

Can work and learning really co-exist?

Are we ready to learn at work?

The pace of organizational life means that 'change' in its many forms, is never far away. In theory then, there is a significant opportunity to learn from change. This cannot be readily achieved from 'outside' the business because the organization itself provides the best place for business learning to occur. By exploring and capturing the issues that really matter to the business, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for business learning that connects individual managers to each other (for shared learning) and individuals and small groups to the challenges that confront them at work. So what if the outputs from individual and collective work could be accredited and certified, so that managers are recognized and rewarded for their respective contributions to corporate learning?

Our overall aim here is to consider the benefits of linking external accreditation to the corporate infrastructure for learning at work. In part, the e-learning revolution has pointed the way towards larger scale, lower cost learning, though for many, web-based learning does not appeal. Why is this? While web-based resources provide access to a wider range of materials than ever before, people generally engage (and learn) more readily with their peers and (learn from) the issues that they confront each day at work. This is not to diminish the potential that the web affords, but the fact is, that a 'learning object' on the corporate learning platform is unlikely to trigger active, sustained, deep-level learning merely because it is available at any time of the day or night. What next then? We believe that if the organization runs its own accredited learning, at the heart of its own corporate university or business school, with professional awards that recognize and celebrate achievement, then managers will buy-in, providing that they can customize the ways in which they combine learning and work, using a questions-driven approach that delivers tangible benefits for all stakeholders.

Interest in the corporate university concept can be traced to the late 1980s when computing and high technology firms in the USA began using their own products to craft 'new wave' educational initiatives, which they called corporate universities. As there are no external constraints, there is no reason why a training function shouldn't reinvent itself as a corporate university or business school. In fact, the rationale for transforming 'static' training provision to 'real time' corporate university is a compelling one, though the true potential for learning has in most cases, yet to be realized. Why is this? E-learning and the near obligatory 'learning management system' have been heavily promoted in recent years, yet the 'cost effective solution' message does not mirror the much tougher challenge of engaging real people in meaningful learning at work. Pressure for results is building, as there is little slack in the leaner organizations of today, now more interested than ever in extracting a return from their investment in e-learning. The digital revolution has already brought with it a change in managerial expectations and behaviour. Dixon (1998) observes that many executives now refuse to attend on-site training, insisting on remote learning wherever possible. This is partly a reaction to 'learning overload' in a rapidly changing world where Dixon believes, almost all their knowledge base is redundant in five years.

The ideal solution of course is to align learning and development squarely behind the strategy of the business, but this is easier said than done. In a corporate world that is already 'fast' and 'getting faster' Dixon thinks that the fundamental challenges for organizational leaders and individual associates centre on the pace of life issue. Here are some of the questions he poses:

Fast and getting faster...Some key questions for the executive team

- Is our organization sufficiently flexible and adaptable to keep up with change?
- Do our people understand the key business priorities?
- Are we harnessing intranet/extranet power to learn effectively?
- How do we capture what we are learn?

Fast and getting faster...Some personal challenges for managers

- How do you cope with constant, rapid change?
- If you find continuous, rapid change stressful, what must you do to restore work-life balance?
- When did you last learn something new and unrelated to what you 'do'?
- When did you last assign time to think 'out of the box', with people outside your own discipline, and area of work?

In most cases, organizations that commit to the creation of a corporate university / business school begin by reviewing what they hope to achieve. The point here of course, is to sketch out the big picture in the hope of minimizing the risks associated with offering an unrelated collection of popular courses.

The relative success of corporate universities at firms like Motorola and General Electric is linked to concerted effort to maintain alignment between learning and the corporate vision. Here, learning is viewed not only as a means of personal and organizational development, but as a tool for initiating cultural change and sustaining competitive advantage during periods of internal re-organization.

If so, is our vision for learning visionary enough?

