

Building Strategic Learning Linkages: Mapping & Measuring Your Learning Strategy



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Believe it or not, but workplace learning is now on senior management's "radar." But it is not about learning requirements; it is about achieving well-defined strategic objectives and performance improvement. This is not to say that the attention workplace learning is receiving is not well-deserved, but it does raise the question about how learning can contribute to these strategic objectives.

Workplace learning's role is growing, but from management's perspective it is only a means to an end. Management has high expectations for learning considering

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they are under pressure to achieve specific performance results in demanding business environments.

There are some interesting factors focusing management's attention on workplace learning. These factors include evolving economic conditions, technological factors, social needs, competitiveness, and managing internal change. These factors comprise management's desperate attempt to differentiate and survive in a competitive marketplace.



ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGY IS AT THE CENTER OF EVERY BUSINESS PROCESS

While workplace learning is part of the overall solution, talk to any business professional about it and you may as well be speaking to them in a foreign language. From workplace learning’s perspective, it’s about, “We’ve arrived”! But learning professionals must now ask, “How do we stay?” Collectively, learning professionals worked hard to achieve this status but it comes with fundamental management concerns — they expect workplace learning to tangibly contribute to organizational objectives.

How Organizations Create and Add Value

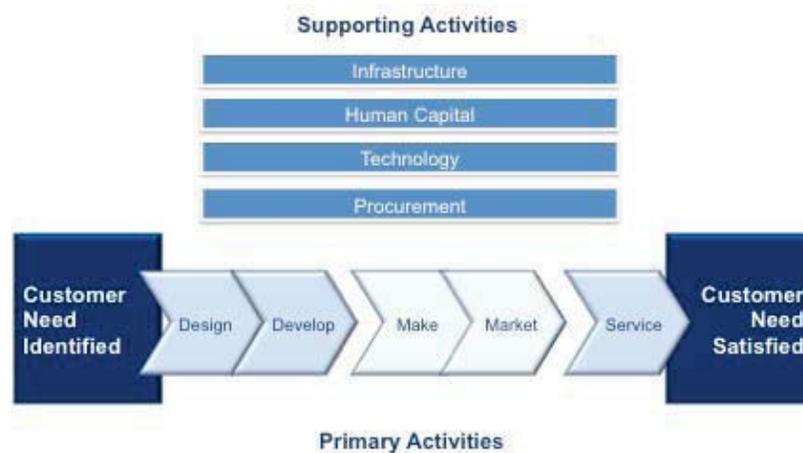
Every company creates value through a systematic process called the “value chain” (Figure 1), attributed to Michael Porter in his influential 1985 book “Competitive Advantage.” Essentially, a value chain is a series of business activities to meet customer needs. These business activities are common to every organization and how well they are performed determines overall profitability and the ability to meet strategic expectations. For management, the value chain is less about cost and more about how the internal process transforms raw inputs into the products or services customers seek.

For example, a manufacturing company creates value transforming raw materials into a product, whereas a retail business brings together various products and offering value to a targeted group of customers.

The value chain differentiates business process between primary and supporting activities. These are relevant distinctions for learning professionals as it provides insight into the role the learning

function is expected to hold within a strategic context.

**Figure 1:
Value Chain Diagram Example**



Primary business activities describe the organization’s value-creating activities ranging from acquiring basic raw material to delivering the product customers. This is noteworthy since strategic linkages become very apparent (Figure 2) simplifying the identification of operational activities that require workplace learning support.

**Figure 2:
Workplace Learning’s Relationship to the Value Chain**

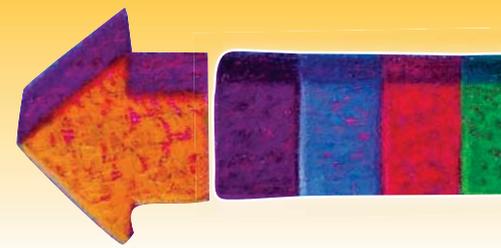


The value chain’s supporting activities, on the other hand, enables primary activities if the organization is to function effectively (Figure 1). Regrettably, learning professionals are passive and act only when “primary activity managers” must resolve specific employee concerns.

Organizational strategy is at the center of every business process and defines its existence through a mission statement. Strategy is how to achieve the mission, whereas the value chain is the systematic process of activities to achieve the mission. Learning professionals struggle with these concepts, but must recognize that the mission defines how to strategically align workplace learning.

Do this: Read your organization’s mission statement and ask, “How does learning contribute to achieving this objective?” Your response will provide direction on where to focus your efforts, but it won’t identify specific primary activities to address. To identify specific areas, review the organization’s performance management framework (strategy map and Balanced Scorecard). Through defined performance objectives, senior management can focus their efforts, and the efforts of employees, on the value chain activities that create the most value and align with the mission. Eventually, it allows workplace learning to address the most relevant employee performance concerns and align with management’s performance expectations.

