A GLOBAL FOCUS SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

Workplace Learning

New thinking and practice
In recent years there has been increasing interest and focus on the application of informal and workplace learning. Organisations are exploring new approaches for employee development that are not tied to the formal structured methods around the classes, courses and curricula model. Equally, they are also reviving old approaches built around apprenticeship and workplace practices.

In part this interest has been driven by economic considerations. Pressures to lower training costs and reduce budgets for travel have been a major factor. But the focus on workplace learning is also being driven by the realisation that the majority of adult learning occurs not through formal learning but through experience, practice, conversations and reflection in the workplace. People learn mainly through doing rather than through knowing. Added to this there is an emerging appreciation of the important role that context plays in any learning.

The increased interest in workplace learning has not been aimed at simply replacing formal methods (although this is often the result), but at better exploiting the limited time and budgets available to organisations so they can realise increased performance improvement, greater employee development opportunities and improved flexibility in the provision of learning opportunities to the workforce.

Additionally the focus on workplace learning has not been confined to any particular business sector or to specific groups of employees (individual contributors, first line managers etc.), but is being adopted across a wide range of industries, agencies and government departments. Workplace learning has always been supported for craft and trade education – where people earn their livings primarily with their hands. However the recent surge of interest and activity has been in the knowledge industries – where people earn their livings with their heads. For knowledge workers this is a relatively new phenomenon.

### The Rationale for Workplace Learning

People learn most of what they need to know and do to perform well in their jobs through experience, not through off-the-job classroom-based learning. Evidence and research output increasingly supports this.

The recent interest in workplace learning has followed the publication of research and survey data over the past 10 years that indicates workplace and informal learning offer an effective and efficient set of solutions to better improve workplace performance.
As long ago as 1996 Loewenstein and Spletzer described in their findings in their report for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics titled ‘Formal and Informal Training: Evidence from the NLSY’ that:

- People learn 70% of what they know about their jobs informally.

An increasing body of research in the intervening 15 years has validated this. A CapitalWorks study reported a breakdown in methods of learning. This study’s findings indicated that:

- Approximately 75% of the skills employees use on the job were learned informally through discussions with co-workers, self-study, mentoring by managers and similar methods.
- 25% were gained from formal training.

More tellingly, Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger of the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina published data on how managers learn in their 1996 book *The Career Architect Development Planner*. They found that:

- Lessons learned by successful and effective managers are roughly
  - 70% from tough jobs
  - 20% from people (mostly the boss)
  - 10% from courses and reading

More recently, in 2010 Peter Casebow and Owen Ferguson of *GoodPractice* found in a study of 208 leaders and managers that the most frequent and effective approaches used were:

- 80%: Informal chats with colleagues
- 45%: On-the-job instruction from managers or colleagues

Although the exact percentages vary from study to study the overwhelming evidence indicates that workplace learning is extremely important in workforce development and deserves our close attention.

**EFMD and Workplace Learning**

EFMD Corporate Services has realised that the increasing interest and activity in workplace learning requires focus and support. In ensuring that services to corporate members are both leading-edge and relevant, and following an EFMD Corporate Services strategic review in 2009, a decision was taken to launch a number of Special Interest Groups (SIGs). The SIG initiative is part of the EFMD’s ‘Excellence in Corporate Learning’ strategy and has been designed to be problem-driven and to address specific issues facing members. The format of each SIG is constructed to allow members to mobilise the collective intelligence of the community and to take the learning and outputs back into their own organisations.

This Special Edition of *Global Focus* is an output from the Workplace Learning Special Interest Group. The contributed articles have been written by participating members of the group and by industry experts who are contributing to workplace learning thinking and practice.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Charles Jennings is a Senior Advisor to EFMD and facilitator of the EFMD Workplace Learning Special Interest Group.

**FOOTNOTE:**

1. ‘Informal learning’ can be a confusion term. Informal learning is usually neither haphazard nor random, but self-directed in some way.
We are moving from the information age (an age of knowledge workers) to the conceptual age (an age of conceptual workers).

Work-life was much simpler in the last century. Information work entailed following instructions and procedures, and logical analysis. Today’s concept work is improvisation. Learning leaders must deal with situations that aren’t in the rule book. Concept work relies on pattern recognition, tacit knowledge and the wisdom born of experience. You can’t pick this up in a classroom or workshop.

The workplace has changed inexorably. Business has become unpredictable. Results are asymmetric. Everyone’s connected. Value has migrated to intangibles. Organisations are becoming organic. Talent chooses where to work. Power is shifting from suppliers to customers. Learning and work are converging. Time has sped up.

Historically, most managers didn’t make time for employees to learn, grow, and develop. However now work and learning are converging into the new conceptual work. That makes life even more challenging. Conceptual work involves gaining experience, learning, developing new thoughts and new ideas, and even developing new lines of business. In this new era of work, the potential value that a worker can create is many times greater than it was, because they no longer have physical limits.

And speed is an even greater imperative. Businesses talk about speed, but they don’t take advantage of it.

Organisations that don’t embrace new ways of operating and radically different approaches to corporate learning will not survive for three reasons:

1. We’re witnessing a dizzying rate of change. Business people are being overwhelmed by the pace of progress and the explosion of knowledge.
2. There are denser and denser interconnections afoot. Everything is becoming linked to everything else. This increases complexity and makes business unpredictable.
3. Intangibles are the prime source of value. Social capital and know-how have replaced plant and equipment as the creators of economic value.

Companies that fail to adopt new practices that take these things into account are doomed. If you don’t believe me, then ask somebody in the newspaper business – *The New York Times* and *USA Today* are doing better than their peers – they have lost only 80% of their value in the past decade. Or look at the music business — remember record stores?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fundamentals</th>
<th>Drivers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Speed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Connectivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matter</td>
<td>Intangibles</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Change tears people out of their comfort zones. Inertia is huge. Maintaining control was the bedrock of 20th century thinking — avoiding surprises, keeping things in line, being efficient, reducing exceptions, doing the same thing over and over, planning your work and working your plan — but these are yesterday’s obsolete practices. When we put new practices in place, we need to be explicit about what obsolete practices they are replacing so employees can unlearn those.

Today’s prime directive is sharing control among all stakeholders — discern the underlying pattern and take action. Act responsibly. Do what’s right. Follow your heart.

I recently found an artefact from the 20th century on the walkway outside my cottage: a time card. Time cards were once a mainstay of industrial life. You clocked in; you clocked out. When work was physical, time was a reliable measure of production. The fastest manual labourer was possibly 20% faster than the average. It’s different with concept work. The top concept worker creates new business models, wins patents, brings in major clients, and does the deals that make the enterprise. A manager who monitors who is at her desk early and which cars are last to leave the parking lot must unlearn clock-watching and look at time through a new lens.

A quarter of a century ago, Stan Davis wrote in *Future Perfect* that the fundamentals of the universe, and therefore business, are time, space, and matter.

The derivatives of time, space, and matter are the universal variables that impact all business.

Speed, connections, and intangibles each suggest levers for improving business performance. Leaders talk about speed but they don’t take advantage of it. Take revenue. It’s expressed as revenue per quarter. Shouldn’t they flip the fraction upside down and talk about decreasing the time it takes to bring the revenue in? Time-to-completion is the appropriate metric. Value network analysis quantifies the value created through better linkages. Relationships like supply chain are the tip of the iceberg.

