Learning & Development and Allied Technological Trends - A Prioritized Investment For Today’s Organizations.

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Abstract

In the current times organizations are more focused around introspecting immediate measures and/or strategies to leverage the productivity and efficiency aspects of the workforce to keep in pace with speculative business expectations and nevertheless to sustain the competition, both of which are definitely two challenging dimensions to perceive and realize. So among the list of available options (could be conventional or evolving) to mitigate the aforesaid situation, organizations are more inclined in investing and leveraging the Learning & Development initiatives to ensure that the workforce are exposed to find new ways to maximize their potential by gaining requisite knowledge and skill-set to align themselves with the organization’s strategies and add value. However, it is not an easy or doable initiative unless organizations adopt various renowned and/or effective practices with learning & development and likewise ascertain and implement the right technology trends that can both optimize the time and cost factors involved, thereby help organizations realize on their ROI.

Organization’s top priorities

Before we actually take a deep dive in understanding the potential reasons as to why organizations prefer to invest in L&D, it is necessary to give a thoughtful consideration in knowing what are the top priorities that organizations have in their list today? It is learnt from a research study that following are some of the priorities that always remains and/or tops the list, regardless of type of the organization and kind of business sector it is into, viz.

1. Cost Management
2. Talent Management
3. Productivity
4. Increasing Customer Focus
5. Adopting New Technology

Secondly, it is equally important for us to understand what are the key underlying reason(s) which usually deter organizations to stay focused in achieving either all or some of the aforementioned priorities, they are

a) Foremost, is the Economic change
b) Business change – pertains to the changes in business operating models, work knowledge, and how best business services can be offered.
c) Social & Cultural change

Together, if the above three changes are not handled properly by the organizations, they can definitely bring in a potential uncertainty and/or complexity resulting in changes to the actual business strategy. So, while it is inevitable that the said changes (with economy, business, social and cultural) continue to bounce back, organizations still continue to work towards business transformation and consistent long-term growth, and achieve this balance either through systematic theories and practices or by creation and reinforcement of long-term training programs.

On similar lines, from an HR perspective following are some of the contemporary priorities, which most HR professionals think and strive to ensure that few of them are atleast aligned with organization’s top priorities viz.
1. Work force cost & composition
2. Work force potential (knowledge, skill-set and capability)
3. Work force performance and productivity
4. Learning & Development
5. Performance Management
6. Rewards and Recognitions

Learning & Development - to achieve Strategic and Operational objectives

In an HR ecosystem, L&D has an important role to play with regards to developing new plans and as well as implementing change, such that the right skill-set, behavior, culture and leadership aspects are in place to both increase the organizational effectiveness and improve the business performance. Secondly, L&D equally helps align people and process at both a strategic and operational levels, with an emphasis on following viz.

- **Organizations readiness for future:** One of the critical aspects where business truly needs L&D support is in preparing for future (from growth perspective) and this is achieved only when L&D strategies are driven and aligned with the long-term needs and strategic objectives of the organizations. Further, in order to be a ‘people ready’ business that is skillful of adapting to changing market dynamics, organization will need to have a clear visibility into how the organizational structure needs to change and align itself, ascertain the potential talent and nurture them, so that such individuals will become tomorrow’s leaders and drive the organization in right directions.

- **Ascertain who can create more value and invest accordingly:** Always, it is worth investing resources in trying to determine which individuals are going to be the most critical in helping your organization to execute growth strategies, as well as have the potential to create value for the organization. Importantly, there should be a shift in the thought process pertaining to routing budgets towards learning and development initiatives (including talent initiatives) that would create more value for the organization in the longer run, rather than focusing on demanding skill-gaps.

Above all,

- **Use and leverage Technology for better understanding:** The usage and/or adapting of right technology can provide invaluable insight and requisite intelligence to support organizational strategies. L&D initiatives and practices driven by technology can be of immense help for the organizations to manage talent, mitigate skill-gaps and prepare for the future as well ensuring that training budgets are routed to where they are most required. Besides, helping to both determine and retain the organization’s high performers, who ultimately can improve performance, productivity and strive to achieve long-term growth.

That said, L&D will continue to have a vital role to play in backing business change, organizational agility and long-term growth.

Learning & Development – most prominent and/or effective practices.

Below table is intended to provide an holistic view about some of the most prominent learning and development practices and/or trends (Reference: CIPD Learning & Development Report, www.cipd.co.uk), where in ‘On-the-Job Training’ stands out in the first place and is considered to be most effective L&D practice, followed by the In-House development programs and others.
That said it is evident that organizations are continuously striving for making significant investments in terms of having and/or maintaining good trainer’s staff besides adopting eLearning practices. But in order to optimize investments made in terms of both time and money, it is imperative that organizations give a thoughtful consideration about implementing the emerging technological trends for creating right platforms which not only enable trainers conduct better training solutions, but should also help to promote the learner’s continuous participation and encourage them. Now besides organization motivations and strategies, here is the one known question which actually provokes us to revisit on our thought process about quantifying and evaluating the eLearning options and the associated trends, before arriving at a conclusion, saying “The fact that though face-to-face mode of training is proven to be the most dominant form of L&D practice, why would organizations prefer and adopt other practices with technology enabled??”

