Roadmap to a new learning future

The key considerations in creating an effective learning ecosystem

Back in the summer of 2014, Debbie Lawley, MD at WillowDNA was invited to attend the Learning Directors Network Event in London. Conversations were dominated by the publication of the 2014 CIPD Learning and Development http://strategic-hcm.blogspot.co.uk/2014/05/cipdldshow–learner-and-learning.html.

The CIPD report is an interesting illustration of the need to be careful when interpreting statistics. Those companies reporting more than half training delivered by e-learning has apparently dropped by 9%. This seems to work against the LDN report where both bespoke and catalogue e-learning had respective increasing use reported as 56% and 57%. This may have more to do with the growing understanding and recognition of much wider learning methods. This changes the way people are reporting the distribution of time and budget spent on learning and this must be applauded.

However, at the Learning Directors Network event there were fears that the recognition of different methods may be shallow and not deeply embedded in practice. The CIPD report refers to "mirror neurons", "correlation between physical exercise and increased learning performance". It may be prudent to be a tad sceptical, especially given the increase in evaluation methods still being predominantly led by Kirkpatrick and other L&D staples from the dim and distant past.

Move ahead to November 2014 and we see the publication of the 8th Towards Maturity Benchmarking survey, where an eye-catching figure illustrates that the numbers may be uncovering a deeper challenge. Whilst organisations are reporting an increase in productivity, speed of rollout, competency, reduced attrition rates, only 15% actually measure this against any KPIs and only 31% report they are realising the benefit they seek, a drop from 51%.

These figures need to be considered holistically – is the challenge here one of 'fit for purpose'? Are we making the right design choices in our learning mix and creating a conducive online learning environment? Do we have the capability expertise and strategy to map our business goals against learning in a meaningful way? Hits, popularity, traffic and shares only tell part of the story. Interestingly, there is evidence in the benchmark survey of a low level of investment in CPD for learning professionals and in this ever changing landscape where we under increasing board scrutiny, this represents a real challenge.

But there is no doubt, that there is change with L&D specialists reaching the top table – learning is part of the strategic roadmap and seen as a key enabler to business growth and innovation.. As a long time provider of online learning services, it is encouraging to see signs that e-learning is now beginning to fit into the whole L&D strategy and not as an ad hoc delivery method. For success, it requires a holistic approach to learning strategy from mobilising managers as advocates to curating content through subject matter expertise.

Roadmap to a new learning future – aligning learning delivery and measurement in an open, social world

The job titles of L&D team members are changing as a reflection of this and the changing nature of the L&D roles themselves. Lisa Minogue-White, Head of Learning Solutions at WillowDNA, during a presentation back at the Learning Technologies show in January 2014 explored this, going as far as saying that even the latest trend of 'Head of Online Learning' or 'Head of Digital Learning' itself is only a short term step. Whether learning is online or not is not really the point, but the strategic orchestration of learning in all its forms is. The senior exec roles in L&D are reflecting the need to apply strategic thinking to mobilising learning to realising organisation strategic objectives.

