the INHERENT INERTIA OF TRAINING

- CHARLES JENNINGS

It's passé to say that we live in a world of constant change. It's a given fact that change has been part of normal human life for eons. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrestled with the concept of change and left us with a wealth of quotations that are just as relevant today as they were when he lived 2,500 years ago – "change is the only constant" is one of his well-known examples.

When we turn to the world of training and development professionals, there is a strong argument that the profession has undergone huge change, especially over the past 30 years. However, there is an even stronger argument that it has not really changed at all.

IN·ER·TIA /I'N'ERSHE/
NOUN: A TENDENCY TO DO NOTHING OR TO REMAIN UNCHANGED.

TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN CHANGE

The World Wide Web has been a major driver of change in many aspects of life over the past 20 years. One would think that its impact would have been profound on training and development. Of course, it has been a change agent in some ways, but many training professionals are in the late majority or laggard groups on Everett Rogers' innovation curve, and what they do today has been little changed by Internet technologies.

Certainly, the Internet has broken the richness/reach trade-off as described by authors Philip Evans and Thomas Wurster in their 1999 book, "Blown To Bits" across many areas of human activity. No longer is the decision either richness or reach. We can now have both. The Internet has helped us exploit this trade-off in education and training to some extent.

Technology has seeded e-learning's growth and helped overcome previous limits to training and development imposed by time and distance. e-Learning is big business, but it is based on the old course paradigm — there's also some movement with MOOCs in workplace training and development. It is still niche and, again, remains rooted in the idea of learning as an event – a course.

The deconstructive impact on education and training has been significantly less than those Evans and Wurster correctly predicted on industries such as banking, the consumer and travel industries, and the press. Technology has had some impact, but it hasn't been transformational.

Why is this so? Why hasn't training and development been in the vanguard of innovation and adoption of new and better methods whether using technology or not?

Consider these factors:

Training is embedded in operating rhythms
The first factor is that the traditional training model is a well-established and is embedded in organizational operating rhythms. Annual development objective setting invariable involves managers and reports identifying the right courses or programs for development. Leaders and managers turn to their HR and training and development specialists with the expectation that they will produce courses and programs to meet their needs.

Budget models are antiquated
Secondly, from a budget perspective there is significant financial and resource investment in the event model for training. Financial officers in many organizations use incremental budgeting processes. Incremental budgeting is where budgets for each year are based on the previous year's spending and adjusted incrementally – movements are small. This model does not work, or is sub-optimal, in a rapidly changing business environment where speed and agility is critical.

Mindsets are stuck
Finally, many manager, HR and training and development mindsets are stuck with the idea that underperformance is a training problem and requires a training solution. This mindset also assumes that development opportunities are only met by scheduling training courses. The idea that each of these problems can often be addressed faster, more effectively and at lower cost by non-training solutions is not even considered. Structured learning events have been, and continue to be, the dominant model for building capability and addressing underperformance in most organizations.

OVERCOMING THE INERTIA

On the positive side, all of these factors can be overcome. However, it does require new approaches to building capability and performance – using workplace development opportunities and social learning techniques. The solution will also include new budgeting models. The last and most important change required to overcome the inertia of training is a change in mindset.

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