HOW TO KEEP YOUR LEARNING STRATEGY FLEXIBLE
Learning and development is undergoing significant changes. In this whitepaper we look at what’s driving this change and provide some practical advice on how L&D teams can support business with a more flexible and agile approach to learning.

The changing business imperative

We live and work in a VUCA world these days. VUCA stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous and this new environment has changed the way that organisations, and all the functions within them, operate. That includes HR and L&D. Businesses need to be agile in order to gain and maintain a competitive advantage in this VUCA world. In fact, businesses need to be agile just to remain in business. Think of the number of seemingly invulnerable big names that have gone to the wall because they had become dinosaurs of yesterday – HMV, Jessops and Woolworths to name a few. These businesses were definitely not agile and they paid the price.

This need for business agility means organisations have to be able to respond to external and internal forces quickly. In order to do so, organisations need to have the skills required for today and for tomorrow. Having the right skills enables greater levels of productivity, innovation and business success. Productivity is a strategic concern for most organisations and for good reason. The UK has a bad reputation in terms of productivity – according to the Office for National Statistics, it has been on the slide for several years now. L&D should be helping businesses increase productivity but in most cases it’s not – benchmarking organisation Towards Maturity found that 70% of L&D teams are failing to improve business productivity in its 2015-16 report, ‘Embracing Change: Improving Performance for Business, Individuals and the L&D Team’.

Having the right skills at the right time is an essential part of improving productivity. However, skills are in short supply, particularly in certain key areas. According to PwC’s 17th annual Global CEO Survey ‘The Talent Challenge: Adapting to Grow’, 63% of CEOs say
availability of skills is a serious concern, an increase of 5% on the previous survey’s results. And it is by no means the only survey to highlight just how pressing the war for talent is and what a top priority it is for CEOs.

Organisations have to be very proactive about getting the skills they need. Of course, L&D has a central role to play here. It is up to L&D, in conjunction with senior managers and line managers, to ensure that organisations have the skills they need now and in the future. Even more important than drafting in new skills is upskilling the existing workforce. L&D needs to foster a culture of continual learning so that internal skills are constantly updated and developed.

To accomplish this – and to recruit and retain the top talent – L&D and the organisation it supports must have a flexible learning strategy. L&D strategies and practices need to be agile. They need to be flexible, scalable and adaptable, enabling organisations and the people within them to respond to rapidly changing business needs and market dynamics. This is something that has to be taken very seriously at a strategic level by L&D and the wider business.

It is, after all, very easy for the top talent to move around. They are in high demand and want to work in places where they know their skills will be developed. It’s not just the top talent that is always scouting around for something better on the horizon either. There is a lot of mobility in the current workforce generally, as the concept of a job for life becomes a thing of the past. Most people expect to have several different jobs in their lifetime at several different organisations. There is also the rise of the portfolio career, when people have several different careers during their working lives.

The learning imperative

Workplace learning has changed dramatically in the past 10-15 years. One of the major changes is that it is no longer just happening in the workplace, on courses provided by L&D. The modern learner is learning all the time – at work, on the way to work, at home – and they are learning what they want and need to learn in order to do their job more effectively. Learners have taken their own learning into their own hands. It’s called self-directed learning.

Technology as a catalyst for change

What has enabled this shift? Technology of course. Technology is behind most of the change in workplace learning and has created all sorts of new learning possibilities and interventions. All of these technologies – search engines, YouTube, game simulations, podcasts, videos, social networks, MOOCs, etc – are right at people’s fingertips, at work and at home, day and night. And critically, they are available on the move – just a few finger taps or swipes away.

The advent and accelerated uptake of mobile technologies has significantly altered how we learn and interact with one another. People are no longer tied to their desk or to a room to carry out learning – they can do it where they want, how they want and when they want. Learning has become so much more accessible and immediate. It needs to be – if we are to work and succeed in an agile world, then our learning needs to be agile. It needs to be responsive and timely. Just in time learning is key to any flexible learning strategy – enabling employees to access learning and information at the point of need.
Gone are the days when L&D created courses it thought learners needed and people had to wait until the relevant course came up (or didn’t, in some cases). Learners don’t have to wait for L&D to provide training – they are going in search of it themselves.

This changed learning landscape has precipitated a decline in the appetite for classroom based training. However, many L&D professionals and organisations are still clinging onto classroom based training, despite all the research and anecdotal evidence that shows the benefits of technology-enabled training.

It’s not that the face-to-face course is dead – it still has its place, albeit a much smaller one, alongside the many other learning interventions now available. What are the benefits of the newer learning interventions? They tend to be more readily available, accessible, cheaper and can be scaled up easily to reach a wide and geographically dispersed audience. Technology enabled learning also allows the modern learner to learn how they want to – rather than having to absorb reams of dense learning material in one go, it can be consumed in bite-sized chunks as and when it is needed.