Businesses must also focus on increasing the value of relationships with customers and partners. Improving network effectiveness improves the business. And as for intangibles, it’s high time to replace 20th century accounting with scorecards and surveys that assess the soft stuff, capabilities, competencies, and intangibles. The narrow focus on what’s easy to count stifles business creativity. What we can’t see has become more important than what we can.

Choosing the right feedback to listen to and responding to it is the key to optimizing speed, connections, and intangibles. Honest, rigorous feedback can identify practices that have outlived their usefulness. When a practice is not producing results, it’s time to unlearn it. Feedback also provides the incentive for adopting new practices. Rigorous transparency promotes agility. Feedback fuels evolution.

Once upon a time, feedback from the boss was sufficient. “That’s what I’m paid to do.” That’s no longer good enough. In the 21st century, all of us must shoulder responsibility for delighting customers and making the organisation better. In a business world characterised by speed, connections, and intangibles, that means paying attention to the right signals. Is that on your corporate learning agenda?

---

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jay Cross is the Johnny Appleseed of informal learning. He is CEO of The Internet Time Alliance, which helps corporations and governments use networks to accelerate performance. He was the first person to use the term eLearning on the web and literally wrote the book on Informal Learning.
Knowledge-intensive organisations represent the backbone of innovation in the European economy. Knowledge intensity refers to a high share of highly skilled, experienced and creative employees, and flexible operations that aim to provide smart products and services. Knowledge intensive organisations also produce a high number of innovations, and a high number of patents (in some industry sectors). They typically focus on the central importance of customer knowledge, and have a high demand for information and communication.

People performing knowledge work are often highly competent, committed and self-organised and yet they require an organisational environment and guidance in order to efficiently align their activities for jointly exploring and exploiting knowledge.

**Stages of knowledge management**

During the last twenty-five years businesses have faced four distinctive stages of KM.

1. **human-oriented**: Organisations realised the value of their “human resources” and bundled a number of instruments aiming at individual knowledge workers and their productivity.

2. **technology-oriented**: Backed by tremendously increased opportunities offered by information and communication technologies (ICTs), organisations eagerly experimented to benefit from the promised changes that would come about by KM tools and systems.

3. **process-oriented**: Fuelled by an emphasis on business processes and thus on the more structured, formal side of enterprise organisation, KM methods, tools and instruments were repositioned as knowledge processes and linked to knowledge-intensive business processes.

4. **collaborative**: The emergence of Web 2.0 has again sparked tremendous interest in ICT-supported KM and technology-enhanced learning in organisations. Although virtually all knowledge workers are engaged in fast-paced, self-organised, collaborative learning activities concerning handling of knowledge, it is not easy for organisations to understand how to benefit from Web 2.0 technologies.

**The Status Quo in collaborative workplaces**

As a result of these four stages, an enormous number of fragmented
KM instruments and tools have been proposed claiming to solve particular knowledge-related problems, but they are not connected or integrated. KM has concentrated on designing organisational and ICT infrastructures to create an environment conducive for knowledge handling, yet has lost focus of its core object – knowledge, the types of knowledge and changes that are necessary with respect to its quality characteristics.

A wide variety of manifestations of knowledge are handled in organisations and barriers exist in transforming knowledge of one type into knowledge of another type that is handled by heterogeneous and often incompatible tools and systems.

Examples include sketches of ideas in a personal file, experts’ emails answering specific questions, project protocols, Wiki articles retaining lessons learned, and so on.

Yet, although there is tremendous change going on concerning knowledge handling at the level of individual workplaces as well as collaboration in and beyond organisations, there seem to be few initiatives that really take up on the valuable experiences that employees gain using this new breed of ICT. The change is also driven by innovative consumer-ICT, smartphones and tablet PCs, and publicly accessible services reducing barriers to participate in virtually all relevant knowledge actions such as (co)creating, searching, sharing or networking.

Refocusing knowledge management on knowledge

After a period of neglecting to design, guide, coordinate and assess handling of knowledge in organisations, we begin to realise that Peter Drucker was right: increasing productivity of knowledge work is indeed the goal for organisations in the 21st century.

We thus need a fifth stage of KM in which we refocus on knowledge and better connect KM and other management approaches. Agility of enterprises requires improving knowledge sharing and a new form of organisational guidance balancing top-down and bottom-up support of learning and knowledge handling in order to align efficiency of organisations and effectiveness of individual engagement.

Knowledge maturing model

This is what the knowledge maturing model (Maier & Schmidt 2007) addresses with the help of a phase model and a set of knowledge activities. Knowledge maturing is seen as goal-oriented learning on a collective level where

- goal-oriented describes knowledge maturing as a process with a direction. Goals typically change over time and get aligned in social processes.
- collective level refers to, e.g., a team, an organisational unit or a community. Knowledge maturing is not the result of an individual’s activity, but of an interconnected series of activities of interacting individuals.
- knowledge for an individual can be thought of as personal cognitive structures becoming visible through behaviour. Knowledge within an organisation may become visible in documents, rules or routines.

The knowledge maturing model (Figure 1), helps to gain insights about how well organisations can propel knowledge from emerging ideas via informal and formal sharing, further developing and refining in collectives until knowledge is institutionalised in new products, services, processes and practices.

Phases of knowledge maturing

Knowledge maturing is characterised by phases between which socially constructed knowledge of a certain domain changes in nature, e.g., is increasingly justified, shared, committed, formal, teachable, legitimised or standardised on its way.
across the three levels of interaction; individual, community and organisation. The phases do not necessarily build on each other and can use outputs provided by all other phases. Qualities of knowledge are typically treated differently between phases, e.g., by different people, procedures, tools and systems.

- **Ia. Expressing ideas (investigation):** New ideas are developed by individuals. Knowledge is subjective, deeply embedded in the originator’s context and the vocabulary used for communication might be vague and restricted to the originator.

- **Ib. Appropriating ideas (individuation):** New ideas or results found in the investigation phase are now connected with an individual in order to benefit from its future (re-)use. Many KM initiatives neglect this phase and focus on sharing knowledge or even detaching knowledge from individuals.

- **II. Distributing in communities (interaction):** Highly contextualised knowledge is shared, co-developed, challenged and refined in a collective of knowledge workers who share a common terminology and understanding of the topics involved. This phase is driven by social motives and the benefits that individuals typically attribute to sharing knowledge.

- **III. Formalising (information):** In this phase, knowledge is de-subjectified and context is made explicit with the purpose to ease transfer to collectives other than the originating community.

- **IV1. Ad-hoc training (instruction):** Topics are refined to ease teaching, consumption or re-use. Learning objects are arranged to cover a broader subject area. Tests help assess the knowledge level and select learning objects or paths.

- **IV2. Piloting (implementation):** Experiences are deliberately collected with a test case stressing pragmatic action trying a solution before a larger roll-out of, e.g., a product or service to an external target community.

- **V1a. Formal training (instruction):** The subject area becomes teachable to novices. A curriculum integrates learning content into a sequence using sophisticated didactical concepts to guide learners in their learning experiences.

- **V2a. Institutionalising (introduction):** Formalised documents that have been learned by knowledge workers are solidified and implemented into the organisational infrastructure in the form of business rules, processes or standard operating procedures or products or services are launched on the market.

- **Vb. Standardising (incorporation):** Certificates confirm that participants of formal training achieved a certain degree of proficiency.

**Guidance**

Maturing is seen as the developmental activities moving knowledge of increasing maturity through the phases from left to right in Figure 1. Guidance reflects on this process with a distinct perspective from the end-point to earlier phases and consequently from right to left in Figure 1. Guidance influences the direction (‘goal’) or the quality (in terms of effectiveness and efficiency) of knowledge maturing by entities not directly involved in it.

