



FROM TRAINING *to* CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN THE WORKPLACE

- CHARLES JENNINGS

The training world is undergoing huge changes that could be termed, “the big squeeze.” Expectations are rising. Executives need support for a wider range of performance needs in increasingly complex working environments to ensure their enterprises survive and thrive. And, many training and development leaders are finding themselves with less time, less financial resources and fewer people.

A recent study by the Corporate Executive Board (CEB) highlighted some of these challenges. In 2012, CEB researchers posed the following question to more than 7,000 business leaders, managers and HR executives across the world, representing all major sectors:

“What improvement in employee performance do you need in order to achieve your business goals across the next 12 months?”

The average response from the executives was that they need an uplift of 20 percent to achieve these goals. Additionally, managers required an average performance improvement of 22 percent. And, chief human resource officers determined that their organizations needed an increase of 25 percent in employee performance.

THE BEST LEARNING USUALLY OCCURS IN THE WORKPLACE.

These are startling figures, especially when one realizes that there are only two ways to improve employee performance – hire more people to do the work, or help the existing workforce increase its output.

But the worse is still to come from this study.

CEB researchers also looked at the increased productivity that could be reasonably expected from traditional classroom training. The conclusion they drew was that classroom training effectiveness has improved in recent years. Training effectiveness was determined as the extent to which employees actually apply training in the workplace.

From a sample of more than 6,000 employees, the researchers determined that classroom training effectiveness had increased from 64 percent to 76 percent between 2009 and 2012. They also determined that further improvements in facilitator skills, new training materials, enhanced classroom facilities, and the increased use of technology in the classroom would not yield breakthrough performance. A further four percent improvement could be expected at best.

The study concluded that “continuing to invest in standard improvements based on yesterday’s work environment will not yield breakthrough performance.”

These findings support others. There is an inherent inertia in traditional training approaches. For example, 20th century training approaches tend to be slow to deliver and don’t scale. Event-based learning usually takes a great deal of time to plan, design and develop. e-Learning has helped reduce the time to deliver and some issues of scale, but often at the expense of disengaging employees from the learning process due to unimaginative content-rich and experience-poor e-learning programs.

FINDING ANSWERS

So, if the answer doesn’t lie in improving existing and past practices, where does it lie?

It lies in changing mindsets first, and then changing practices. It lies in helping people appreciate that learning is not an event or series of events but something that happens at any time and is most likely to happen as part of the workflow.

It lies in understanding that classroom training can be a wonderful way to help employees quickly get to grips with what’s expected in their jobs and what’s available to help them. Well-designed training can often help people get started or refresh basic core skills. Classroom events can also encourage joint problem solving and community building.

However, the best learning usually occurs in the workplace. It comes from tackling big challenges and from making mistakes and then reflecting on what went wrong, how we can fix it, and what we would do next time. It comes from sharing our challenges and successes with colleagues. It comes from practice in context, and more practice.

And it comes from appreciating that learning and performance improvement is a lifetime journey. That everyone, no matter what our role or position, benefits from adopting a mindset of continuous learning in the workflow. ☺

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