LEARNING PROFESSIONALS MUST DEMONSTRATE HOW THEIR EFFORTS ALIGN WITH STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES



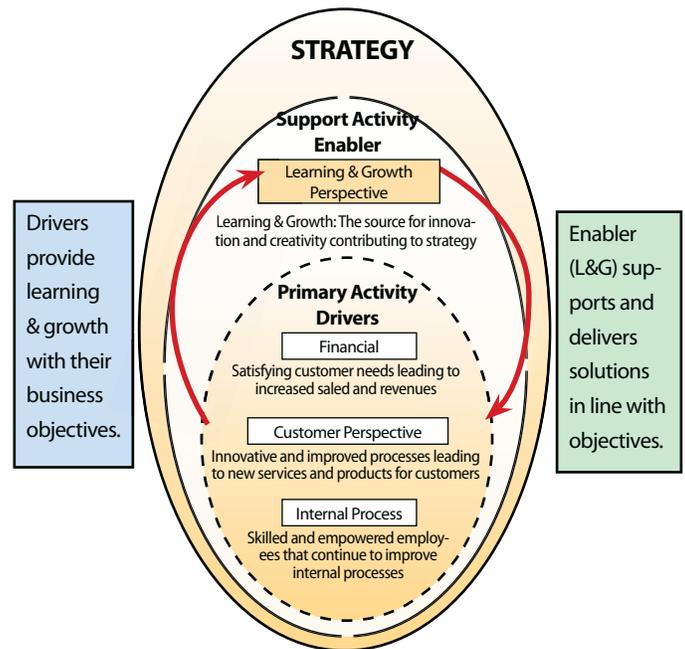
Workplace Learning's Relationship with Strategy

Organizations must quickly adapt to evolving market conditions while balancing the need to meet specific strategic objectives. Through a performance management framework organizations are able to meet both objectives. An effective performance framework includes four key business areas, referred to as perspectives, which are: financial performance, customer performance, internal process performance, and the one most relevant for learning professionals, learning and growth performance.

The first three perspectives are considered the value chain's primary activities. The last perspective, "learning and growth," is the one that confounds management and learning professionals equally.

Dr. Robert Kaplan and Dr. David Norton introduced the concept of "learning" while developing their performance management frameworks (Strategy Maps and Balanced Scorecard). In these frameworks, learning is an essential enabling perspective providing primary activities with a sustainable competitive advantage. Figure 3 illustrates learning and growth's relevance and relationship within a performance management framework.

Figure 3:
Learning & Growth Enabling Strategic Drivers



5 Steps to Strategically Map Workplace Learning

Many learning professionals believe business and strategic concepts are complicated. Let me share a secret with you ... it isn't. Senior management likes to keep things simple, but recognize that they must quickly adapt to market and economic changes.

Senior management realizes that competitiveness and long-term sustainability is through employees that are adaptable and possess relevant job skills. Workplace learning has an opportunity to play a prominent role, but only if it is able to respond and align to strategic objectives.

Here are five straightforward steps that you can initiate to ensure workplace learning takes a proactive role:

- **Analyze the mission and vision statement.** These statements provide insight into critical areas requiring the support from workplace learning. Identify where workplace learning will have impact.
- **Review your organization's performance framework.** The framework outlines value-added activities, relationships among the primary perspectives, and how performance objectives cascade throughout the organization.
- **Build partnerships within the organization.** Learn about the performance expectations of primary activities. Work closely with the stakeholders and treat their business as your own.
- **Align with "partners" performance metrics.** Business unit managers are under tremendous pressure to meet specific performance objectives. Gain buy-in from your business partner ensuring that your learning solution aligns with their performance metrics.
- **Brush up on your knowledge of business, strategy and performance.** Focus your professional development to help you effectively work and communicate with various levels of management. Always explain how your learning initiatives deliver results in business and strategic terms.



ORGANIZATIONS MUST QUICKLY ADAPT TO EVOLVING MARKET CONDITIONS

Making Connections: Strategically Mapping Workplace Learning

A performance framework's primary perspectives work together to achieve focused and tangible objectives along with other relevant performance metrics. But for many it is often a mystery how workplace learning can tangibly connect with primary business activities within a performance framework.

Management utilizes a performance-mapping tool called a strategy map to make tangible connections among business activities. A strategy map is a visual framework of cause-and-effect relationships among the components of an organization's strategy integrating the four perspectives of a performance management framework. The design of a strategy

map, and subsequently a performance framework, illustrates the interrelationships among the organization's internal processes and intangible assets that create a sustainable competitive advantage. The following example clearly demonstrates the process.