Guidance is contrasted from management in that it leaves the decision about whether or not to follow the influence with the guided and that all employees can take on the roles of guides, while guides still might rely on similar approaches as in management or leadership, for example creating opportunities, challenging or advising. Guidance can be exerted on general capabilities, on improving the learning process itself, or on a specific problem or activity which can aid learning.
From Knowledge to Action
Where should we go from here and who should act in what way?

– Invite all employees in: The knowledge maturing model is inclusive, so every employee can play a decisive role in sparking new waves of knowledge maturing as well as guiding others in their activities impacting on knowledge maturing.

– Create exemplary workspace and guide others: Individuals can play a pivotal role creating an “ideal” work environment for themselves and take on a guiding role for self-organising knowledge workers. They can describe, explain and promote promising new task patterns, processes and practices of knowledge work and look for fellows committed to claim change.

– Reflect on infrastructures: Those responsible for enterprise knowledge infrastructures, but also process owners and project managers can reflect on how knowledge maturing is supported and performed, design interventions and analyse potential impacts of support solutions with the help of the knowledge maturing model.

– Influence maturing: Indicators monitor knowledge maturing and support knowledge maturing-aware tools adapted to reflect an organisation’s idiosyncratic positions and intentions. Besides positional authority, guidance-oriented roles, activities and artefacts are deemed to positively influence knowledge maturing.

– Use multi-purpose tools: Take up experiences of knowledge workers with a new breed of tools for knowledge handling and collaboration in an agile way. When designing ICT for knowledge maturing, concentrate on how people perform knowledge work and how they appropriate generic tools and systems, such as office systems or collaboration systems. These are predominant tools used widely across professions, organisational units, organisations and even industries.

– Go where people are: KM tools should connect with systems that people already are highly engaged in and build upon tools that people use rather than introduce new tools, expecting people to switch to. Given the complexity of knowledge work, this seems more promising than crafting specialised solutions that prescribe how work should be done in specific cases with a limited range of potential users.

The knowledge maturing model, activities and these recommendations together address a cornerstone in Drucker’s challenge of improving productivity of knowledge work. Pursuing this approach aids resolving conflicts between limited enterprise knowledge infrastructures and dynamically shifting expectations of self-confident 21st century knowledge workers driven by the pace of innovation in consumer-ICT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Ronald Maier holds a PhD in MIS from WHU Otto Beisheim School of Management and a habilitation degree from University of Regensburg and is Head of the Department of Information Systems, Production and Logistics Management at the School of Management, University of Innsbruck.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT
This work was co-funded by the European Commission under the Information and Communication Technologies theme of the 7th Framework Programme, Integrating Project MATURE (Contract No. 216356, http://mature-ip.eu).
According to many research studies conducted over the last few years, the development of future leaders and managers is one of the highest priorities for European organisations. Having a good understanding of how managers learn, and what they look for support with most frequently, is an important starting point.

While there has been a movement recently to adopt a more flexible approach to learning and development amongst more sophisticated organisations, there is still a significant focus on traditional approaches among the learning and development community.

Two recent surveys highlight the challenge. In the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, CIPD, reported in its 2011 Learning and Talent Development survey that its members considered in-house development programmes to be the most effective learning activity. A 2010 ComRes survey of people in management positions, on the other hand, found the most effective development activities to be informal chats with colleagues and on-the-job instruction.

What accounts for this difference in perception? A simplistic interpretation would be to resort to cliché and claim that learning professionals see direct involvement in learning interventions as the only option. However, a more complex and interesting story lies behind the findings of the two surveys. These also highlight an opportunity for learning and development (L&D) departments to exert more influence over the performance of managers in their organisation.

The informal debate
While similar, the two surveys asked questions with a slightly different focus. Managers were asked what they did when faced with an unfamiliar challenge. Learning and development professionals, on the other hand, were simply asked which learning approaches they believed were more effective. In fact, the CIPD survey didn’t offer informal conversations as a possible response to its question.

This in itself explains much, since it appears that the concept of on-demand, workplace or ‘fingertip’ learning isn’t really on the agenda of most L&D professionals. The global financial crisis means organisations have to do more with less and, specifically, that many L&D departments are looking to spend less on expensive external programmes and replace them with more cost-effective internal programmes. It’s little wonder that the focus of learning professionals is on their internally developed interventions.
We should be finding out from our customers what they think and, perhaps more importantly, what they actually do.

There are alternative approaches that need to be considered alongside more traditional methods. However, as it stands at the moment, ‘informal learning’ still feels like something of a fad. It gets mentioned at conferences, and in the blogs and articles of people working in L&D practice, but it has yet to really find a place in the mainstream consciousness of the learning profession.

Therein lies the danger for learning professionals wanting to remain relevant and effective. Managers are saying that they find informal methods more convenient and, crucially, often more useful than traditional learning methods.

Indeed, even when the frequency with which managers engage in different learning activities when faced with an unfamiliar challenge is examined (see graph below), it is clear to see that it is the informal activities that they engage in most. Optimising the effectiveness of these activities might improve performance more than simply concentrating on those interventions over which learning professionals have direct control.

Organisations correctly stress the importance of listening to their customers. The same should also be true of the learning profession. Instead of asking ourselves what approaches we think are more effective, we should be finding out from our customers what they think and, perhaps more importantly, what they actually do.

**Frequency of use when faced with an unfamiliar challenge**
What managers look for support with

Just as important as understanding how managers learn, is knowing what they most frequently need support with. This enables learning and development departments to provide less resource intensive support solutions to managers that they can access on demand in the flow of their work, rather than having to wait for a formal learning intervention.

At GoodPractice, we have a wide range of clients across government, health, finance, media, sport, transport and other sectors. We recently conducted an analysis of every single search query carried out by a quarter of a million managers, randomly selected from all our clients, over a full year to get a picture of the kind of challenges that managers look for support and assistance with. The results read like the key topics that would be covered in the most basic management development programme, but that is perhaps informative in itself. The top ten search terms were:

1. One to one/appraisal
2. Change
3. Time management
4. Feedback
5. Coaching
6. Mentoring
7. Motivation
8. Meetings
9. Stakeholders
10. Training

You would imagine that most of these subjects form part of the standard L&D offering in most large organisations. If we assume that the learning interventions in these management programmes are effective in dealing with these basic requirements, the question arises as to why managers are continuing to look for online support with them.

One reason could be that without immediate application, the acquired knowledge and skills resulting from a formal learning intervention are quickly forgotten. Another possibility is that managers simply like to have the reassurance that they are doing the right thing. Whichever is true, what’s certain is that L&D departments could save a lot of organisational time by providing on-demand support for these basic management tasks.
Bridging the perception gap

The apparent disconnect between managers and learning professionals does not indicate that one group is right and the other group is wrong. Managers are likely to underestimate the impact of a course that they attended several months ago compared to a just-in-time intervention they have now. Equally, learning professionals are likely to overestimate the impact of courses they design and deliver, pouring weeks of their working life into them. However, it is clear that the two viewpoints are not aligned, and this is something that needs to be addressed.

The question is: what can be done to close the perception gap between the two groups in a way that balances their understandable biases?

A first step towards a better shared understanding is for L&D professionals to simply work harder at getting to know the managers in their organisation better. The survey by ComRes wasn’t difficult to construct and would be much easier to carry out within an organisation than it was externally. Equally, the analysis that we conducted at GoodPractice wasn’t particularly time consuming, and a competent IT department could provide similar information based on intranet search queries or emails to the HR support team.