If your organization is serious about learning at work, perhaps even with its own e-enabled corporate university or business school, it may be useful to assess the extent to which your current vision for corporate learning 'connects' with employees. Vision is essentially about crafting and sustaining a picture of the future. It involves unearthing (or creating) images of the future that foster genuine commitment and engagement rather than compliance. The door to success generally opens when an organization's leadership manages to bind people together around a common identity and sense of destiny. For example, Henry Ford led his company to success in part because he had a clear vision - providing inexpensive transportation for all. With a genuine vision, people learn and excel, not because they have to, but because they want to.

Will our people really buy-in to learning at work?

Speaking on the theme of 'learning and leadership' at a corporate event, a UK board director talked of his firm's drive to become the world leader in its field. His view was that the growth needed to achieve this objective could only be achieved by ensuring that learning for everyone - not just organizational leaders - received top priority. So what does this actually mean in practice? A vast array of learning provision is available to choose from - ranging from traditional, campus-based courses to hi-tech multimedia resourcing, so how do you decide what to buy, when and where to use it and more to the point, how to track the return on investment in learning?

A common element in most, if not all of the courses that are commercially available is 'input' activity. This is usually instructor-led or via programmed sessions, drawing on pre-configured content that provides structure, context and information. The mode of delivery is generally designed with specific learning objectives in mind and written in behavioural terms, so that instructors and/or students can check their progress. But herein lies the problem - the emphasis on directed 'input' even when purpose-designed, means that it is unlikely to connect with the specific learning needs of course participants nor their varied learning styles. The problem is compounded by the fact that adult associates can draw on reservoirs of experience that may be greater than the value of the material in use. We are not suggesting that organizations abandon input work, but rather that employees be encouraged to use their own questions to drive a more 'active' agenda for learning at work.

The idea of a course without a curriculum or even specific learning materials may worry some, but it has the potential both to 'engage' the hearts and minds of participants and to 'liberate' them. How? By focusing attention on the personal and organizational value of the output (or application) they create rather than the 'here and now' value of the input, which is often lost beyond short-term memory retention if it is not 'owned' and used more or less immediately at work. As in any organization, managerial communities tend to break down into 15 per cent of individuals who are active continuous learners, 60 per cent of individuals who have potential for some form of learning if they can be convinced of its necessity, and 35 per cent 'couch-potatoes' who are blocked from learning for various reasons. Given executive sponsorship, an 'active' enquiry-driven approach that places greater emphasis on outputs (than inputs) is more likely to engage the 'silent majority' of people in any given organization.

Reg Revans argued that organizations that fail to learn (and change) as rapidly as their environment are doomed, no easy task but achievable in his view, via the formation of action learning teams and an emphasis on 'questions' to generate learning rather than relying solely on what is already known. His philosophy is a sensible one: '...tomorrow is necessarily different from yesterday, and so new things need to be done. What questions need to be asked before solutions are sought?'

Though second generation learning tools are now more evident, action learning, it seems to us, is still the only process that actually lends itself to customization and in this respect its potential is both elegant and practical. Meister (1998) offers the following insight:

Rather than simply sending high potential managers to external executive education programs, organizations are developing focused large-scale customized action learning programs with measurable results. These hands-on, application-driven programs are based on actual business challenges facing an organization and give participants an opportunity to actively discuss, diagnose, and recommend solutions to real-life business challenges. (Meister, 1998, p. 15.)

What would happen if your organization really championed action learning? First, employees will feel more engaged as they work on their own professional development. If they are encouraged to make the links between ways of enhancing their own capability and potential, then they will experience for themselves a development process that is timely, relevant and meaningful. Action learning is never a solitary, competitive process as it is organized and facilitated via small groups that share openly and compare outcomes. The key point here is that organizational benefits must also flow from small group activity that helps build and sustain cohesive networks with common goals. Here, group members discuss and share insights and use a questioning approach to find, then implement solutions that enhance team (and organizational) performance. Above all, the aim is to hold in balance personal and organizational agendas for learning via an action learning process that uses a dynamic, questions-driven curriculum to create new knowledge that will help to deliver on the business strategy.

