



The rise and rise of lifelong learning



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In the run-up to Lifelong Learning Week, I found myself considering when lifelong learning became something we started talking about at work; the point at which it entered our corporate lexicon. It's virtually impossible to put your finger on it. It's not as if the concept of lifelong learning suddenly emerged from nowhere. It's how we get through adult life, after all; how we survive.

At some point though, a combination of various technological, societal and economic factors meant that the idea of one set of skills being sufficient to see you through an entire career became anachronistic. The rise of lifelong learning in the workplace thus became the natural counter-balance to the demise of the job for life.

At the same time, technology became more important to both our work and personal lives, closing the gap between the two. Previously, there had been a far greater, more obvious, divide between the skills and competencies needed at home, compared to at work. However, once the technology being used for a more fulfilling home life also became the technology we needed to use at work, attitudes towards undertaking learning at work began to shift.

They're shifting still. Just a few years ago, we may have tended to view workplace learning as a way of developing skills – but with one eye on securing a promotion or a pay rise. Now, we think of the benefits more broadly – of how learning ties into our mental wellbeing, self-worth and perceived status and how it helps develop highly transferrable skills.

But I think there's also a growing focus on (and acceptance of) employers' need to be selfish about the provision of workplace learning. Yes, employees need to be given opportunities to grow and to develop their skills but I sense a greater determination from employers to get what they need from this too. In the face of all the well-known pressures around skills gaps and a shrinking, aging workforce, there needs to be more justification for learning than just learning for learning's sake.



Getting learners out of their comfort zones is an effective way to embed new ideas and approaches.



A commonly asked question

All of which means that workplace learning is here to stay and that the importance of encouraging employees to be lifelong learners has never been greater. In turn, in my experience at least, this tends to give rise to the commonly asked question of “how do I turn my organisation into a learning-driven organisation?”

The very simple answer is that you need to create a learning culture which encourages time being set aside for distraction-free learning and where leaders role model the necessary learning behaviours. Leading by example is vital here, particularly in any organisation wanting to get people to do things they might not want to do (initially, at least). Leaders have to show they’re open to change and willing to do things differently themselves. Without that, any attempt to create a genuine learning culture within an organisation will fail.

Alongside this, you need a clear understanding of the skills you require and a comprehensive learning and development (L&D) strategy, tightly aligned to your overall business strategy, to deliver them. You need well-designed learning interventions, available across all delivery mechanisms (digital, virtual and face-to-face). But perhaps most crucially of all, you have to provide learners with the psychological safety of knowing it’s ok to make mistakes.

Bearing in mind that most workplace learning is now done on the job (70% of it, if you ascribe to the 70/20/10 model), that requires a fair bit of bravery. But it’s only by taking people out of their comfort zones and allowing them to make mistakes that they’ll really develop.

Don’t get too comfortable

The idea of learning by being outside your comfort zone is an interesting one. We’re very aware that different people prefer to learn in different ways. I remember, just a few years ago, how much time and effort we put into creating learning programmes featuring activities that would appeal to several different learning preferences. This meant there would always be something for every type of learner to gravitate towards.

I was thinking recently about whether it would be possible to construct an entire programme around just one individual’s learning preferences. However, when discussing this with an L&D colleague, it was suggested to me that we should be thinking of this from completely the opposite perspective.

Rather than favouring those preferences, we should actually steer clear of them – because getting learners out of their comfort zone is actually an effective way to really embed new ideas and approaches. That’s where you’re really testing yourself and pushing your boundaries.

While necessity has been a critical factor in catalysing workplace learning’s recent growth, so too has the way in which learning is now so readily accessible. You could pick up your phone right now and be engrossed in some form of learning activity within minutes. That’s helped deliver what we refer to as “learning in the flow of work”; having the ability to immediately dip into a learning activity in response to a real-time challenge.

There’s still scope for so much more in this area. The technology available to us is already capable of spotting that I’m due to chair a virtual meeting tomorrow, for example, and then automatically finding and scheduling a quick bite-size learning refresher for me on how best to do that. It’s simply a case of how we tap into this technology and all its functionality.

Lagging behind

So many aspects of modern workplace learning seem to be moving on at pace. However, one aspect that hasn’t quite moved as we might have hoped is measuring the return on investment (ROI). Yes, it’s hugely challenging but we, as an L&D community, have to find a way to figure this out.

We all know that when organisations are looking around for cost savings, L&D spend is often one of the first areas targeted. It can be very easy to turn the investment tap off at any point. That could be dangerously counter-productive right now.

Think about a development such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) at work. That’s going to have huge ramifications for people’s jobs and work patterns – and demands a host of new skills in order to capitalise on AI’s possibilities. Do we really want to risk seeing L&D budgets cut back at such a crucial time in the development of workplace AI? Yet unless we can better prove a return on the investments already being made, then we can’t really blame leaders for seeing this as a viable cost-saving target.

In this week of all weeks, if someone could point me in the direction of a course that offers fool proof methods for measuring learning ROI I’d sign up in a heartbeat. The joy of learning is not just in the knowledge gained but also in its ability to shape a brighter, more innovative future for all.

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