At the same time as this broader, more quantitative method, a more traditional way to understand learning needs is to work closely with senior managers to gain insights into the organisation’s key priorities, and where they see current and future skills gaps. It’s important when doing this to establish with senior management what their evidence is for highlighting those skills gaps, and how well they have communicated what they perceive excellence to look like in that particular area. There may not be a gap at all, just a need for clearer expectations.

A second approach is to better understand and embrace informal and workplace learning, since it clearly works for managers, and help it to flourish. A difficulty with this approach for many learning professionals is the nature of informal learning. There is no course, no pre-determined learning outcome and there is no way of controlling or quality assuring the activity. These elements have been the cornerstone of what learning professionals have done for decades, so breaking that habit calls for a real and significant change.

Following the evidence

A growing body of evidence shows that people learn how to do their jobs mostly through informal means in the workplace. It therefore becomes important that L&D professionals start to understand this trend, so they can best help their customers by making informal activities easier and more likely to be successful.

This isn’t a case of discarding formal learning completely. Learning is a process that includes formal, informal and social elements, but for the last hundred or so years, we’ve been focusing on and optimising the formal side of the learning experience, and ignoring the rest. It’s time to address that balance.

Not every survey tells the whole story. Indeed, not every survey is fully accurate. Several surveys finding the same pattern, however, begin to paint an accurate picture. All the evidence of recent years tells us two things:

1. Managers and other professionals learn most of what they do on a day-to-day basis informally in the context of the workplace.
2. Learning functions are still mostly focused on delivering courses in classroom type environments away from the workplace.

That difference in viewpoints is a signal that there’s an opportunity for learning professionals to do something different. We’ve all known for many years that ‘telling ain’t training’. Encouraging an environment where informal learning and workplace learning can flourish is the ultimate expression of effective facilitation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter Casebow is CEO of GoodPractice based in Edinburgh and has been formerly, Head of Strategic Communication at the Royal Bank of Scotland. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Bankers in Scotland and holds an MBA from Heriot Watt University. He is Chairman of Devonshire House (Scotland) and as a qualified mountain guide volunteers as an outdoor activities instructor.

Owen Ferguson is the Product Development Director at GoodPractice. He has worked in learning and development for over 10 years, with previous positions at Standard Life and Bank of Scotland Corporate.
There is a strong link between long-term, high level thinking skills, as typically displayed by graduates, and the well-being of organisations. This is why organisations employ graduates; they need employees with thinking skills and who know how to embrace their own long-term learning. We argue that organisations can use Work Based Learning (WBL) processes to develop people with these thinking skills – effectively, their own graduates.

For those employees who do not have a first degree, WBL is a way to develop employees’ skills so that they are ready and able to undertake more senior roles in the future. This serves the purpose of being able to make early identification of their attributes and sow the seeds of high level thinking within the employee at an initial stage, thus nurturing their creativity, innovation and acumen. A key asset of a university-led development programme is that universities enable people to learn, so that the learning process is not one-off. Learning how to learn is a key and valuable aspect of high level thinking. For some employees it can be a second chance to make up for a lost education. Becoming better at what they do in the company is a reward and a motivation both personally and for their organisation.

For those employees who already have graduate skills WBL is a way to develop the abilities needed for a specific work role. WBL is an applied concept and does not require the learning of a set of theoretical perspectives. It requires employees to take an existing work-based situation and progress the situation using learning that has been developed in universities for years: learning that includes research and development skills, reflective lateral thinking, critical and ‘big picture’ strategic planning skills. Our Institute has been developing these high level skills in the workplace for almost 20 years.

Over this period the authors and academics from the Institute for WBL at Middlesex University in the UK have been developing and writing about WBL for the purpose of employee learning and employer engagement. Benefits that develop employees and enhance work for the company have emerged:
- Carrying out a research and development project on an aspect of their company work they wish to develop further.
- Reading and understanding research findings and statistics.
- Nurturing the ability to communicate important information.
- Conveying their learning to others in the company.
We are usually ‘so busy being busy’ that we forget the importance of stopping for a moment to consider how to apply our learning and to relate our reflective thoughts onto real life issues at work. This is what WBL nurtures in employees.

The importance of partnership
Of course it is possible for companies to create their own certificate programme and pay university staff to teach it, but a university certificate supports the credibility of a programme and is vital for quality. There is a clear need for a client company and university provider to understand each other and talk through the different approaches whereby the university brings its standards, and the company has clarity regarding what is wanted.

Staff at the Middlesex WBL Institute have joined forces with senior leaders in companies, internationally, to explore new ways by which organisations can use WBL processes, using a strategic and developmental approach that complements the approach the Institute has championed for almost 20 years.

Using what the Institute calls a ‘partnership’ approach the process begins with a conversation with the CEO around the key challenges the business faces, and the key stakeholders in the company who are best able to tackle them. We then agree with the CEO the kind of projects this group [ie identified key stakeholders] might work on to tackle these challenges and how the learning gained can impact on the organisation as a whole. This will have two major benefits: first it will help inform enhanced decision making which can lead to business improvement, and secondly the learning can demonstrate evidence of the high-level skills mentioned above, and lead to individual HE awards.

The model overleaf reflects the stages in the process.
Examples of how this strategy works in practice
Over the last two years the Institute has been working with Toshiba TEC Imaging Systems Ltd to explore ways in which the kind of processes outlined above can work best for them. The key challenge for Toshiba was how to align engineers working in the field who rarely come together to align with plans for promotion of a new brand to improve service relationships. The outcome was that a selection of 20 engineers, who they designated ‘brand champions’, worked with the WBL Institute to develop the type of qualities described above. As a result they are now engaging with colleagues to explore the new brand and provide feedback that will inform future company policy. By writing up their reflections, each will acquire a University Diploma in ‘Facilitating Change’ which can contribute to a university degree if desired.

What are the benefits for the organisation? As Mags Thomas, HRM Manager at Toshiba put it “They gave us a discipline, a way of looking at the needs of our business”.

We have identified that work based learning can both lead to the development and accreditation of high-level thinking skills, and also provide opportunities for staff to learn together.
The same kind of discipline has worked for four senior directors at Rank Plc. The challenge for this organisation, as articulated by the HR Director Sue Waldock, is the creation of a more collaborative culture – the breaking down of silos – a challenge shared by many companies. Waldock saw WBL as a way of enabling experienced directors to learn more about the kinds of contribution they could make to the organisation. Over the last eighteen months two employees worked with Waldock and three other directors reporting to the Board, helping them to reflect on learning and work on projects that will make a difference in the future and also lead to a Masters award. Waldock herself will now be following a Professional Doctorate based around bringing all the learning together, in close collaboration with the CEO, to show the impact these kinds of processes can make on changing an organisation’s culture.

In summary, in comparing the twin benefits available to an organisation of introducing work based learning, we have identified that it can both lead to the development and accreditation of high-level thinking skills, and also provide opportunities for staff to learn together and improve their performance, leading to clear measurable benefits and a financial return for shareholders.

Our view is that work based learning is an investment that companies can make that will yield tangible business success as well as provide an incentive for key staff to remain and get University recognition.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Professor Carol Costley
Associate Dean and head of the Work Based Learning Research Centre at the Institute for Work Based Learning. Key research interests are in practitioner research and especially the methodologies appropriate for people doing research and development into their own practice. Recent publications published by Sage in 2010 ‘Work-based Research; approaches to enquiry for insider-researchers’ with Elliott and Gibbs and a chapter in An International Handbook of Workplace Learning on ‘Workplace Learning and Higher Education’.