The impact of ‘learning science’

Much of this new learning is in tune with what neuroscience is telling us about how we humans like to learn and how we learn best. Neuroscience has been giving us lots of fascinating and important insights into how the adult brain works, how we like to learn and interact with each other and this is another contributory factor to the changing learning environment. However, it is very easy for L&D professionals to feel swamped by the stream of new neuroscience findings and unsure of what is relevant, what is accurate and therefore, what findings should be incorporated into L&D practice.

It’s important for L&D to keep an eye on neuroscience research. Make sure findings are from credible sources and have been through sufficient stages of peer review before incorporating them into practice.

So what are the key findings that L&D should be aware of and thinking about? First and foremost, neuroscience tells us that the brain is a lot more plastic than was once thought¹. This means that we humans carry on learning throughout our lifetimes, particularly when in an environment that supports and encourages learning. Organisations that have a strong learning culture will benefit.

The research shows that learning is most effective when it happens in the right environment² – i.e. in organisations with a learning culture and when it is designed in a brain-friendly way. Neuroscience highlights just how social humans are. We often learn...
best in a social context or in interactive, simulated situations. We like to learn in manageable chunks and in order for it to take root and effect behaviour change, it needs to be applied soon after. Just-in-time learning really supports the embedding process.

The learner experience

By personalising the learning experience for individuals, L&D makes it easier for people to access the learning they want and need. This is very important considering the diverse nature of today’s workforce. It is now multi-generational, with as many as four generations in one workplace. Don’t assume the older generation resists technology – many of them have embraced digital learning. And don’t assume that digital natives only want to learn online - many of them desire face-to-face learning.

L&D needs to think hard about learner expectations. The modern learner needs to be thought of as a consumer. Seeing as the acquisition of knowledge and new skills is now so easily available and often free of charge, if L&D wants to stay in the loop, it needs to think of learners as consumers and give them the breadth of choice that they want.

What is a flexible learning strategy?

Let’s go into a bit more depth about what it means to have a flexible learning strategy. There is no one-size-fits-all and even within one organisation, there can and should be lots of variation about how learning happens and how it is applied. There should be different strategies for different processes and however learning happens, the strategies should always be flexible, scalable, responsive and adaptable. Learning must meet the needs of the business and, these days, business needs and goals change rapidly so the learning strategy must be able to reflect that.

It also needs to encompass the whole learning journey, right from new recruits through to long standing members of the organisation. Onboarding is an area that is increasingly important and L&D needs to think about the learning and information needs of recruits before they even start their new role. Gamification, for example, is a great way to get new hires familiar with organisational culture and to start assessing where their learning needs are.

A gamified onboarding process might include a challenge to meet all your new team mates within a certain time, or to take photos of key parts of the building that new recruits must be familiar with. If you have a large intake of new starters you can make the process more competitive providing leaderboards or a prize for the first person to complete the task.

There are also checklist elements that new starters need to complete, such as getting a company photo, organising a security pass, getting their computer up and running. These

Onboarding is an area that is increasingly important.
can also be gamified. By asking for feedback and assessing progress through tasks, L&D can fine-tune the experience for future new starters.

And by providing simple quizzes on sector and company knowledge, L&D teams can understand what types of information is required for new employees to get up and running as quickly as possible. These quizzes can be set up as learning challenges, encouraging individuals and teams to seek out the information they need to answer the questions.

Having a flexible learning strategy moves away from the sheep dipping approach – where people receive the same training, based on a set of pre-established criteria and processes. By its very definition, a flexible learning strategy should not be written in stone.

Incorporate and design a range of learning interventions and make them available to the workforce so that they can choose what learning best suits their needs and career stage. Social, collaborative learning has really taken off so set up networks and nurture them – there are well established tools such as Yammer, Slack and Idea Scale that are being used by a wide variety of organisations. Peer-to-peer learning, communities of practice – that’s how a lot of learners want to learn and are already learning. If L&D wants to be a part of it, then it needs to actively encourage and facilitate collaborative learning.

What is critically important is that L&D doesn’t view its learning strategy as purely an L&D issue. As we said earlier, learning has to meet business needs. Therefore, the learning strategy must be aligned to business strategy. Some L&D leaders don’t even refer to their L&D strategy – they call it their business strategy.
How to create a flexible learning strategy in eight steps

Step 1 Align learning with business need
L&D needs to be a strategic business partner. To achieve this, it needs to be talking to and working with people throughout the business, particularly business leaders. L&D simply cannot afford to work in isolation. How can L&D know what skills are needed unless it is talking to business leaders and the workforce? How can L&D confidently assess what skills will be needed to drive future business success unless it knows and understands how the business is currently operating and where it wants to be? The CIPD’s 2015 Learning and Development study found that only a quarter of L&D leaders agreed that their L&D strategy was fully aligned to the business. That has to change.

