You might call it a “perfect storm.” Others might use a different term, but in the end, the term is immaterial. We all have to deal with the broad social influences converging on our workplaces affecting employee learning and development. In some respects, employee learning and development has never been more important given this current climate some commentators describe as “VUCA,” which means volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

For generations, employee training programs had a clear focus. We helped employees improve skills to solve known problems. However, something foundational has changed. In today’s VUCA world, we need a different focus for employee development. We need a different approach to employee development that enables employees to learn new skills and help our organizations become more agile and adaptable.

A critical element of effective employee learning in such a world will be a next generation of learning content strategies. Traditional approaches to learning content are perfectly suited to an environment where improving skills to solve known problems is the strategic objective. However, an analysis conducted by LinkedIn of some of the most “in demand” jobs reveals something that tells an interesting story.

After looking at 259 million LinkedIn profiles, eight of the 10 job titles with the fastest growth since 2008 are:

- IOS Developer: 142x growth
- Android Developer: 199x
- Social Media Intern: 174x
- Data Scientist: 30x
- UI/UX Designer: 22x
- Big Data Architect: 3,360x
- Cloud Services Specialist: 17x
- Digital Marketing Specialist: 17x

The other two were both fitness related.

So today’s employee learning and development initiatives need to shift from preparing employees to solve known problems, to preparing employees to fill jobs that don’t exist yet. How do we do that? We start with content. No learning or development can occur unless we deliver content to employees, but we have to rethink learning content if we are going to shift the strategic focus of employee development to reflect the broad influences of demographics, technology, behaviors, and future needs of both employees and the organization.

Three Elements of a Next-Generation of Learning Content Strategy

Content Definition: Let’s start with a new definition of content. Content can be anything that answers a question an employee might ask that can improve or influence performance.

Curation: Content needs a structure to be effective. Curation is about providing context so the content employees need is usable, accessible, and can be applied in the moment of need.

Delivery: Employee performance cannot be improved without content, but the content must be delivered to employees to be effective. The delivery of content, therefore, must be a key part of any effective content strategy and must take into account how employees access information.

Content

A traditional approach to defining content would restrict content to learning objects generated by the organization, usually the training or HR department, and delivered to employees via formal training, either a classroom or an online course. Other content might be from third-party vendors such as online courses or seminars conducted by

outside subject matter experts. At the core of a traditional definition of content is the idea that content is what the organization deems it to be.

That’s fine, as far as it goes. But learning professionals have known for quite some time that employees learn most of what they need to know to effectively perform their jobs informally or socially. The 70-20-10 or 80-20 theories of social and informal learning long have dominated thought leadership in the industry, but traditional learning content strategies did not adequately address this reality. In fact, many traditional learning professionals tried to “formalize informal learning.”

A far more effective approach is to simply accept reality. Social and informal learning are real, and our employees already are engaged. Additionally, employees already are accessing content on their own, when they need it, and on their own mobile devices, too. To employees, it doesn’t matter where useful content originates. If it’s useful, it’s... well, it’s used. To employees, learning content is anything that helps them in the moment of need. This practical, real-world approach to learning content is exactly what we as learning professionals have to adopt, and we have to adapt our content strategies accordingly.

Curation

This leads us directly to consider the second key element of the next generation of learning content strategies — content curation. If we accept that content can be anything, then we also have to accept that this definition creates risks and can be a little scary. What if employees access content that is inaccurate or not vetted by subject matter experts? This is why we have to have an effective strategic plan in place to organize content and provide a context for employees.

Guiding our employees to great content will become an important role for learning professionals in this evolving environment. Curation of content, therefore, is crucial. If content is king, context is queen.

Delivery

The third and final element of the next generation of content strategies is delivery. Since we’ve broadened the definition of content, and recognized that content is king and context is queen, it follows that we must have a platform to deliver this organized and collected content to employees. What’s happening in the market in this specific area is amazing. The technology advances in social sharing and social media-inspired learning platforms and mobile delivery continue unabated. As we see more and more employees using tablets and smart phones for work-related purposes, it’s important that our learning content strategies give employees something useful that delivers content straight to those devices. Our employees are already there.

The real question we have to ask ourselves is, “Why aren’t we?” Mobile delivery of effectively organized content will be effective and important for the next generation of learning organizations, and will be central to the next generation of learning content strategies. **TEL**

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