

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

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- The Real Reasons We Don't Evaluate
- Are Deep Learning Skills Atrophying?
- Simulations: Gaming the System
- Overcoming Learning's Short Shelf Life
- An End to Death by PowerPoint
- The Cost-Based Analysis of Development
- Real-Time Learning at Xerox
- The State of Learning Governance

A portrait of Teresa Roche, a woman with short, styled white hair, smiling. She is wearing a black turtleneck top and a necklace with a circular pendant. The background is a grey wall with several large, white, circular decorative elements.

Agilent Technologies'
TERESA ROCHE

The Beginning of a New Era

Time to formalize informal learning • BY JOSH BERSIN



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During the past quarter century, corporate training has gone through several major shifts.

The 1980s and early 1990s were the era of the corporate university. Companies created centralized training functions to develop employee skills in a wide range of professional and leadership areas. The economy was growing, so companies could invest in these learning organizations and support a long-term focus on employee development.

Then came the Internet and a decade of focus on e-learning. Companies purchased complex, employee-facing learning management systems and thousands of online courses. Corporate universities drifted into federated learning organizations with teams scattered around the enterprise.

We are now beginning a third era: the formalization of informal learning.

This shift is a result of a tremendous need to reduce costs, the proliferation of networking and mobile devices, young and always-connected employees and the ability to store and search massive amounts of content easily. Added to this is the investment many companies recently have made in integrated talent management and an emphasis on managing four generations of workers.

In this new era, corporate learning is employee-directed, continuous, person-to-person and requires new tools and technologies. Much of learning is based on informal methods, including on-demand resources, simulations, social learning and embedded learning.

As in the e-learning era, technology plays a big role. Today, approximately 175 million people are on Facebook, and more than 40 million professionals are on LinkedIn. There are more than 1 billion cell phones in the world. Companies commonly use blogs and wikis and portals for quick and easy access to resources.

While learning and development executives still are responsible for building high-powered professional, technical and leadership programs, they're also now the stewards and architects of a vast range of informal learning tools and resources.

Formal training still is appropriate for portions of some learning programs, but informal training is becoming much more predominant. Besides being more cost and time efficient, informal learning also supports how most learning takes place. Corporate managers esti-

mate that approximately 20 percent of job-related learning occurs through formal, traditional training, while 80 percent occurs informally or on the job.

If we are to stay relevant, learning professionals must formally consider informal learning when doing strategic planning. Rather than being an afterthought or addendum, informal learning should be near the top of the planning process.

Consider a high-powered new sales training program Bersin & Associates evaluated for one of the world's fastest-growing technology companies. The program includes technical education, performance support, a series of communities of practice and a heavy focus on management coaching. These learning approaches come together to form an integrated, high-performance sales development program designed to bring formal, informal and self-directed learning together.

Bersin & Associates recently published the Enterprise Learning Framework, a graphical view of what the modern training organization looks like in light of the big shift to informal learning. The chart shows the six learning areas on which learning organizations should focus:

1. Programs.
2. Audiences and problems.
3. Approaches.
4. Disciplines.
5. Technology.
6. Culture.

These areas aren't new, but we do need to think about them differently in the era of formal informal learning. As you formalize informal learning, you must think about these areas as an integrated whole and consider each when doing program planning.

If it all sounds a little overwhelming, particularly in these difficult economic times, take heart. Formalizing informal learning can be achieved without spending a lot of money. If we think like architects and bring together the elements of learning we already know, we can lead this new wave of corporate training and help our organizations become more competitive than ever.

Research clearly shows that enduring organizations have built a strong set of formal and informal learning processes, all supported by many elements of a learning culture. As leaders of corporate training, we must go beyond the classroom and e-learning catalog and embrace this new era. **CLO**