Learning and development specialists suggest that the learning function is purposefully evolving from a learning provider to a learning enabler. **Martin Moehrle** reports

Insights from an EFMD corporate member survey

Leadership will have to be less vertical in its focus on its own team and more horizontal in connecting teams across and beyond the enterprise and its ecosystem

How work is organised today was largely shaped during the industrial age of the 20th century. This includes labour law and management practice but also our understanding of learning and development (L&D). The underlying assumption was long-term employment in a stable and predictable environment.

Since the turn of the current century we have witnessed an accelerating transition into the knowledge era, in which knowledge workers are much more self-determined in organising their work. Most organisations are now a mix of industrial and knowledge-based work, with the latter increasingly gaining importance.

In industrial settings, productivity is managed through workforce mastery of prescribed procedures, whereas in knowledge-intensive settings productivity is enhanced through workforce expertise, connectivity, commitment and inspiration.

In the context of digital business transformation, manual work will partially become automised through robots; and cognitive work through artificial intelligence.

However, a digital mindset and digital skills are urgently needed. In parallel, humanistic skills such as empathy, critical thinking and judgement, creativity and collaboration will have a renaissance.

Leadership will have to be less vertical in its focus on its own team and more horizontal in connecting teams across and beyond the enterprise and its ecosystem.

Big data will be a driver of transparency and of personalisation. Access to knowledge is at almost everyone's fingertips. Hierarchical structures will give way to agile ways of working. Lifelong learning will turn from concept to reality.

These changes in the world of work will, for sure, have an impact on how L&D specialists add value to their organisations.

EFMD therefore decided to take the current pulse of its corporate members by asking two open-ended questions:

– *What do you see as the most significant future challenges in the corporate learning function?*
– *What are the major internal obstacles to coping with them adequately?*

Thirty-one individual answers came back in free text form. The responses touched upon many different issues. However, when clustering, the six challenges pictured in Figure 1 and the six obstacles displayed in Figure 3 (over the page) clearly emerged as those most relevant. They paint a lucid picture of a transformation that could be best described as one "from learning provider to learning enabler".

Challenges

Learning culture: A repeated challenge is the need to strengthen an organisation's learning culture so that self-directed learners connect, share and reflect in learning communities and provide and receive rich feedback. Central learning initiatives drive a sense of purpose and prepare an organisation for what lies ahead; local initiatives tackle real business issues; internal trainers are easily released from their day jobs to teach and coach or mentor; and experiential learning gains further importance.

Learning experience: The ubiquitousness of information through the internet and the horizontal flows of information in a knowledge-intensive environment boost the role of informal
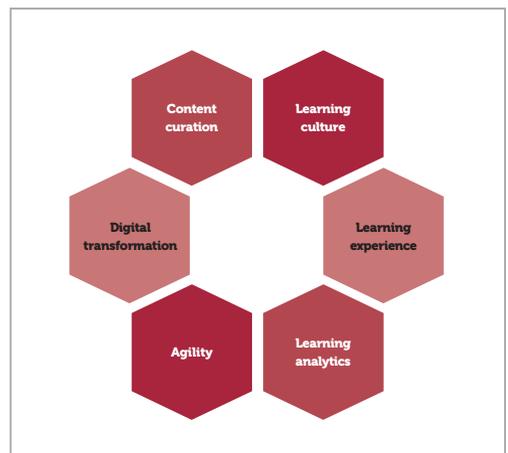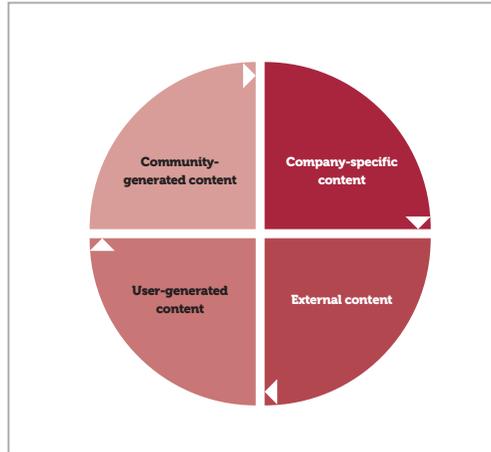

Figure 1: Summary of reported future challenges

learning. Ease of access and convenience of engaging in an exchange are becoming of the essence. Learning paths with mandatory and optional elements, learning portals with personalised features (sometimes integrated with performance and career management) should improve the learning experience, which again is an important aspect of the employee experience and a driver of the employer brand. In the future, the learning environment should be much more designed with the views of the learner in mind.