Most of our client engagements involve working with organisations faced with the need to learn fast and applying learning in the workplace with technology as a core enabler. The challenge is how to articulate this and then how to create the correct governance and learning structures in organisation design. This includes creating the best-fit tech architecture to enable this to be flexible and robust to achieve the performance levels required of our people.
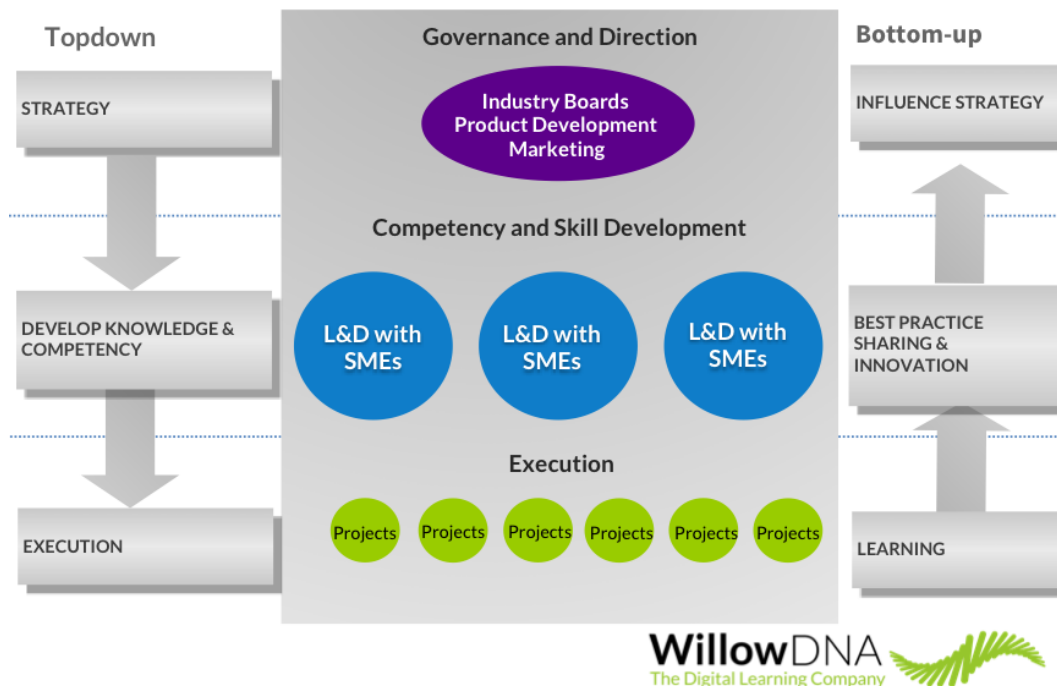
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The diagram above makes a good start in describing the flow of governance through organisational design and structure. Direction is set through the top table, supporting knowledge, skills and competencies defined with L&D working alongside the subject matter experts. Finally, skills and experience are executed in projects, delivering the company output. This sits though in fluid systems which are often complex. The challenge is how to simplify this flow, supporting the need for knowledge on the job with feedback on effectiveness back through to the SMEs and then to the top table in terms of achievement. The more rapid this can be, the more effective it is. The faster the rate of change in the organisation, the faster this has to be.

Business strategy engagement – aligning learning strategy for business growth

There is, of course, no one right way of handling this. The culture, direction and underlying drivers of an organisation are critical in defining the best way of addressing learning. And it is very likely that different business areas will respond to different approaches as their contexts are frequently so different.

The dynamic of a business area that deals with complex, uncertain knowledge, relies on ill-defined or wholly collaborative relationships. Often there are many dispersed stakeholders in a more challenging environment than a more stable working area. The learning strategy then has to be sensitive to the context as well as the business drivers.

We find the following model a useful one when starting out in forming the strategic outline for an organisation or business area.

Building a learning organisation - the steps

Individual learning, tactical organisations

Formal Ad Hoc Learning	Competency & performance based training	Knowledge flow, learning and innovation
Organisational Push *Cost based* *Efficiency Drive*	*ROI* *Efficiency drive with evaluation of effectiveness*	*Organisational pull to support teams based on learning in the workplace Improvement based*
• portfolio of training accessed via catalogue • training provided to support gaps in skills to do job • e-learning seen as a cheaper way of delivering classroom training	• Competency frameworks as a means of achieving culture change and consistency in roles and reward • Blended learning, complexity of learning understood and evaluation undertaken • Recognition of best practice, initiation of communities of practice and professional networks	• Growth in collaboration focus, recognition of importance in informal learning • Learning dept becomes focused on creating the right environment for learning plus specific business les initiatives • Product knowledge focus imperative, improvement focus, innovation