Where does 'accreditation' fit and what benefits will it bring?

So far, we have said little that is wholly new to organizational learning, but as practitioners and theorists alike know, organizational learning initiatives are themselves vulnerable to change. So even if the right structures, visions and processes are brought together, how can they be made to stick? It is our view that external accreditation can in fact, provide the much needed 'glue'. How? In our scenario, the employee's work drives the agenda for learning, the 'classroom' is the workplace and 'return on investment in learning' is the key measure of success. Here we have discovered that 'credit' can in fact, be the international currency used to track the return on investment in learning. Accreditation via credit accumulation can be used to:

- Connect 'input' events to 'output' applications - this sustains and integrates professional development and business learning.
- Build from business challenges - outputs can take many forms, from written text to audio / visual work. Evidence of learning in output form, is designed to reflect your work realities.
- Help managers to learn from each other - shared insights help to sustain interest and engagement in accredited learning for professional and organizational development.
- Reward managers for staying engaged - credit is awarded for outputs, this accumulates until the credit track requirements for an accredited qualification have been met.

Exhibit 1 contains a checklist based on some of the frequently asked questions about accredited action learning. Here the principles of credit accumulation apply to the 'empty box' or dynamic curriculum; first a learning design is created with inputs from the various stakeholders, next the associate uses resources (including peer and specialist inputs) to create purposeful outputs or applications that can be applied at work. Each output is credit-rated and the associate can only accumulate the credit needed to meet the requirements of certification by fully applying his/her learning at work in this way. In so doing, the evidence of learning is also created, enabling each associate to track their own return on investment in learning - from both personal and organizational perspectives.

Aside from the added value of external recognition, accreditation actually helps to promote, sustain and integrate active learning by providing purpose - managers obtain professional qualifications that are fully aligned with their work, the organizational direction and focus, and all aspects of human resource linkage with strategy implementation. It also helps external providers of learning services to customize accredited pathways to awards, based on organizational specifications for specific inputs. Further, the award structure motivates, recognizes and rewards the associate at work. In fact, all of these elements can be combined and integrated under the banner of the organization's own accredited 'brand for learning'.

We routinely deploy the approach outlined here to craft 'own brand' accredited and certified learning designs. In all cases, there is a 'trigger point' or organizational need that also connects with the personal development needs of participants. In our experience 'own brand' accredited action learning can be:

- Tailored to meet organizational imperatives, focused on the business agenda and workplace challenges.
- Determined by the issues, realities and best practice in the business today and the likely challenges for the future, a focus that promotes cultural change and innovation.
- Used to demonstrate a return on investment in learning, increasing employee value to the organization, and offering measurable improvements to the bottom line.
- Facilitated via internet-based resourcing and communications - this transforms the cost base and ensures comprehensive access to online libraries and other knowledge databases.
- Integrated with personal career development. For example, supervisors and managers can accumulate credit towards professional qualifications by working on and resolving the key challenges at work. In so doing, their efforts are recognized (by qualifications) and matched by a return on investment in learning (for the business).

In some respects, it is easier to think and plan for the 'here and now' but it is our firm view that accredited action learning holds a key to unlocking the full potential of the organization in the longer term. Consider for instance, some of the forces that are shaping the future (Table 1) and the ways in which you might customize your responses to learning challenges.

Table 1

Fast-forward to accredited corporate learning: Customizing responses to forces that are shaping the future

Learning challenge:	Response needed:
Prepare for the unexpected	Be ready to deal with 'wild cards' that might undermine the organization's future.
Faster reaction times	Embed accredited action learning at all organizational levels.
Flatter structures	Create learning 'cascades' that formalize interdependencies within a leaner structure.
Teams and partners	Build learning partnerships with customers and suppliers.
Globalization	Better communications, information exchange and knowledge management.
Cultural sensitivity	International action learning teams working together f2f and virtually on learning pathways.
Invest in technology	Encourage employees to use computers as they learn at work.
Creating family	Encourage managers to learn from each other and in so doing, sustain knowledge networks.
Purpose and meaning	Always customize learning so that it is relevant to the learner and to the business.
Leadership and learning	Organizational leaders must set an example and sell the benefits of learning at work.