Here are the probable reasons that actually drive organizations to assess the best L&D practice and understand how technology can be of good help viz.

- Primarily, where organizations are in the mode of carrying out their business functions globally by having a decentralized working teams spread across different geographies of the world.
- Secondly, to meet the agnostic training needs from decentralized teams.
- Likewise, the time criticality involved with the work assignments which usually put employees away from the in-house training programs.
- Importantly, where business dictates a work culture of having learning by doing approach or vice-versa in place.

**Need for Technology (or Technical Trends) to leverage L&D**

From operational standpoint, ‘Access to learning’ has been one of the key concerns today, strongly backed by ‘lack of time for learning’, together are cited as major barrier(s) to learning by employees. Similarly, from the strategic perspective the asks are equally challenging viz.

- a) Primarily, need for improved access to learning content
- b) Degree of flexibility i.e. promoting learning at workspace
- c) Scalability / Learning reachability to employees working across different geographies
- d) Increased volume of learning
- e) Introspect and facilitate new ways of integrating learning into workflow
- f) Promote continuous learning
- g) Improve communication between individuals, learners, tutors etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No</th>
<th>Learning &amp; Development Practice</th>
<th>Most Used (%)</th>
<th>Most Effective (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>On-the Job Training</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>In-House development programs</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Coaching by line managers</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>eLearning courses</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>External conferences / Workshops / Events</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Instructor led training delivered off the Job</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Blended learning</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Formal education courses</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Coaching by external practitioners</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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So, in order to address the L&D objectives from both operational and strategic dimensions, it is inevitable that L&D practitioners /teams rely and/or adapt technology trends. That said, here is the note on some of the most promising technological trends viz.

1. **eLearning through Mobile:** It is very evident that mobile devices have become an integral part of the daily life, where entire gamut of our day-to-day activities from both personal and professional fronts are being administered seamlessly. Now, looking at ease and sophistication factors with mobile, eLearning market has inclined to reach those potential users who started to believe and appreciate the fact that handheld based learning is one of the most convenient and effective modes of learning because of following key reasons viz.
   
a. Concise presentation  
b. Interruption free learning  
c. Portability & Flexibility  
d. Increased Interactivity  

Now with that said, **mLearning** shouldn’t be just understood as eLearning on a typical mobile screen, but a platform that outdoes the conventional learning by bringing structured learning into a more casual space which is driven by attributes such as

- *Self-paced and self-driven.*  
- *Micro* lessons supported by interactive elements such as attractive charts, images and a typical 2-3 minute videos which are easily absorbed and/or memorized.  
- *On-Need / JIT* (Just in Time) Learning – to cut down the waiting involved while progressing with the course.  
- *Personalization* – the flexibility and ease to organize one’s learning activities.

2. **Gamification / Game based learning:** Mere adopting and/or implementing eLearning solutions alone cannot help in pooling the requisite interest or encourage participation. Likewise, it is very important that success / achievement have to be rewarded to ensure that participants remain motivated and lead through the enrolled courses in a progressive manner. So, to achieve the aforesaid objectives a typical *game-centered* or *game based* eLearning solution or platform can be of good help. Although ‘gamification’ is no longer considered emerging technology, but the measures to incentivize the online trainings or eLearning engagements has actually added a real flavor or wrapper around gamification, thus making it one of the best trends to keep the online learners engaged.

Here is a good example called **‘Spoke LMS’** that exactly works on the underlying principle of offering real/tangible rewards for a learner who actually earns some coins (as credits) by completing a course and progress with a continued participation. In a nutshell, **Spoke** learning management system acts as a single point of platform that enables learners to communicate, collaborate and earn real-world incentives and prizes.

3. **Enhanced User Experience (UX)** – This is one of the critical directives which govern the overall L&D or eLearning engagement. Because, although there are numerous L&D solutions or LMS available as on today, learners quest for the best and comprehensive eLearning / training solution remains still open and it is very inevitable whereby learners tend to consciously evaluate the available options and finally categorize them simply whether to abandon or to engage with them. Now, in the process of such evaluation it is just the user experience and/or user-centered design which predominantly influences the learner to arrive at a conclusion to remain engaged with a L&D / LMS, because user experience is all about intersection of technology and thought process but from a L&D standpoint user experience is all about balancing the tripod of intuitive training, interest retention and facilitate continuous engagement.
4. **Collaborative learning**—The term ‘collaborative’ is used in the context of social networks, knowledge sharing platforms, online practice communities and forums, and online meeting tools etc. So, any L&D platform that facilitates a sort of interaction between learners is branded to be a collaborative learning tool. But this isn’t enough as true collaborative learning need to definitely facilitate social learning i.e. knowledge acquisition and transfer through a social environment.

**References**

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