Dr Peter Critten
Has a background of more than 40 years in HRD, the last 20 years of which have been at Middlesex University Business School, where he led programmes on HRD and organisational Change. For the last 2 years he has undertaken the role of Project Manager Work Based Organisational Learning at the Institute to promote the kind of policies he explains in this feature.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Professor Carol Costley and Dr Peter Critten, Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University London NW4 4BT
If you ask people what they remember from their own time at school – especially around their mid- to late-teens – you invariably find they remember friends, their first romantic relationships, and school dinners. They remember things that they won or competed in. When it comes to the classroom – they remember the teachers who treated them poorly, or the classes that were especially bad or boring. They remember school trips and practical exercises – sometimes the ones that went wrong. Most of all they remember their good teachers. The good teachers are those who were enthusiastic, who inspired, who seemed to care about the subjects they were teaching, or about their students’ learning and development.

We may not be able to answer the simple question: how does learning work? Even if we don’t know, we need not let that stop us – in more or less the same way that not knowing how cooking works should stop us from trying our latest culinary masterpiece on friends and family. Wherever one goes there is the same sense – that there are people with an instinctive flair for learning who are able to construct something quite wonderful, and others who follow instructions but are clearly missing some vital ingredient. And this is part of the problem: without understanding the mechanism it is hard to know what the vital ingredient is. We end up knowing that good teaching is vital to learning, but that no amount of teacher training will ensure good teaching.

There is another problem. We appear to be undergoing a transition from an old paradigm of learning to a new one. In the old world we delivered learning – we used a variety of methods such as classroom courses, books and more recently online courses to do this. There was an implicit assumption that learning translated into results. But attempts to quantify these results began to cast doubt on the efficacy of these approaches and recently this assumption has been challenged to an ever-increasing degree. To add to our woes, research into the contribution made by informal learning together with the emergence of information-on-tap (courtesy of the world wide web) has meant that conventional learning approaches have came under increasing pressure to justify their existence.

Our response has been to focus on the task of delivering performance improvement via learning interventions. The difficulty with this is that...
We are finding our set of learning methodologies isn’t well suited for delivering performance gains, and probably never was. I was recently reminded by an expert in the field that when one engages in performance consulting, one should allow the appropriate methodology to emerge naturally from the analysis of the performance gap. It has been my experience that if you want to change behaviour, you change behaviour. That is to say, closing a performance gap will probably involve reengineering a process or making some other tangible change, rather than just raising awareness.

We should start by basing our approach on research into how people learn. Two years ago a team I was part of at the British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC), together with Engine Service Design did just that. We looked at the manner in which people had learned and were learning. Our findings helped inform and validate a model of learning that I had been considering for some time. This model offered a very different perspective on the learning process. People learned:

– as a response to challenges (such as changing jobs)
– from mentors (such as line managers)
– from peers
– from defining experiences – often challenges.

I would like to introduce an approach that I call the ‘Affective Context Model’ as a framework for understanding adult learning in the context of workplace learning.

Most learning approaches appear to share the tacit assumption that learning is primarily focused on knowledge transfer; that somehow learning is simply translating information from one place to another - for example from book to head.

These approaches were bolstered by cognitive theories of the 1970s which viewed the human mind as functioning like a computer. Any reflection, let alone our better understanding today, demonstrates the ineffectiveness and inaccuracy of these approaches. Unfortunately the only theories of learning which can be demonstrated reliably are classical and operant conditioning and we are rarely in a position to alter employee behaviour through a system of immediate reward and punishment.

More recent research is revealing a very different picture of the human mind; one in which a tiny rational area sits atop a hugely complex decision-making and learning machine over which it has very little control, and which it knows only as ‘gut instinct’. Crude as this might sound, if you ask a chess grandmaster how they decide which are the better moves to make the answer is likely to be expressed in terms of
the ‘feel’ of the position – certainly not as a result of an exhaustive analysis.

And so it is with learning: as we experience situations our mind makes almost all the learning decisions for us, coating information in an emotional ‘wrapper’ which determines whether it is stored and how it is processed. For example, the budget details of your organisation may be terribly important to the business – but you probably can’t remember them. On the other hand, the altercation on the train journey to work that you witnessed might not be significant, but it is marked indelibly in your memory. You have limited control over what you learn. Information which has strong ‘affective context’ is stored, whilst that which has weak ‘affective context’ is not.

This model explains a great deal about what we learn, why, and when we learn. Most importantly it explains the distinction between ‘pull’ and ‘push’ learning. Push learning is usually delivered before the challenge to which it applies is encountered, so the learner’s brain has no affective context. Where we are faced with a meaningful challenge – such as the prospect of starting a new role or job – we learn quickly, ‘pulling’ the information we need, because it matters.

When human beings learn things, they wrap or tag the knowledge with its affective context; things that matter. These things are not simply ‘emotional’ in an obvious sense – for example they may include factors such as how engaging the person you are watching is, or how similar to you they are, or how pressing your need for the information is. This last point is especially important: the vast majority of online learning that is undertaken is text-based. This does not matter to the learner, regardless of ‘learning style’ since the information is typically sought in response to a pressing problem they face: ‘how do I get my Wi-Fi to work?’, ‘should I worry about this rash?’. In such cases the learner supplies the affective context. This is the fundamental distinction between courses and resources.

Thus we arrive at the central problem with traditional learning methods: a failure to grasp that learning is something undertaken by the learner. The role of the learning professional should be to inspire or motivate the learner sufficiently to learn (and then perhaps to make resources available). Today this is accomplished principally by the use of tests: across the world millions of students let information wash over them, secure in the knowledge that they will be able to cram it into short-term memory once they are sufficiently anxious about an impending test.

Effective learning must always start either from a point of what already matters to learners, or by making something matter to them. This creates a strong argument for workplace learning – learning in the context of use.

The value of the Affective Context model lies in its ability to reconcile a wide range of conflicting findings in the area of learning and memory, as well as its ability to predict which types of learning intervention will be effective. An experience can be viewed as a network of elements, each of which has varying degrees of affective context. Material with low affective context quickly fades from memory. The model also explains the formation of scripts, schemas and episodic memory. When we do things repeatedly a common pattern of affective activation emerges – the incidental material simply fades away, unless of course it is especially charged. For example if you take the same train journey every day you will struggle to remember a journey on any specific day, but you have an ‘averaged’ memory for what happened. If one day an argument occurs on the train, you will remember this – and if you are asked about the whole journey you will add this vivid memory to your generalised schema for your train journey to create this episode.
This same effect can be seen in a number of ways. In Bartlett’s famous ‘War of the Ghosts’ story experiment researchers looked at which elements of a story survived retelling. Unsurprisingly it was the more emotionally charged aspects that remained, whilst the specific words used varied. Further support for this model comes from distinctiveness and levels of processing theories. The Levels of Processing model suggests we remember information better when we spend more time thinking about the information and making connections. However it cannot explain the fact that information which is merely visually distinctive (such as seeing someone catch on fire) is better remembered. But both findings are consistent with the Affective Context model.

Recent research into the ways in which failure can enhance subsequent learning are also consistent with the model. Failure primes us to learn via the dopamine system, which in turn sensitises us to affective aspects of the situation. Expectation failure – a Piagetian concept – works. Failure – and fear of failure – are powerful emotional contexts.

So what does this mean for learning and learning professionals? Firstly it means we should look for opportunities to deliver resources instead of courses in order to respond to ‘pull’ rather than ‘push’ and provide people with the learning they really need, to do things they really care about.