Assume ABC Inc.'s strategic objective is to increase revenue (Figure 4). Increasing revenue requires an increase in production and sales. This financial objective leads to derive the customer objectives. Increasing sales and revenue requires developing loyal customer and lasting relationships. These customer objectives require that the internal process develop new products and facilitates client interaction. These show the interrelationships of the three primary perspectives driving strategy.

Learning and growth's role is to enable the three primary perspectives. In this example, workplace learning identifies the value-added activities as sales improvement and customer satisfaction. Collaborating closely with the relevant business activities, learning professionals can focus their learning efforts on the specific business needs such as sales, customer service, and product development.

Learning professionals must demonstrate how their efforts align with strategic objectives. Strategically mapping workplace learning allows it to take on a strategic capacity relinquishing an outdated functional training perception. This requires adaptable learning approaches that map directly to strategic goals and value-added business activities.

Workplace Learning Strategy 'Roadmap'

The time has come for workplace learning to play a significant role to help senior management achieve business objectives. To be operationally effective and achieve well-defined strategic objectives, there are three elements for learning professionals to direct their efforts. These elements include: value creation, performance management, and strategic alignment.

Focus on Value Creation

Successful organizations develop processes to continually create value for their customers through a systematic process called the "value chain." The value chain is a sequence of business activities designed to satisfy customer needs. Organizations effectively perform these activities to ensure profitability and meet strategic expectations.

A value chain differentiates primary and supporting business process activities. While workplace learning is a supportive role, it must align operationally to ensure that learning solutions tangibly contribute to the organization's primary business activities.

Focus on Performance Management

A performance framework aligns performance expectations with specific strategic objectives and includes four perspectives with the "Learning & Growth" perspective most relevant to learning professionals. Three perspectives operationalize strategy, whereas learning and growth actively supports operational employee skill requirements.

Combined with the value chain, a performance framework defines particular performance metrics that focus employees on specific value creation activities. Management looks to workplace learning to ensure that employees possess the appropriate skills to meet these

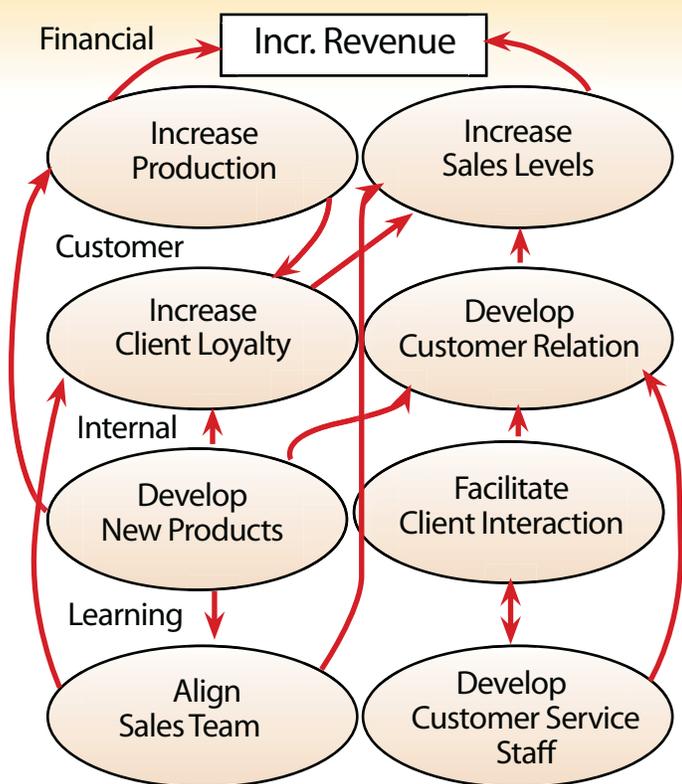
performance metrics and ultimately, the organization's mission.

Focus on Strategic Alignment

Closely related to performance management is strategic alignment. Referred to as strategy mapping, this process is a visual cause-and-effect framework of the business activities.

Strategy maps illustrate the four performance framework perspectives between internal processes and intangible assets. Visually, strategy mapping is an opportunity for learning professionals to develop adaptable learning approaches that map to strategic goals and specific value-added business activities.

Figure 4:
Company ABC — Strategy Mapping Learning to Strategy Objective



Learning is on management’s radar, but to remain there, it must prove that it can deliver tangible value. Determine management’s strategic objectives using the mission as a guide. Identify the primary value chain activities that add value and correspond to strategy expectations. Utilizing the existing performance framework, analyze the value-added business activities for learning opportunities. Finally, strategically map the learning opportunities to the primary activities illustrating tangible relationships.

Ultimately, you decide whether workplace learning is a value-less afterthought or is considered as an enabling operational business partner. Start now to develop tangible workplace performance solutions that resolve value-driven business concerns and contributes directly to strategic objectives.

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