



To design today's modern learning environments, you must understand not only what training people need but how they typically solve problems and learn.

By Josh Bersin

Corporate training faces many rapid changes today: cost reductions, consolidation and centralization, focus on first-line management and professional skills development, certification programs, and the adoption of social networking for learning. Bersin & Associate's research has shown that despite the 11 percent reduction in spending that took place in 2008, today's learning and development professionals are spearheading tremendous change in the evolution of their training programs.

In particular, one of the most important changes taking place is the formalization of informal learning. Today's high-impact training programs go far beyond instructor-led events and include

self-study materials, social experiences, performance support, mobile learning activities, coaching, and highly interactive forms of e-learning.

In 2008, we set out to create a profile of the modern training organization and to identify the strategies, approaches, disciplines, technologies, and processes needed to succeed in today's corporate learning world.

Our research finds that successful learning and development programs still rely on the tried-and-true basics: performance consulting, design, program management, audience analysis, and program administration. And the disciplines of organization, governance, planning, measurement, and leadership still apply. Most training organizations are well versed in these skills and can hire people or consultants to help with these elements.

But the research also finds that learning and development professionals need a whole new set of skills and disciplines to succeed in today's social learning environment. These include:

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS AND PERFORMANCE CONSULTING.

Before offering the appropriate learning solution to a business challenge, today's learning professional must investigate audience learning behaviors. Before prescribing a learning solution, you need to ask questions such as: How does your target audience access information to get the job done? How do employees find people with answers? Who are the subject matter experts and how can they be leveraged to improve performance? How can managers become more engaged in the development and coaching process? To design today's modern learning environments, you must understand not only what training people need but how they typically solve problems and learn.

INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE.

The term "information architecture" refers to a technical discipline now taught in school—how to organize information so that it can easily be found and used. Information architecture encompasses how to design an online learning environment so that it is easy to locate the information employees need. Traditional approaches, such as course catalogs, are inadequate for today's learning styles and information resources. Learning and development organizations must now work with IT to build social learning experiences, portals, and other solutions that are easy to use, highly efficient, and incorporate all types of learning resources.

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT.

One of the most exciting new opportunities in corporate learning today is the use of internal social learning networks. These networks already exist in many companies as communities of practice. Your learning and development staff must learn how to build, promote, moderate, and support these networks.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT.

Like it or not, this term has now become an integral part of the mission of learning and development. While the concepts of KM have been around for decades, today's organizations now have the opportunity to implement very useful tools to manage, share, and update technical information, documentation, on-the-job findings, and other forms of knowledge—which can and should be integrated into our training programs and curricula.

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT.

We have all heard about the wisdom of crowds. Whether or not you use social networking, all learning and development staff must understand the potential for these tools and solutions to drive business value. Organizations such as Accenture, IBM, British Telecom, and the Federal Reserve now have highly active networks that enable professionals and technical experts to share information, expertise, and even videos freely around the

organization. Through tagging and rating by employees, these information resources can become tremendously valuable learning tools.

For example, Sun Microsystems has a multimedia portal called Sun Learning eXchange where employees can post, view, rate, tag, share, or download content to their desktops or wireless devices. The portal has revolutionized sales training, allowing salespeople to get information and seek guidance from their peers quickly and easily. Modern learning professionals should be considering how to make learning environments more like YouTube and less like course catalogs.

MEASUREMENT, EVALUATION, AND BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE.

One of the benefits of new corporate learning software is we now have much learning-related data. Through the use of new tools, you can monitor and analyze the usage of learning programs and activities more easily than ever before. This data will inform your decisions about what programs to build, who to invite, and how to improve your informal learning programs. However, to capitalize on this data, your learning and development team needs someone who understands how to capture, aggregate, and analyze data. Without such a resource, you will be working in the dark.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS.

While this is certainly not a new discipline, it is one that is more important than ever.

Today's learning environments must be marketed, monitored, and continuously integrated into the daily lives of business people. Your learning and development team needs a change management expert as well as a communications expert to be successful.

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN, REVISITED.

The traditional concepts of instructional design (the ADDIE model) have not gone away. But it is time to revisit your process and add steps to incorporate social learning, coaching, management solutions, and knowledge management. We're currently talking with organizations in the midst of redesigning identification processes to ensure the concepts of informal and social learning are incorporated into every program.

Despite the significant challenges most of us are facing, this is a very exciting time for the training profession. While budgets are currently tight, we can achieve even greater corporate impact and value by embracing these new disciplines and approaches. Our companies, learning and development organizations, and learning audiences all stand to benefit.

Josh Bersin is president of *Bersin & Associates* (www.bersin.com); josh@bersin.com.

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