But of course sometimes people don’t care about things when we want them to do so. Therefore another key role of the educator is to encourage people to care: by being passionate, by being credible and persuasive and by finding ways to connect with people at a ‘personal’ level. Educators should inspire and motivate people, building their confidence and making things matter. If an educator can create an affective context, the learner will do the learning.

We should also look at delivery mechanisms that combine the affective context with the knowledge rather than stripping it away. For example we can employ a variety or media, and use stories, scenarios and simulation to preserve the significance and present challenges.

Learning should deliberately mix affective elements such as context, anecdotes, consequences and personal impact in a way that connects with learners’ concerns.

The Affective Context model points to the need to focus on learning that takes place in the context of work – in other words, workplace learning.
“If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself.”

Henry Ford

In the corporate world where deadlines are rampant, constant innovation is indispensable, workloads are mounting, and financial pressures are omnipresent, it’s no wonder the employees of many organisations feel as though they are disconnected from one another. Many employees have become disenfranchised or disengaged and as a consequence, it has led to poor business results and lost opportunities.

In late 2010, the Corporate Leadership Council released its quarterly engagement trends report. Results indicated that only 22% of employees planned on staying in their current positions. Supplementing the point 21.6% of all employees surveyed described themselves as highly disengaged. As a consequence and according to Gallup Management Journal this disengaged and disconnected culture [in US-based organisations] is costing US$300b per year in lost revenues alone.

Is there a remedy for such calamitous organisational health?

One budding approach that may help unify your team, your business unit and your organisation to ultimately enrich and enhance your corporate culture such that all employees feel as though they are moving forward as a connected group is through the deployment and utilisation of an internal enterprise-wide micro-blogging platform.

How Micro-Blogging Came To Be

Back in 1985, communications researcher Friedhelm Hillebrand of Germany sat at a typewriter tapping out words on a sheet of paper trying to establish the ideal number of characters for a new point-to-point message service for cellular mobile telephones. He and his colleagues were devising a text-based communication system that would soon become known as texting. That magic number of characters was 160, and it is now used pervasively across most mobile telephone devices for instant text messaging.

The problem for any organisation however was that texting typically involved person-to-person exchanges and therefore wasn’t open to the entire spectrum of employees. Thus in 1988 Jarkko Oikarinen of Finland developed IRC (Instant Relay Chat) after toying with the idea of distributed chatting through status messages using computers and internet protocol.

1998

In 1988 Jarkko Oikarinen developed Instant Relay Chat after toying with the idea of distributed chatting through status messages using computers and internet protocol.
Flash ahead in time to 2006 and the concept of IRC and person-to-person texting was significantly enhanced by Odeo Company General Manager Evan Williams and programmer Jack Dorsi of the United States to become an open, internet-based, 140 character messaging, collaboration and status update service we now know as Twitter. This was the beginning of a new term; micro-blogging. *PC Magazine* defines micro-blogging as: A blog that contains brief entries about the activities of an individual or company. Created to keep friends, colleagues and customers up-to-date, small images may be included as well as brief audio and video clips.

**Moving Towards a Culture of Sharing**

Inside organisations, however, there is a dichotomous attitude at play. On the one hand there are many employees utilising Twitter (or external micro-blogging) to connect, learn, share and inspire with external friends, family and even colleagues; yet many organisations have not yet grasped how this technique might actually help with its internal culture, its objectives, and ultimately its business results.

According to research published by McKinsey in December 2010, only 13% of companies felt as though micro-blogging was actually enhancing company culture. The encouraging sign however is that this sentiment is up from the 2009 data point of 10%.

It’s incumbent upon senior leaders in the organisation to accurately and appropriately understand the tangible benefits of an internal micro-blogging service for its employees. If executives believe that Twitter or micro-blogging is either a waste of time or simply a fun outlet then they are missing the point entirely. This mindset might actually cause further damage concerning the number of disengaged employees that are on the rise inside today’s organisations.

Micro-blogging quite simply should be thought of as a method in which organisations might flatten its hierarchy, increase the number and quality of relationships between employees, and speed up the exchange of knowledge, ideas and information within the business. Micro-blogging can also help mitigate missing connections between the field worker, the front line, the individual contributor, the manager, the director, the VP and the executive suite. By gaining access to peers that one might not otherwise know, the flow of organisational information and knowledge speeds up at a fraction of the time and cost.

Micro-blogging can both humanise an organisation and drive business benefit. It’s a running commentary of what might have previously been discussed at the water cooler, the lunch table, or in the classroom; only now, the entire organisation has access to the dialogue and can take advantage both by listening and by contributing back.
Exchanging Ideas; Improving Culture, Knowledge and Networks

Employees typically have a voice when they are in team, project or manager-subordinate meetings. Occasionally they might chime in when attending town halls, classroom sessions, and all-hands meetings. When micro-blogging is brought to fruition inside the organisation, safely tucked within the corporate firewalls, the connection can be extremely powerful. Senior leaders have the ability to listen in and get a stronger sense of what is going on in the company be it related to employee opinions, ideas, issues, or opportunities. Employees can not only connect and be part of the dialogue; they can read the opinions and ideas of their peers as well as senior executives.

“Micro-blogging isn’t an elephant sitting in the room,” says Bert Sandie, Senior Director of Technical Excellence at Electronic Arts. “It’s something that epitomises tangible business value through the informal exchange of ideas and knowledge leading to improved results.”

Micro-blogging, by definition, has an additional benefit; micro-blog entries are short, concise and succinct. Most enterprise micro-blogging platforms limit the updates to 160 characters or less, similar to texting. This brevity forces everyone in the organisation to carefully think through their update or their response. Furthermore, due to the fact micro-blogging technology is an enterprise controlled application itself (whether hosted internally or on the cloud) employees must log into the system, thus there is no chance for anonymity.

In terms of increasing the engagement level and culture of an organisation micro-blogging can provide several benefits, including:

- Greater understanding of what is actually going on in the organisation across teams or projects
- Personalising and demystifying the aura of senior leaders
- Seeking opinion and exploring options before decisions are made
- Driving engagement and the feeling that everyone’s opinion is important
- Increasing social status of employees in business related matters
- Providing information that is timely through non-formal use
- Building trust amongst senior leaders and front-line workers in open, transparent ways
- Weak chance of disrupting already established workflows

Risks and Pitfalls

Enterprise micro-blogging can be viewed by employees and leaders as simply one more tool or one more task they need to make time for. Employees may already be suffering from information overload having to send, receive and process too many pieces of information through multiple channels. If micro-blogging is not introduced and positioned
as a way in which to help save time, improve existing work processes, and to increase engagement within the organisation, it will undoubtedly be negatively viewed by employees.

Jun Zhang, Jane Cody and Yuling Wu of Pitney Bowes introduced the “noise-to-value paradox” in 2010 as a possible impediment to micro-blogging adoption. If employees are unable to appropriately filter or make sense of various micro-blog streams they may abandon the application due to a lack of context and full understanding.

From a technology perspective, an organisation will have to decide whether to host the micro-blogging platform within its own firewall, or utilise the service of a hosted provider. The latter may cause some concern from the vantage point of the Chief Security Office. Furthermore, if the service is not accompanied by an enterprise-wide guideline and learning plan, some employees may not fully understand the security implications of what they share. Anything an organisation does to encourage intelligent and appropriate use of internal micro-blogging may help to counter security and ethical threats.

