

WHAT BUSINESS ARE WE IN, **TRAINING OR LEARNING?**



A decade ago the job we did was called training and we worked in a training department. Then the name changed to learning and development. But did the job really change? More importantly, did our customer's expectations change? Barry Sampson deliberates.

At the last Learning Technologies conference in January, I took part in a debate with e-learning and performance experts, Andy Wooller and Charles Jennings. Learning management was the subject and the topic: 'Should we be attempting to manage learning?'

The debate was good natured and although each presenter put forward a different viewpoint, there was unanimous and speedy agreement on one aspect; we can't manage learning, only learners themselves can do that.

Despite the consensus, we all felt there was still something worth debating. So if the argument wasn't about the management of learning, what was it about? The answer is straightforward. You can't manage learning but you can, and often should, manage training. In my view, we were just looking at this the wrong way.

A quick show of hands at the end confirmed that around three-quarters of the audience indicated it was training, not learning, that their internal customers expect.

Charles Jennings showed some interesting research from the Corporate Leadership Council's *L&D Team Capabilities Survey* in 2011. According to this report, when asked if they were satisfied with the performance of L&D, only 23% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. A similar figure, just 24%, thought that L&D was critical to business outcomes.

SEMANTICS

Overall, a little more than half of respondents would actively discourage their

colleagues from working with L&D. Scary stuff. We need to be cautious not to jump to any unsubstantiated conclusions, as these high level results don't give us any insight into the reasoning behind the answer. However, they do clearly indicate that there's a serious disconnect between what the business wants from L&D and what they believe they're getting.

Bridging that gap is going to take some work and it's critical that we're successful. Considering just how unsatisfying the experience seems to be, I don't think it's over-dramatising it to say that the continued existence of L&D is at stake. If you are looking to reduce costs, it is an easy decision to get rid of the department that is avoided by more than half of managers, and which three-quarters say makes no critical contribution to business results.

There can be no excuses here. We can't tell ourselves that the business just doesn't understand what we do and then carry on as before. Even if this is true, which to some small extent may be the case, we're not delivering to the standard being set for us. Could the gap in performance be a simple semantic difference? Do we think we're responsible for learning while the business thinks we're responsible for training? What does this even mean? Are we (and they) clear about what the difference actually is?

If we go back to the point where training started to become L&D, what were the perceived benefits? It was suggested that the term 'training' implied an outside-in approach, with the learner an empty vessel to be filled with appropriate knowledge. 'Learning' on the other hand, implied an inside-out approach, developing the learner's capabilities and strengths so that they could reach their maximum potential.

A COURSE BY ANY OTHER NAME

Training is focussed on the needs of the organisation whereas learning is focussed on the needs of the individual. The aim behind the name change is worthy, and one we should continue to strive for. However, the seeds of the problem lie in this move from training to learning, where we and the business started to lose sight of each other.

The problem was that training had become a dirty word. As L&D practitioners we became disdainful of what had previously been the mainstay of our existence. Fast forward to the present day and we have a more sophisticated perception, a greater understanding of how people learn, and an unprecedented array of tools and technologies to help. But we still treat training as a poor second cousin (that's when we can bring ourselves to say 'training' rather than 'the t-word'). This is a

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great shame when so much of what we do could best be described as training.

There is now plenty of research confirming that most of what we learn in the workplace happens informally. The figures vary but they're usually in the region of 50-80%. That gives us some nice quotable figures such as: around 80% of learning is informal and the remaining 20% is formal. These figures aren't fixed and they vary from organisation to organisation but they're well accepted and sufficient as a guideline.

EIGHTY TWENTY SPLIT

We're also told that although we have the '80% informal/20% formal' split, we spend 80% of our budget on formal learning and 20% or less on informal. Why is that? Because it's exactly what we should be doing. Remember, the 80% informal is happening on the job, without the support or interference of L&D, and quite often without the learner even realising that they're learning. They're just getting on and doing their job.

Informal learning is doing quite nicely and it largely doesn't need our help. Contrary to what some seem to think, it's been this way for a very long time; long before social media, mobile devices or the internet. The reason that we focus our budgets and our efforts on the formal 20% is because that's where it is needed; by the business and more importantly, by the learners.

This slightly more formalised (excuse the pun) definition is based on work published by David A Cofer in 2000 in the *Practice Application Briefing on Informal Workplace Learning*. It is a characteristic of formal learning that the training or learning department sets the objectives, while in informal learning the learner sets the objectives.

Sound familiar? Remember, training is focussed on the needs of the organisation and learning is focussed on the needs of the individual. The informal learning is happening in the workplace as and when the learner needs it. The rest is what the business needs us to design, deliver and, to some extent, manage. The business needs this because:

IT IS TOO IMPORTANT

Some things are too important to leave to chance, such as compliance and regulatory

subjects; things that are being done to ensure legal compliance and to mitigate risk. It also includes things that are critical to the way things are done in the business, for example: customer service standards, reporting procedures or key-holder responsibilities – in essence things that have to be done the 'right way'.

NOVICES NEED SUPPORT

Every day is someone's first day, whether their first day in the organisation, in a new role or just the first time they do something. It is tempting to assume that everyone knows how to go about finding the information they need and where they should look for it. But it is easy to forget what it's like to be a novice; someone who lacks the necessary knowledge, skills and organisational context.

This is a serious issue. If you look at attrition rates of newly recruited managers, by far the most commonly stated reason for leaving is some variation on "I didn't know what to do, or how to do it". They want and need some structure. They need some degree of training.

THE BUSINESS REQUIRES EFFICIENCY

Even if it is possible for someone to explore and discover these things for themselves, it is often much quicker if their learning is given some formal objective and structure. Reducing the time to competency is a very reasonable business goal. We can describe it any way we like, but to most it looks a lot like training.

Should we return to the days of endless face-to-face courses and tedious page turning e-learning? Heaven forbid. However we should recognise that the 20% isn't just important, it's most of what we do. And we should make sure that what we do is well designed and aligned to organisational objectives. We should understand that compliance training may not excite us, but it's a significant part of the real and perceived value we add to the organisation.

And maybe, if we use the word 'training' with some sense of pride, we might be able to deliver something better than before.

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