← Efficiency   Effectiveness →

Business development and growth
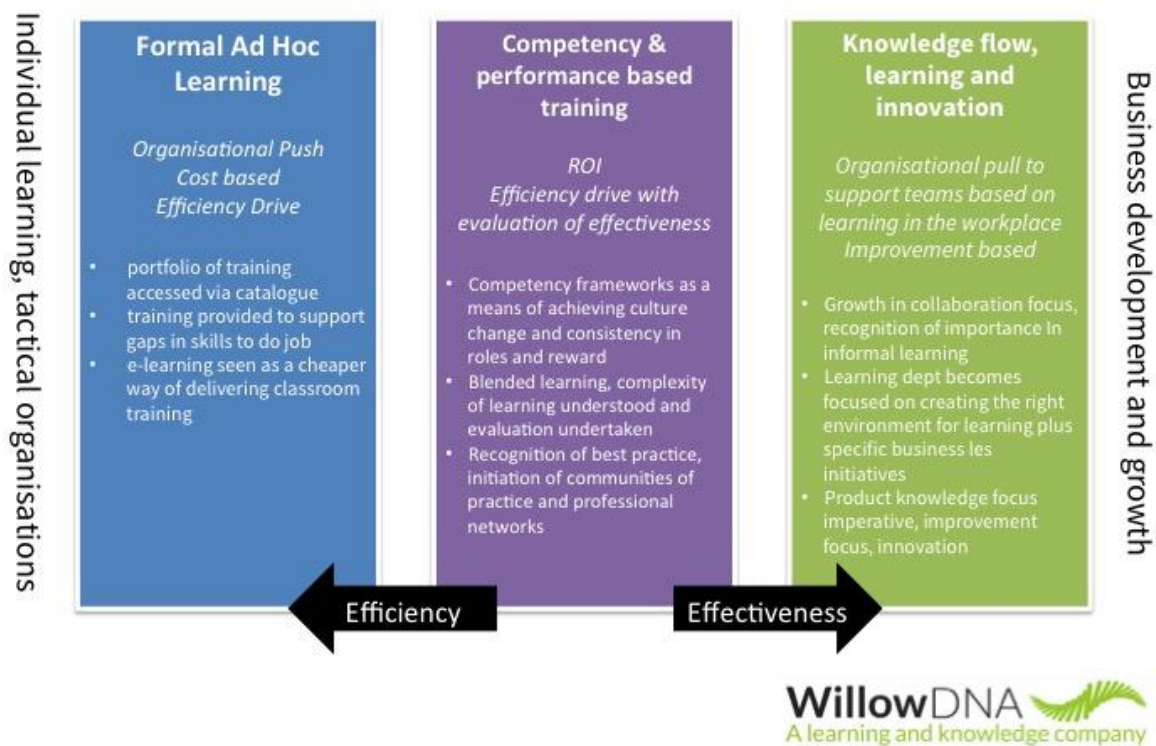
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Fig 1. Becoming a learning organisation copyright WillowDNA 2012

It is not intended as a flow from left to right although the journey for many companies has been just that. Reality is usually much more additive, with tactics continuing to be important and cost of delivery remaining an issue. But L&D are likely to be focusing on business outcome now and targeting top table issues. L&D will be engaging at least some of their learning budget to directly support the USPs of the company. Innovation and knowledge flow in the fastest moving business areas will require a responsive and broader learning ecosystem, probably employing more of the wider 70:20:10 toolkit.

Of course, online learning is a key delivery mechanism and it would be a very strange organisation that did not have online and social learning as fundamental aspects of their learning ecosystem. Matching the learning practice with the cultural norms of the business function is going to result in better outcomes.

It is the engagement of learning in the working practices of the company that is the underlying foundation to any L&D delivery mechanism. We find feedback

