The Future of Workplace Learning: Being a Learning Architect

With the development of new educational theories and technologies, many innovations have changed the landscape of work and learning. How has learning adapted and changed with the transformation of the workplace? What do we need to do to learn effectively in the digital age?

Learning Landscape Now and 30 Years Ago

There are important changes in workplace learning - learning through new technologies, an unprecedented availability of information on any subject (although not all of it accurate or professional) and social exchanges of information. Let's take a look at some of these.

Mobile Learning. With increasing broadband connectivity, mobile and web-based learning are gaining more traction. Online courses can be viewed anytime and anywhere on the computer or the smartphone. Along with this trend and the short attention span in today's digital world, learning content is increasingly micro-sized and modularized. Snippets of reading materials, vignettes and videos are often condensed into a few minutes' worth of learning material.

Google as the World's Knowledge Management System. Learning nowadays goes beyond structured courses. With unprecedented access to information and knowledge, we have plenty of opportunities and resources at our fingertips. Search on google and blogs, vlogs (video+blog), YouTube channels, articles, websites, infographics and social media posts pop up. There are even Q&A websites that invite us to ask a question and receive a specific answer. The possibilities are very open with a lot of information on any subject. Often, learning something does not require a trip to a bookshop or any in-depth investigation, but just the first couple of results from a search engine.

Social Learning. Learning has also become a more social process. People share information they are passionate about and make available resources for others to consume and use freely. Social media or Q&A sites, amongst others, also allow us to get a quick answer to any questions they might have. Just type any question on Facebook and receive a myriad of answers. We can learn from anyone in our network anytime and anywhere. Certainly, these answers are not always accurate, but often are spot on.

Opportunities and Challenges with this Digital Learning Landscape

There are huge opportunities in this changing landscape. Employees have the chance to learn any subject and improve their capacities, with many resources at their fingertips. The company can offer cost-effective courses that are convenient for the employees as well, being available anytime on the computer or smartphone. There is information to learn new
competencies, skills, theoretical knowledge and many other things, presented in different formats, from video lectures to book-sized web pages.

However, there are a few challenges to consider. Firstly, information found on the Internet outside of a professional environment can lack accuracy and structure. This information might not always be up-to-date or reflect the current state of affairs in specific scientific or technological fields, especially those that advance very fast or are very narrow or specialized. So we need to decipher, discern and distill the wheat from the chaff.

Another challenge with this instant availability of resources is learning becomes more superficial. We may not bother to learn a subject in depth or to focus very much on it at all and choose to just bookmark the webpage instead.

**Being a Learning Architect in this New Digital Age**

With these opportunities and challenges, we need to be our own learning architect to leverage these resources productively. Here are three principles to guide us – own our responsibility, possibilities and actions.

**Own our Responsibility.** Typically, from kindergarten to university life, our preparation for working life follows a pretty structured and well-planned path. We have collected the required diplomas and certificates along the way. When we enter working life, the learning structure is less clear. Taking responsibility for our learning means getting clear about what we want to learn, taking initiative to access the relevant learning resources and applying it. How about conducting a "learning audit" to look at the new knowledge, skills and mind-set that we have gained? What shifted for us? What have we learned and done differently?

**Own Our Possibilities.** Career paths are evolving along with the twin process of globalization and technology. We need to imagine new future possibilities in the world of work – how jobs will change and the skills that will become important. How about identifying new skills and capabilities with the changes in your industry or organization? Envision new roles in your career. With these possibilities in mind, we can seek a holistic learning experience. This means approaching content with child-like curiosity, seeking out new experiences, and critically thinking about what we read, watched and learnt.

**Own our Actions.** Without actions, the possibilities we envisioned would be just a dream. Actions translate to behaviors that over time become our habits. We learn through our actions. Experiment with something new. Reflect on the results. Adjust the next action. This will also help us validate ideas from the web or our network. Action learning is not new, but as Alvin Toffler, the futurist says, “the illiterate of the 21st century are not those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.” On whatever you chose to learn, how about listing out what you can do, where can you learn it, what are the reliable sources and who can teach you? Keep a learning log to reflect on your learning. And just do it, starting from tomorrow.
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