PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
in a NETWORKED WORLD

— CHARLES JENNINGS

Across the globe, organizations are under increasing pressure to grow and deliver results. Yet the world is in a low-growth dip of a low-frequency cycle; many economies are growing slowly, if at all, and the upturn seems to be some time coming. Leaders try to address this challenge by focusing efforts on increasing revenue while limiting costs. Increasing workforce productivity is a critical factor in both these endeavors and professional development is probably the most important component of workforce productivity.

There is a widening gap between these demands and our ability to support professional development at the rate and scale required to meet them. Development needs to be faster than the business and as fast as (and preferably faster than) change. Failure to match these speeds almost inevitably leads to a downward spiral of missed top- and bottom-line targets.

These difficulties are compounded by the new networked working environment.

WORKING AND LEARNING IN THE NETWORK ERA

The ways organizations and professionals work have changed radically over the past 20 years. According to a recent study by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB), 74 percent of senior leaders report the number of stakeholders with whom they interact has increased, and 70 percent feel they lack the flexibility to effectively lead in their new networked environment. At the same time, 80 percent of senior staff have received more responsibility, 65 percent must deliver business results faster, and 76 percent are asked to deliver more and broader objectives.

We are no longer leading, managing and working in a Taylorist world (see below). In today's network era, learning and work are merging. A focus on functional management has given way to agility, standardization to innovation, best practices to "good" and "emerging practices," curriculum to continuous development, and competence to capability. Workers are no longer seen as part of some machine but as co-creators of value.

There is an emerging body of research that suggests the required changes in professional development in this post-Taylorist networked world are not happening quickly enough. For example, the CEB also surveyed 7,000 organizational leaders, managers and HR directors and found that they require at least a 27 percent increase in performance to meet their goals in the next 12 months. There are two ways to achieve this increase: hire more people or help the existing workforce achieve "breakthrough performance."

In the same study, improvements in traditional classroom training yielded at most a 4 percent performance gain in the new networked working environment. These methods have, over time, become quite efficient and there's little headroom for further efficiency gains.

WHAT GOT US HERE WON'T GET US THERE

The answer to improving performance does not lie in improving existing professional development approaches. It lies in looking beyond the classroom and traditional e-learning approaches. We must focus on new ways of learning to deliver breakthrough performance in the new networked working environment.

Professional development is a continuous, ongoing process that consists of more than a series of development events. If we are to meet the ever-increasing demands being placed on our organizations, our executives, our managers and ourselves by economic trends and the new networked working environment, we need to step out of our "program" mindset and start to maximize learning where most of it happens – in the workplace. ⏱

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The Past (The world of Fredrick Winslow Taylor)	Today's Network Era (where learning and work are merging)
Functional Management	Agility
Standardization	Innovation
Best Practices	Good Practices; Emerging Practices
Curriculum	Continuous Development
Competencies (satisfactory)	Capabilities (potential)
Workers as part of 'the machine'	Workers as co-creators of value

Adapted from J.Cross, H.Jarche, C.Jennings