Step 2 Focus on outputs
When creating a flexible learning strategy, L&D needs to make sure business needs are at the heart of it. Learning has to be designed around ensuring individuals and teams have the skills and knowledge that the business requires. Towards Maturity has done a lot of interesting work around the need for L&D and organisations to focus on desired business outputs, rather than inputs. What does the learning need to achieve? How will a particular piece of learning benefit the business? If learning is approached in this way, learning and business alignment will happen much more easily and effectively.

Research is showing that people learn through sharing and collaborating.
Step 3 Build credibility in the business

L&D needs build credibility with the business, from the CEO down. It needs to talk the right business language and focus on influencing as well as supporting business strategy. Interestingly, developing business acumen seems to be the highest indicator of L&D success. According to the CIPD Learning and Development Survey 2015, the top four indicators of success are:

1. Business and commercial awareness (66%)
2. Understanding how to enhance learner engagement (50%)
3. Experience of training design and delivery (44%)
4. Knowledge of coaching and mentoring techniques (43%)

Most L&D professionals know these are the skills they need to develop. However, the same survey shows that employers do little to encourage the professional development for their L&D teams. When asked to what extent they are encouraged to develop their own capability, more than one in five L&D, HR or Organisational Development (OD) respondents said ‘little’ or ‘no’ extent.

As workplaces have changed, so has the function of L&D and the skills needed by those working in L&D. The CIPD in partnership with Towards Maturity has done a lot of work around this, culminating in a 2015 report called ‘L&D: evolving roles, enhancing skills’.

Step 4 Become the enabler of learning

Instead of being gatekeepers of learning, L&D now needs to facilitate and enable learning. It’s all about performance consulting, rather than delivering learning. L&D professionals need to really get to grips with what technology offers – how to curate and disseminate content, rather than just providing it, for example. Analytics is an area that L&D really needs to build its strength – knowing how to amass, interpret and present data around learning and how to share that with the business at large in terms of reference that the business understands.

Step 5 Keep the L&D team’s skills up-to-date

It’s very easy for L&D to expend all its energies and focus on improving the skills of the workforce, while neglecting to keep its own house in order. It can’t afford to do that. L&D has to possess the internal skills needed now and in the future if it is to have any hope of meeting organisational needs.

Step 6 Focus on performance

The Learning Performance Institute has even suggested that we shouldn’t call L&D learning and development at all but learning and performance. It says learning should be about improving performance. What is the impact of learning on performance? How has it improved performance in the workplace? L&D needs to have this mindset.
Step 7 Establish learning as a continuous process

It comes back to the concept of continuous learning and continuous improvement. L&D has to ensure that line managers and senior managers buy into continuous learning. If line managers aren’t on board then the workforce will disengage and performance and productivity will suffer.

Step 8 Stay abreast of latest thinking

There are plenty of models that support continuous learning. The learning framework 70:20:10 championed by Charles Jennings is becoming increasingly popular. With 70:20:10, the premise is that roughly 70% of learning happens on the job, 20% from observing others and only 10% from formal interventions, although the ratios are not prescriptive and will change based on the organisation. This fundamentally challenges the long-held belief that classroom training is the best form of workplace learning. Jennings suggests that most learning at work happens on the job and that L&D teams need to design learning strategies with that in mind.

Again, Towards Maturity has produced some helpful research into this area. Its recent report ‘70+20+10=100: The Evidence Behind the Numbers’ found that the model delivers significant business results. For example, employees following 70:20:10 are four times more likely to demonstrate a faster response to business change (30% v 7%), three times more motivated (27% v 8%) and twice as likely to report improvements in customer satisfaction rates, according to Towards Maturity’s research.

All of these changes and requirements for new skills may be daunting, but it’s also an exciting time to be in L&D. L&D needs to be at the heart of change, rather than being left behind or sidelined.
12 top tips to kick start a more flexible learning strategy

1. Know what skills your organisation has and where the gaps are. Keep developing skills.
2. Know what skills will be needed in the future and how to get them.
3. Foster a culture of continuous learning.
4. Embrace the possibilities of digital.
5. Consider and implement a whole range of learning interventions.
6. Focus on business outcomes not inputs.
7. Think of learners as consumers. Give them choices.
8. Be facilitators and enablers of learning.
9. Make sure your learning strategy is aligned to business strategy.
10. Keep up to date with neuroscience findings.
11. Consider learning models such as the 70:20:10 framework.
12. Ensure your own skills are current, relevant and forward thinking. Be an L&D professional of the future, not of the past.

References

1. Growing evidence of brain plasticity
2. The implications of recent developments in neuroscience for research on teaching and learning.
3. Embracing Change: Improving Performance for Business, Individuals and the L&D Team
4. Start with the 70. Plan for the 100
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