TEN HABITS OF
HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEARNING PROFESSIONALS

Stephen Walsh shares key trends from the *Learning Insight Report 2012* and creates a 2013 e-learning To-Do List based on the findings.

E-Learning Age and Kineo have just released the latest annual e-learning insights report which focuses on sharing good practice. The research was conducted in over 30 in-depth interviews with learning professionals from organisations including BP, BT, Vodafone, Tesco, British Army, Bupa, Sony and British Airways.

The financial crisis has been painful – but it may have helped L&D. According to e-learning expert Clive Shepherd, it has forced the industry out of the cosy niches occupied for too many years. "We are becoming more accountable, more innovative and more connected to the businesses in which we work. We are gaining respect for delivering services that make a difference. Our clients don't care whether or not we use technology they just care about outcomes. E-learning is dead. Long live learning."

CHANGING BY DEGREES

Our research appears to show that learning and development departments are facing many challenges including business pressures, technology changes and social changes. These pressures have not led to one single dramatic change in way L&D departments operate. Rather they have led to a series of smaller, incremental adjustments. Taken collectively, these subtle changes are reshaping the landscape and what is emerging is a distinctive learning and technology strategy or architecture.

Also apparent is an increasing recognition of the value that learning technology delivers to businesses. Consequently, there is increased confidence amongst learning technology professionals, despite – or perhaps because of – economic challenges. One L&D director commented: "There has never been a better time for learning technology to demonstrate the value it can deliver to businesses."

The research identified ten key functions that successful L&D departments are doing differently – Ten Habits of Highly Effective Learning Professionals.

1 Focus on improving performance

The good news is that while many budgets are being cut, businesses recognise the value learning technology can play in improving performance. Every project has a clear focus on how it will lead to improved business performance; and just-in-time learning is being integrated into the tasks that people perform. There is increasing investment in the development of learning-on-demand and as performance support.

2 Support informal learning

L&D is playing a key role in supporting informal learning through the curation of content including the disaggregation and delivery of resources. L&D departments are helping learners find what they need when they need it. This involves providing resources rather than courses, in a format that is easily browsed or searched. People are time poor and want freedom to decide what they need. Resources to support informal learning tend to be short, often quickly produced, often with a short shelf life. They come in multiple formats from videos to checklists.

3 Design new formal courses

Despite much talk and genuine interest in exploring alternative methods, the development and delivery of formal courses is still one of the important tasks undertaken by L&D departments. There is a key requirement for structured courses with assessments in areas such as compliance. These formal courses are increasingly blended with a greater use of learning technology to include self-paced e-learning courses, webinars and technology in the classroom. Webinar use is growing substantially.

4 Prepare for multi-device learning solutions

Online learning once meant delivery to desktops or laptops. Now, increasingly, delivery needs to be via multiple devices including tablets and smart phones. Learning professionals are exploring multi-device responsive html designs that adapt intelligently and use less Flash.

Is Flash dead, and are apps dying? Several interviewees commented on the app bubble being about to burst. The future seems to be towards one single version led by web trends towards responsive HTML design.

It's likely that the term 'mobile learning' will disappear too – since nearly all devices can be made mobile (a laptop on a train is mobile), and since much of the usage of 'mobile' devices such as smartphone and tablets, is done on the couch – which is about as immobile as you can get. We are keen to lose the 'e' from e-learning for some time, and there's a feeling that the 'm' can go with it.

5 Rethink e-learning design

This is partly about designing for multi devices and partly about designing performance support objects. Even on desktops e-learning is shorter, more resource based, more task based, less linear, more creative and less on-brand. As a general rule people want bite-sized, user led e-learning for the YouTube generation.

Your e-learning To-Do List for 2013

Where do the results of the research leave you as the L&D professional? You are skilled enough to set your own priorities, but here is your starter-for-10 (well, 11, actually) to get the ball rolling.

1. Develop a business case for your key initiatives, and ask vendors to help you figure out how you'll measure success – they're motivated to support you on this.

2. Ask yourself whether you could design your next learning programme to be used on the job, where they want it – how would it change your approach?

3. Look at how your learners are accessing content – could you strip out key resources from some of your content and package them differently? Could you pilot this?

4. If you're not using webinars or online tutors or communities to support your formal e-learning courses, run a pilot to see if there's an appetite for these methods.

5. Look again at the devices your learners are using and at how you're going to make mobile work in your organisation. Think beyond multiple versions and native apps if they're putting mobile learning out of budget reach.

6. Consider the influence of web design on your approach to e-learning design. Encourage your teams, vendors and colleagues to move beyond the back/next constraints.

7. If you are not already segregating your e-learning into levels, consider a model where you can define the levels that you need; and use it as reference when engaging with vendors and internal clients.

8. Look beyond the stricture of the course to design full learning programmes and experiences – ask learners what would enhance those experiences for them.

9. Consider what you could do to make your line managers and coaches feel supported and, in turn, supportive of learning initiatives. Why not kick-off an initiative with them as your target audience?

10. Ask yourself what would happen if you didn't assess a specific learning intervention, but just recorded its completion?

11. Measure something, and share the results. We all benefit from more examples of learning technology making a difference. Why not lead by example and share your successes?

"We need to assess learning less, what matters is how well they do the job. People may pass tests but it doesn't change behaviour in the workplace"

6 Provide experiential learning

For many organisations, learning on the job is fundamental and the learning should be designed to support this through workbooks, performance support and coaching.

7 Support line managers

With the growth in informal learning, experiential learning and performance support, coaching is growing in importance. Frequently, line managers play a critical role as coaches and in staff development more widely.

8 Develop appropriate assessment

While assessment is still critical in many formal learning courses, there is less need for it in areas such as informal learning and performance support. Where evaluation is required, it is often built-in as part of the learning and as on-the-job assessment.

9 Create seamless learner journeys

The new architecture needs to provide learners with fast access to learning. Resources are increasingly accessed through role-based portals, and the ability to search through peer-rated content. Portals are also personalised and provide content based on an individual's role or experience. Resources are increasingly available on any device. Recent pilot work by City & Guilds and Kineo is a great example of this.

10 Evaluate the outcomes

Successful learning departments are preparing a business case for projects and then evaluating the impact on performance. They ensure that the learning is followed up with reminders and make certain it is transferred to the workplace. L&D departments can increasingly demonstrate the value that learning technology can deliver.

The good news is that organisations increasingly recognise the value that learning technology can deliver and is delivering. The reputation and influence of learning departments is growing and being backed by investment. The majority of learning technology professionals interviewed felt confident about the future and about meeting the challenges ahead.

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