Source: Adapted from Dixon, (1998)

In our experience, little of what is exemplified in **Table 1** can be achieved from outside the business. A set of challenges like these requires a more radical, internalized solution. By capturing the issues that really matter to the business, it is possible to customize and cascade an agenda for accredited learning that connects individuals and small groups to a powerful way of learning at work.

References

Dixon, P. *Futurewise: Six Faces of Global Change*, Harper Collins, London, 1998.

Meister, J. C. *Corporate Universities: Lessons in Building a World-Class Workforce*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1998.

Source: *Accrediting Managers at Work in the 21st Century*, Richard Teare & Gordon Prestoungrange, Prestoungrange University Press, 2004.

EXHIBIT 1: AN INDICATIVE CHECKLIST FOR IN-COMPANY, ACCREDITED ACTION LEARNING

(1) Do you offer courses to your employees or members?

If so, would it 'add value' if they were accredited? This means that your managers and supervisors can gain credit towards professional qualifications (by producing outputs from learning) - on your terms and via a corporate university or business school that you control and manage.

(2) Do you want to change the way in which you deliver courses over the internet?

If you do, then an 'active learning' route is the best one to take. The internet is well suited to action learning - it can provide all the learning resources that participants might need - all from one place. But unless the learner knows what he or she needs to learn and what the key questions and challenges are, the he/she is likely to feel 'swamped' with information. Further, a good deal of productive time may be lost with little or no tangible return on the investment in learning. The action learning focus on questions helps each learner to discern what information is actually needed.

(3) Do you develop your own in-house learning materials / purchase from a third party or some combination of both?

If you do, credit can provide the linking mechanism - almost like 'joining the dots' in a drawing book. Why? Because action learning is about 'active', shared learning - it compels associates to reflect on 'real' issues and to find implementable solutions to them.

(4) Do you have existing affiliations with education providers? If so, would you like to use them more cost effectively?

By blending contributions from academia with those from your own organization and from external developers and consultants you can build a dynamic curriculum and faculty that reflects the best people available to you.

(5) Do you have sufficient resources to provide career counselling for your managers and supervisors?

Accredited action learning offers the ideal way to facilitate and maintain a culture of continuing professional development. It encourages associates to 'draw' out what they already know and to 'structure' their learning in such a way that they can build on their managerial career in a meaningful and relevant way.

(6) How do we justify the time and effort?

Action learning can be: *internalized* (for lower cost and 'best fit' customization), *internet-resourced* (for maximum convenience and minimum 'time out') and *accredited* to encourage, support and recognize excellence at work. The emphasis on 'credit for outputs' makes it possible to quantify the return on investment by tracking the outcomes.

(7) Isn't it more important to have a course badged by a traditional university?

In the past this may have been true, but the world of learning is changing quickly. In a recent poll, 97 per cent of the organizations questioned felt that their 'own brand' (accredited) learning was more important than traditional university education.

(8) Are there disadvantages to accredited learning at work?

No. It is more cost effective for organizations to take control of their own agenda for learning, aligned with the needs of the business. In-company courses also promote lateral communication. This enhances understanding of different roles and perspectives and builds a broader base for collaborative effort.

(9) The organization doesn't want qualifications; it wants better managers.

We agree. Professional qualifications recognize and reward individual (and collective) effort. However, the motivational power should not be overlooked and the organization undoubtedly gets its better managers in action anyway.

(10) Our managers and supervisors are too busy to combine learning and work.

This is certainly a challenge. But don't be overprotective. Let them decide whether or not they want to engage. Because the work is wholly work-related, busy people find time once they see for themselves 'fit' and relevance. Thereafter, they will also build their own support teams at work and at home.