

Innovations in information technology and financial imperatives are fuelling the return of workplace learning. **Charles Jennings** looks at why an age-old practice is so suited to the 21st century



Learning on the job

Profound changes over the past 20 years have influenced the approaches we are taking to developing workforce capability at both individual and organisational levels.

The rise of networks and the ability of individuals to access massive amounts of information on seemingly every subject are presenting both opportunities and challenges for learning within the workplace. While having ubiquitous information and connections at one's fingertips is a luxury unimagined by our forefathers, it also alters fundamentally the way we learn and perform.

These developments have re-awakened great interest in the age-old approach of learning within the workplace rather than leaving the workplace in order to learn. The difference now, of course, is that 21st century workplace learning is being overlaid and supported by 21st century technologies and 21st century thinking.

Workplace learning has been part of the toolkit for building human performance and productivity for centuries. The master-apprentice model and experiential on-the-job learning were the only ways people developed



mastery of their trade or profession until the extension of more formal class-based one-to-many learning systems that originated in Prussia during the 18th century.

This Prussian model spread around the world and, until recently, has been the dominant approach to learning in the vast majority of organisations. The French philosopher and sociologist Michael Foucault has referred to the period during which classrooms were established as the *modus operandi* of education and training as “the great confinement”.

In the 55 years from the end of the second world war to the millennium, the classroom model became even more dominant in corporate training. Many of the “corporate universities” that were established in the 1990s were simply extensions of the off-the-job classroom-based learning model.

Most of us now realise that classroom-bound learning is confining. The vital link between learning and work is broken or at least weakened significantly by moving learning away from the workplace.

The challenge of retaining what has been learned in a classroom and applying it effectively is difficult. It is certainly more difficult than if the learning takes place in the context of where it is to be applied. At the same time, the profusion of new communication technologies and applications built upon them has opened up opportunities for workplace learning that simply have not existed previously.

Many organisations are now taking steps to break out of the “confinement”.

When these changes and opportunities are set against the weakening business climate



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over the past two years there is an even greater imperative to focus more closely on the value that can be delivered from stagnant or declining learning budgets through taking a fresh approach and incorporating workplace learning at the heart of our learning strategies.

In fact, it is vital that all organisations, be they institutions of higher learning, government departments or business corporations, now recognise the sea change that is taking place and adjust to it. Doing so is critical for the preparation of students and employees for successful and effective careers in today's hyper-competitive environment.

Learning maturity and workplace learning

It is worthwhile pondering on learning maturity and its relationship with workplace learning to understand whether we are moving forward by adopting what could be seen as an age-old approach to ensuring someone can do his or her job effectively.

Various maturity models have been developed for organisational learning that link learning with work. One of the most straightforward is that originated by technology group IBM. In IBM's model learning maturity is described in three phases.

- an Access Phase, where learning is separate from work – including classrooms and other away-from-work learning “events” that are planned and delivered not by the learner but by Leadership and Development professionals
- an Integration Phase, where learning is enabling work – using enterprise-wide learning systems, supporting business performance and with some “blended” learning and increased learner control
- an On Demand Phase, where learning is embedded in work – where learning is part of the work and “learning is the work”

Workplace learning sits firmly in the On Demand phase in this model. Much of workplace learning is “pulled” by the learner rather than being pushed and it is carried out on a need-to-know and need-to-perform basis rather than when an event is scheduled. In the workplace most learning is “just-in-time” rather than “just-in-case”.

Knowledge work and workplace learning

The rise of knowledge work is one of the most important phenomena to have occurred in the second half of the last century.

In a society dominated by highly specialised institutions and organisations, knowledge work – as characterised by non-routine, creative, problem-solving, innovative and change-oriented activities – has become the norm rather than the exception.

We find these knowledge workers everywhere in our society – as managers and executives in commercial business and social enterprises, as civil servants, politicians, as entrepreneurs, as consultants, as doctors, as accountants, financial analysts and stockbrokers.

In developed countries these knowledge workers are approaching 40 % of the population and in emerging economies they form a new “middle-class”.

The explosion of knowledge work and the increasingly dynamic world of the workplace have together created challenges that cannot be addressed through the provision of structured off-the-job learning solutions alone. There are significant challenges in this new world of work that require a range of different approaches.

“Time to competence” is one major challenge facing organisations that employ knowledge workers. In an environment where information and knowledge are exploding and where the half-life value of both is decreasing, the need



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Knowledge workers need to develop and enhance their “knowledge capital” on an on-going bases during their daily working lives. To do this, they need to adopt a continuous learning approach that includes learning from the experiences they have during their working day, learning through practice and learning from others they work and interact with through conversation, discussion and problem analysis.

Although time-bounded learning events may help, in no way can they fully support these needs. The use of effective workplace learning approaches is not a desirable but an essential in 21st century knowledge work.

An additional dimension in the general “speed to competence” issue faced through working in a dynamic workplace is that many organisations struggle with the challenge of ensuring that their most talented employees are provided with support for their ongoing development and career progression.

In the more robust financial climates of ten or 20 years ago most of the talent development was through off-the-job events and experiences that were provided in conjunction with leading education providers and business schools.

In today’s whirlwind working world and financially constrained environments many organisations are looking to support talent development within the workplace, whether through workplace coaching and mentoring or through facilitating the use of employee social networks and “learning through others”. Both of these approaches can be integrated into overall workplace learning strategies.

The EFMD and workplace learning

The EFMD is actively addressing the issue of workplace learning and extending learning beyond the classroom as part of its Excellence in Corporate Learning strategy.

A Workplace Learning Group has been established as the first of a number of planned special interest groups to support members in developing their learning provision. Initial membership of the workplace learning group includes the BBC, Allianz, Coca Cola, Eli Lilly, Ergo, GSK, Holcim, L’Oreal, Novo Nordisk, Toyota and MAN.

The group had its first peer workshop event in October 2009 and is actively identifying the key levers, tools, guidelines, frameworks, good practice and solutions that can help build sustainable employee capability beyond the confines of formal training and development courses and programmes. Pilots and case studies of new approaches to workplace learning are also being developed.

One key area of focus for this year-long collaboration is the use of new informal workplace learning methods and technologies emerging from Web 2.0 developments such as social software and performance support solutions.

The group is also focusing on issues such as the engagement of experts as originators of learning content, closer alignment with line managers to develop informal coaching and mentoring, building best practice through distributed working groups, technology-based delivery and consumption of learning content, and other related areas.

EFMD is working on the launch of further special interest groups including Executive Development Centres and Community-Driven Action Learning. **gf**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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