Learning analytics: The advancement of data science and of the management of big data are very promising for both better measurement of the impact of learning on business outcomes, be they financial, operational, or people-related, and the personalisation of the learning environment. Survey members' feedback clearly shows that learning functions must make tangible progress in their approach to learning analytics.

Agility: The quest for more responsiveness and for the ability to capitalise on change were often mentioned. The learning function should drive an organisation's agility but foremost become more agile in its own functioning. The learning offer needs to be refreshed faster and more frequently and the cycle time from needs analysis through to design, delivery and measurement must shrink. Learning teams should work much more cross-functionally within HR and across the enterprise and apply design thinking principles.

Digital transformation: Digital business transformation requires the rapid build-up of digital skills but also the courageous embracing of digital learning channels and tools with a focus on mobile learning. (Figure 2). The provision of up-to-date and meaningful content in digital format is critical. The use of games and simulations will raise learner engagement. Blended learning offerings are regarded as the standard. Engaging large groups, through, for example, hackathons, allows learning at scale while solving business problems. The feedback shows that most EFMD members are in full swing in embracing digital age learning, although not yet there.

Figure 2
Sources of learning content
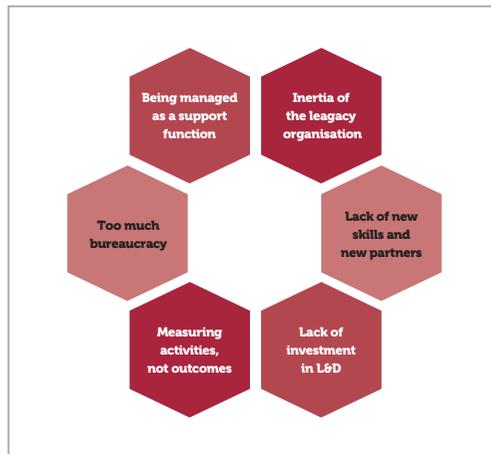
Figure 3:
Summary of reported obstacles in coping with future challenges

Content curation: Given the ongoing shortening of the half-life of knowledge and the ready availability of content through the internet, learning functions must curate such content to limit duplication, search costs and secure quality as well as creating their own content. Curated content should be integrated in learning portals and interfaces. Sponsorship of social learning platforms should yield higher levels of connectivity and also allow user-generated and community-generated content.

Obstacles

Inertia of the legacy organisation:
As a major obstacle to tackling the above challenges, members mentioned a missing sense of urgency at the top but also within their own learning teams, who often prefer to continue with what they have been used to.

Lack of new skills and new partners:
Members report continuing struggles to fully grasp new digital and agile skills required in organisations and within their own teams. This is also true for external partners. Exploring the market for new partners with new skills takes time and energy. Hiring new learning professionals with the right skills, experiences and networks might be the way to accelerate internal development efforts.

Lack of investment in L&D: Propelling the learning function into the digital age would require considerable investment, especially in the upgrading and integration of the IT infrastructure. Learning teams seem to struggle to make a business case and have to compete against other investment priorities.

Measuring activities, not outcomes:
One reason for the inability to make a convincing business case, according to the feedback received, is the continuous focus on measuring and reporting activities rather than outcomes. L&D functions must improve monitoring the business impact of their programmes, which would influence activities along the entire learning cycle. This is not new but a continuous area of focus where progress seems to be urgently required.

Too much bureaucracy: Members mention too much red tape in internal processes, too long taking decisions and the desire to unleash a lot of potential that is held back by bureaucracy.

Being managed as a support function:
A final obstacle mentioned is the perception of L&D being a mere support function and not a value-creating function. The old love-hate affair with HR can be read in between these lines. On the one side, strong linkage to other people processes is highly relevant; on the other side, the often administrative and risk-averse nature of HR is somehow felt as a burden.

Conclusion

This survey reveals that L&D leaders are very aware of the need to reinvent their functions. They must transform themselves from providing quality learning interventions in a highly controlled environment to enabling learning in a dynamic and increasingly informal context near the job and on the job.

Such context is much less controllable. Formal and informal learning become of equal importance. The beauty of a programme's design and delivery needs to be complemented with building and fuelling connectivity as knowledge flows across and beyond the organisation, and with accelerating time to performance and time to change. This will require new skills, new roles and, most importantly, broader missions. Funding models may have to be slightly adjusted to accommodate for informal learning.

Traditional roles such as those of instructional designers will evolve. Design thinking, systems thinking and integrating learning with organisational development, performance management, talent management, knowledge management, recruiting, business development and group strategy will open new avenues to add value.

The concept of an adaptive and learning organisation is as attractive as ever but getting there continues to be a rocky path.

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