In Summary
Henry Ford obviously did not experience micro-blogging inside the automobile company he helped to build. However, if still alive he might agree that micro-blogging helps increase bottom-line success through improved collaboration, engagement and a corresponding connected culture. If everyone is moving forward together, micro-blogging can be a useful tool and behaviour to assist with the end goal of becoming successful as a united organisation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dan Pontefract has been Head of Learning and Collaboration at TELUS since 2008, previously holding similar positions with SAP, Business Objects & Crystal Decisions. He maintains an active blog at www.danpontefract.com
The face of learning is undeniably changing. We are an increasingly connected global community with endless numbers of ideas and amounts of information to share. It seems we are witnessing the first wave of ubiquitous connectivity - the more we are connected, the more we want to engage with ideas, information, and one another in ways that had not been possible even just a few years ago.

In this switched-on world, eLearning makes more sense than ever before. Yet, in order to enhance the effectiveness of teaching methods and the development of employees’ skills, training companies are required to exploit new modes of communication, and therefore must not underestimate the impact of social media and workplace learning on the corporate world.

Roy Amara, former President of the American think tank Institute for the Future used to say: “We tend to overestimate the effect of technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.”

Today, social media presents all the characteristics of this type of disruption. The private sector has already made this major change. Nielsen announced back in February 2009 that Internet users are now spending more time on social networking sites than using email. Therefore, it will only be a matter of time before these sites make their impact felt on companies’ processes and operating methods. Therefore, it will only be a matter of time before these sites make their impact felt on companies’ processes and operating methods.

“Virtual classrooms” are generally developed as distributed learning environments that can take advantage of synchronous experiences such as classes, seminars, and e-mentoring, as well as digital online courses, flexible learning content creation and deployment opportunities. Today’s more flexible virtual classroom systems for eLearning create more demand for commercial and community-produced learning content assets. Attractive offerings such as simulation-based learning, games-based learning, and mobile learning are also expected to drive the future demand for more and higher quality digital content.

To be successful, eLearning programmes should deliver scalable, standardised courses that achieve reliable, sustainable results. The development of new tools and new content forms such as blogging and podcasting mean that experts now have a chance to contribute to the digital content dialogue without concern for technical abilities. Inspired by the ongoing quest for innovative, personalised, portable and engaging experiences, today’s eLearning takes advantage of a broad and rich foundation of multidisciplinary media and methodologies.

I want to challenge the common assertion that eLearning is not suited to developing soft skills. By incorporating social media, informal and workplace learning into eLearning models, we can facilitate development, and in particular, the development of leadership skills.

Soft Skills

A person’s soft skill EQ is an important part of their individual contribution to the success of an organisation. Screening or training for soft elements such as dependability and conscientiousness can yield significant return on investment for an organisation. For this reason, soft skills are increasingly sought out...
by employers in addition to standard qualifications.

Soft skills are diverse and varied and can involve the ability to lead, participate in, unite and build a team, motivate and teach and interact with other employees, negotiate, make decisions and solve problems.

So, how can the development of these skills, including leadership skills, be assisted by eLearning and new technologies?

Leadership as a soft skill: identifying leaders
Whether or not the wisdom of crowds exists, strategy cannot be drawn up on a totally participatory basis. We need to identify those who are able to contribute. This may not be feasible today, as we do not have the necessary tools for this identification process, but it will be feasible tomorrow as social media is providing solutions within this domain. We are beginning to spot leaders who have good ideas, and we know how to evaluate them. For example, if you go to a forum, it won’t take you long to recognise the two or three individuals who stand out from the other participants. They will be the ones who are interested in working together with other employees to draw up the strategy.

Leadership and information sharing
Sharing information is another of the many challenges leaders face in terms of developing their own skills as a leader, and in coaching those with the potential to lead. Information sharing and a culture of exchange and openness, encouraged by the emergence of social networking, enables companies to accelerate their decision-making processes and increase their capacity for innovation and productivity.

By creating a networked organisation, the participation of employees, clients and partners is encouraged, developing their subconscious skills. Information is thus shared vertically and horizontally, encouraging a “community company” approach.
Integrating Social Media, Workplace Learning, and eLearning for Development of Soft Skills

Managers must be stronger if they want to have an impact

Organisations almost always contain teams that have already developed collaborative working methods. By using what already exists these methods can be expanded right across the enterprise. These are the benefits for organisations wishing to acquire a competitive advantage by becoming a community company before their competitors do.

Towards Social Learning

To have many people working together on knowledge is to achieve ongoing learning and development of soft skills. Also, the value of individuals is enhanced and knowledge is networked, and the impact of these factors will be permanent.

Virtual and social networking tools challenge the idea that training can only take place at set times and favour instead an ongoing, informal learning process.

We are moving more and more towards a system of co-coaching employees. As Jerome Coignard from distance learning solutions provider CrossKnowledge points out:

“there is far too much compartmentalisation of highly formal training, eLearning and informal learning. It’s interesting to see how this informal learning, equipped with social-networking platforms within a business, can be boosted using content. The content will be denser and continuous, while retaining the timelines and patterns inherent in different types of training”.

The possible and desirable links between training, formal learning, business social networks and informal learning will create even more value for each person and for the business. Each person can individually store and share their own working and resources in order to learn and work better collectively. There is no doubt that social learning is the next step. This virtual space will facilitate collaborative work and give middle management a true leadership role once again, having fed and developed their ability to lead. There is one thing the experts are sure of: businesses are not prepared for this change, and there is an urgent need to help them through the process.

Pushing for Change

Leading from behind, or even from the middle, is a very effective means of leading, especially during times of transition. The reason so many change efforts fail is because they are dictated from on high without letting the people in the middle and on the ground absorb, internalise and implement. This is where leadership from the ranks plays a major role. When those people take the initiative and make it their own, there is a great chance for success. A virtual space, from social networking to eLearning, can encourage this.

Here are some simple lessons for implementing principles of leading from the middle.

Be open. People want to know what’s going on and their role in it. It falls to managers to make clear what the goals are and especially how those goals affect the team. If my company is going to grow, what do I have to do to improve delivery, ensure quality and continuously improve. The culture of exchange and openness encouraged by the emergence of social networking sites enables companies to accelerate their decision-making processes, and increase their capacity for innovation and commercial productivity. Faced with these new challenges, making the most of talents is paramount. Social networks help businesses improve competitiveness by being more responsive.

Be facilitating. Leadership really is the art of enabling others to succeed. Managers can do this by providing tools and resources so people have what they need to do their jobs. They also need to be available to set direction and be of counsel, that is, the team’s advisor. Sometimes managers will have to jump in
and help out with the workload but often it is
matter of facilitation, and that starts with being
available to advise, nudge and most of all, listen.
Previously, managers went out into the field
and they always had a powerful hold on their
territory. Virtual communication changes all
this, allowing people to move into a new territory.
However, in order to maintain consistency,
managers continue to occupy the field through
their teams.

Be forceful. People are people. We have our
own ideas; we don’t like to be dictated to. In
a “collaborative space” system, a manager
has an important role to play. To succeed, he
or she must have a hands-on management
style, while still acting as a leader. However,
it doesn’t always work out that way. It used
to be true that once managers reached a
certain level, they would automatically represent
authority. They had real responsibility. Now, with
all these communication tools, they carry less
weight, so managers must be stronger if they
want to have an impact. Those who manage
to show they are strong will be more richly
rewarded than before. Knowing how to take
risks and master relational strategies is a major
asset for a company.

