New Trends in Learning Reflect a Changing Workforce

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The economy continues to create uncertainty in commercial and government organizations with sluggish growth, reduced resources, and tightening budgets being the order of the day. Even as we await more favorable market conditions, one thing is clear: The makeup of today's workforce is forever changed. Human resource professionals must operate with a leaner workforce and employees, regardless of level, must have the capability to lead and execute work across cross-functional teams.

People are now the primary investment within organizations. As such, professional development initiatives must keep pace. Learning programs need to be more agile, adaptive and occur as quickly as possible to maximize the productivity of employees and adjust to a tech-savvy, global workforce with different learning styles.

With blended learning, human resource practitioners now have a range of delivery modalities to meet various learning styles within the organization. But that is not enough. HR needs to match learning modalities (instructor-led, e-training, virtual, peer-to-peer, mentoring, and social media) to desired business outcomes and the skills and behaviors needed on-the-job across a diverse workforce demographic. In this sense, HR is now a true "broker of capability."

The *ESI 2011 Learning Trends Report*, a global learning survey directed at a cross-

section of commercial and government leaders, confirms that best-in-class organizations need learning methods that:

- Align to an individual's "moment of need."
- Develop leadership and other "soft" skills, such as critical thinking and business acumen.
- Translate into tangible and measurable business impact.

Blended Learning at the Point-of-Need

Blended learning contrasts with more traditional, commodity training focused on obtaining credentials. Credential training is a good starting point, but focuses exclusively on learning content to achieve a certification, rather than on-the-job application.

Just-in-time tools, learning-on-demand, and self-paced online learning are just some methods that organizations are utilizing to ensure learning events are immediately relevant, with the added bonus of cost savings and flexibility by reducing travel and keeping people on the job.

Yet, the difficulty is that the more training choices you have does not necessarily translate into better results. A blended training approach needs to provide the right information at the point-of-need to enable an employee to perform effectively. For example, learners simply needing more information on a topic or seeking to recall information may require a different learning experience than those seeking to apply content to specific on–the-job challenges or organizational changes.

The blending of learning solutions is not simply offering a choice of modalities, but also takes into account content, learning styles, teaching techniques, and learning environments — and aligns to specific learning objectives.

Therefore, a multi-touch, blended learning program must:

- Support the learner's ability to recall and repeatedly apply content in their work environment.
- Follow and complement the individual's workflow.
- Reflect and be tailored to support organizational methodologies, culture, and technical readiness in order to assure an engaged and productive workforce.

Development of Leadership Skills

An aging and changing workforce means that organizations must plan for a wave of retiring employees while building new talent. To meet this challenge, organizations report an increasing need to develop leadership capabilities in their employees and cite a growing priority to improve skills in stakeholder management, interactive communication, and effectiveness in a cross-functional team environment.

Specifically, the *ESI Learning Trends Report* shows that 53 percent of organizations indicate that fostering and encouraging leadership skills in employees is an important area of training investment, coupled with a strong requirement to allocate funds and build business skills/acumen (40 percent) for technical professionals.

Leadership training can move the entire organization forward by:

- Equipping the workforce with skills in critical thinking and business acumen to identify organizational priorities and design the appropriate responses within a business context.
- Supporting a culture of individual accountability to speed decision-making, ensure successful project outcomes and ultimately, assure organizational effectiveness.
- Rapidly developing the capabilities of less tenured employees to manage and lead successfully to ensure continuity and productivity.
- Achieving a new level of team dynamics to create more integration and cohesion on projects and programs, resulting in greater workforce productivity.

Show the Value of Training

With training and development budgets under strain and scrutiny, HR recognizes the need to move beyond “smile sheets” to post-assessments that track learning transfer and business impact.

Learning can and should be a critical business process, enhancing not only individual or team performance, but also having a significant impact on the strategic and financial goals of an organization. If you can measure the *business* impact of learning, then you are better able to determine how effective your organization achieves true learning transfer.

The first step is to define the key business impact areas for measurement. Some of these might be increasing quality, increasing productivity, increasing employee engagement, decreasing costs, increasing revenue, increasing customer satisfaction, decreasing cycle time, decreasing risk, and increasing effective communication.

Then, set expectations with a measurement strategy. This would include course evaluations completed immediately post-training by both the trainee and manager, and then another round of measurement 90 days out and even six months after the training to substantiate behavior change and, ultimately, the business impact of the learning investment.

Quantification is now the last, but critical step in validating the business case for learning. Producing quantitative and qualitative reports and other high-level output can help prioritize training investments based on real, tangible data showing job impact.

Measuring, of course, assumes that training translates into an actual transfer of learning in the classroom to changed performance on-the-job. For this to happen, organizations must develop a supportive and complementary workplace environment, where management, business processes, and supporting tools all permit the learner to apply new knowledge and skills immediately upon return to work.

Organizations often fail to establish success criteria or identify expectations for learning engagements. This is a key pre-training strategy in order to measure trainee performance against agreed upon standards.

ESI's own client experience shows that learning transfer also happens more effectively with an incentive program to motivate employees, full manager support along with executive sponsorship, and a systematic process to prepare individuals to apply what they have learned.

In order to maintain a competitive edge, best-in-class organizations are adopting new approaches to learning, and HR is becoming a broker of these blended learning capabilities. In this way, HR adds real value, turning an organization's workforce into a tangible return on investment by achieving higher quality output, even with fewer resources and lowered budgets.

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***Laurie Keyser Brunner, Senior Vice President of Global Client Services**, ESI International, serves as a champion for ESI's clients, helping them to realize their goals by leveraging ESI's mix of learning modalities, ROI measurement tools, global infrastructure, and other products and consulting services.*

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