Be teaching. One successful way in which
managers can teach is through the Socratic
method, that is, instructing by asking questions.
Employees may want information but often it
will be a matter of discovering the answers for
themselves. That ensures learning. It can be
frustrating if someone wants quick answers, of
course, and at times that is the proper method,
but over time you want people to discover
lessons for themselves. Social networks can
help to develop this new method of collaborative
working. Collective training allows individuals
in a same group to help each other with simple
problems, such as developing a macro in Excel,
or with more complex issues, such as
responding to a client in a specific situation.
It is one of the revolutions in the collaborative
world, as this method saves time, avoids
unnecessary expense [especially travel costs]
and improves teamwork quality and productivity.

Therefore, the emergence of a virtual space,
is increasingly prompting cultural change.
The development of collaborative work and
the redefined leadership role for middle
management means that those at the top will
have to recognise the importance of developing
their business through new social behaviours
and eLearning. They will have to recognise that
the ever-growing use of social networks, blogs
and forums can be incorporated into eLearning
programmes, creating a community company
that shares knowledge, encourages participation,
develops hard and soft skills in employees and
leaders alike, and remains competitive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Steve Fiehl is Chief Innovation Officer and Co-founder of
CrossKnowledge. He was formerly managing director, in charge
of web content and consumer activity, at Groupe Lagardère.
Steve is a graduate of HEC Paris.
Even if the words ‘workplace learning’ are not part of the official Toyota jargon, the practice behind the concept is firmly rooted in the Toyota Way culture. The Toyota term for it is On the Job Development (OJD). According to the Toyota philosophy the responsibility to develop people falls squarely on the line manager, not on the HR department or the trainer in the classroom. The next generation is developed through coaching of daily work. Managers are expected to allocate jobs to members based on the development opportunity these jobs provide.

In other words, Toyota employees are typically given ‘challenging’ assignments. The development then lies in the stretch between their current ability and the learning they need to go through to complete the assignment successfully. In addition to defining the right stretch for each member, the manager must also coach and support the member throughout the assignment to help him or her succeed, all the while leaving enough room to think; allowing mistakes; and using each one as a stepping stone to development.

With its rapid globalisation in the nineties, Toyota has realised that the OJD mindset & skills are not so easily embedded in the global workplace. Managers in Toyota’s international affiliates have not necessarily been ‘raised’ in corporate cultures with a strong focus on workplace learning and people development. Toyota had to find a way to accelerate the learning of its global management population so they could acquire the OJD mindset and skills without the years of acculturation their Japanese counterparts had benefitted from. And so, although it sounds like a contradiction, they turned to OJD classroom training. This is where our challenge at Toyota Motor Europe’s Pan-European training department started. Starting in 2005, we had to figure out how to train our managers in OJD, then move OJD from the classroom back into the workplace where it belonged. Our aim was simple – to create a sustainable learning process beyond the confines of the classroom in order to realise durable changes in workplace behaviour.

Following a two-day problem-solving course, members were expected to select a real problem at work and apply the newly learnt, standard problem-solving methodology to resolve it. They were assigned a more experienced mentor who had already gone through the same action learning process and who was expected to support and coach them.
Deploying the course from highest level executives downward was key to preparing our managers for their first structured practice of OJD. Having gone through the process themselves first, managers were prepared to take on the mentoring of the next level down. The mentoring itself was an excellent opportunity to deepen their own problem-solving skills and provided a first opportunity to coach it. The panellists evaluating the final papers learnt how to evaluate problem-solving skills, sometimes in functional areas outside their own, giving honest but constructive feedback. Top management learned they also had to pay attention to these projects, motivate learners and mentors, follow up on their progress and celebrate their success.

In the end, everyone learned in the process. As a training department, we learnt a great deal, primarily through the many mistakes we made.

- For quite some time the evaluations by the panels were so severe that learners came to fear the experience. We invested a great deal of effort at a later stage to make the experience motivational.

- We paid insufficient attention to the interaction between the mentor and the learner before the classroom event, losing motivation power there too. Due to the high number of learners, we stopped insisting that each learner be mentored by his or her own line manager, which undermined the OJD ownership of the line manager.

- We trained members per grade in cross-functional groups and as a result could not capitalise on the power of the team in the workplace.

- We lost impact in the classroom training itself, because our HR trainers couldn’t discuss the wide variety of real workplace issues with sufficient understanding and depth.

Each of these errors was corrected with time, even as we continued to deploy the problem-solving course. Still, all of them combined provided us with some great insights as we started rolling out the OJD course.

In deploying the OJD course in 2009, we launched four critical innovations aimed at enhancing transferability of the classroom learning to the workplace:

- We reinforced the development bond between the line managers and their direct reports. We had realised that by providing mentors outside this relationship we were allowing managers to skirt their ‘development’ responsibility by selecting someone else to mentor their subordinate, thus inadvertently weakening the development bond.
chain. We made it a rule for trainees to be mentored by their direct supervisor.

- The switch from cross-functional training to integral team training brought workplace dynamics into the workplace and created a team focus on practicing the new skills together in the workplace after the class.
- Using the team’s own leaders as teachers further strengthened the impact and relevance of the classroom discussions and created stronger continuum with the subsequent workplace learning.
- In addition, we introduced a 180 degree survey of OJD behaviour enhancing the awareness of the managers of their perceived strengths and weaknesses before attending the class.

Our efforts to drive sustainable learning in the workplace were further strengthened by aligning the appraisal and promotion practices with learning goals. The Toyota Way competency model closely reflects the behaviours taught in the problem-solving and OJD courses. In addition, in order to be promoted to a next level, members are required to demonstrate their problem-solving skills through a practical, documented case in front of a panel of senior managers. The supervisor is expected to coach and support the promotion candidate successfully through the preparation and the panel presentation. In case of failure, it is the supervisor who is questioned as to the effectiveness of his or her coaching efforts.

In 2010, Toyota intensified its efforts to strengthen workplace learning beyond the classroom. We stopped taking the classroom event as the focal point of our thinking. Instead we started considering the continuum of learning that needed to happen in the workplace over a certain period of time and considered how we could structure and strengthen it to meet our objectives. Rather than creating training events we wanted to focus on creating ‘learning programmes’ by combining informal, individual reflection, management and peer coaching, leader mentoring and formal training modules into a 1-year flow aligned with workplace dynamics to create just-in-time learning. In the “Managing People in the Toyota Way” programme we experimented with a broad variety of new learning methods while continuing to use some of the practices previously developed. We also successfully introduced Peer Coaching: creating an outlet for peers to be paired on strengths and weaknesses and to informally meet through the program.

Currently we are consolidating our lessons learnt on how to integrate classroom training into workplace learning in order to create durable changes in behaviour in a ‘Sustainable Learning Model’. Different levels are taken into account: from the company as a whole where top management championship plays a key role to the team dynamics and the individual in his interaction with his or her supervisor. This model should not only help us design workplace learning programmes, but also energise and structure the informal learning that takes place. The latter dimension will require yet another step in our learning and a new shift in our thinking about the role of a ‘training’ department – that is, letting go of the notion that our role as ‘trainers’ is only about the creation and delivery of some kind of formal learning event. Our challenge now is to strengthen the learning processes embedded in real-life workplace activities and events.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Ann-Sophie Cremers headed Toyota Motor Europe’s HR Training department as Senior Manager, then General Manager between 2005 and 2011. Prior to this, she worked as HR consultant for E&Y and Hudson. Since 2011, she has gone back to consultancy with in motion consulting, focussing on setting up learning programs as well as corporate training organisations.