loops the most effective and these can be embedded in most working fields from Product Management through to Call Centres. This requires the correct learning environment including people, process through to technology.
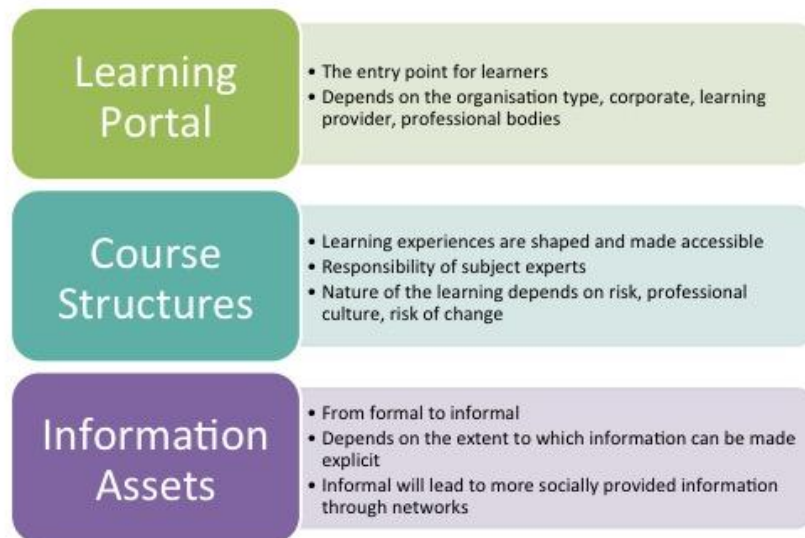
Creating the right learning architecture

If we reflect back on one of the key figures in the Towards Maturity Benchmark Survey, where there is evidence of a reported fall in realising the benefit sought from investments in learning innovation, we have a view as to why this might be. If you compare these figures to the 'Use of Technology' section, you'll find more than half of respondents reporting they use more than 16 different technologies and the expected high percentages in use of e-learning, LMS, virtual classrooms and mobile. Compare this to the investment in CPD for L&D and this may uncover a challenge. It's not to say that L&D are not sensitive to the new learning ecosystem and investing heavily on a personal basis in gaining deeper understanding (the attendance at thought leader events, conferences webinars and dialogue via social media shows demonstrates the motivation and intellectual curiosity). However the skills needed with the L&D and the services of the partner organisations with which they engage is changing.

Learning ecosystem design can feel overwhelming and extremely complicated. Most organisations have legacy systems. There are few suppliers who can cover a whole requirement for any reasonably complex company. Even if they could, organisations rarely have the same needs throughout the company. And even if they did, those needs change.

To make this begin to feel manageable, it is best to strip the ecosystem down to three basic elements; the learning portal, course structures and information assets. What happens next is really down to the type of organisation we are dealing with.

A way of analysing the needs of the organisation can be achieved by tackling several dimensions; approach to risk, nature of information, rate of change, culture.

Learning Architecture – 3 Tier Model

Learning Portal
- The entry point for learners
- Depends on the organisation type, corporate, learning provider, professional bodies

Course Structures
- Learning experiences are shaped and made accessible
- Responsibility of subject experts
- Nature of the learning depends on risk, professional culture, risk of change

Information Assets
- From formal to informal
- Depends on the extent to which information can be made explicit
- Informal will lead to more socially provided information through networks

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Where a company's rate of change is very high and knowledge tends to be held socially, then a social collaboration enabler will be vital. So the learning portal will need to access knowledge domains and the network of people, both experienced and novices. The course structures may be evolutionary and highly changeable – so more need to keep them simple and adaptable. And the information assets are more likely to be in the domain of the community so community spaces become more important.

Where a company has a high-risk profile, the learning portal will probably need to be security focused to specific accesses even within the company, the course structures are likely to be leading towards accreditation. The information assets are likely to be well defined, with clear structures and change managed by the correct authorities. This is a simplified view and, of course, most companies have business areas that may be quite different to each other. Simple companies (this does not mean small) will require a more straightforward ecosystem, the more differentiated, the more complex the ecosystem.

Evaluation and the ecosystem

Embedding evaluation into the ecosystem design and the implementation of that design is essential if we in L&D are to stay on that top company table. One of the neatest ways of achieving this at a strategic level is to use value chain analysis, ensuing the learning interventions that are deployed at each stage of the ecosystem are correctly targeted at the company objectives.
The simple example below, borrowed from Fujitsu, uses the sales team objective of increasing the win ratio. Each intervention then will be aiming for a specific outcome, for which there will be assumptions. Interventions then must be measured against the intended outcome. The tighter this can be, the more effective the intervention.

This is a somewhat different approach to the traditional Kirkpatrick model – still needed in the right places.
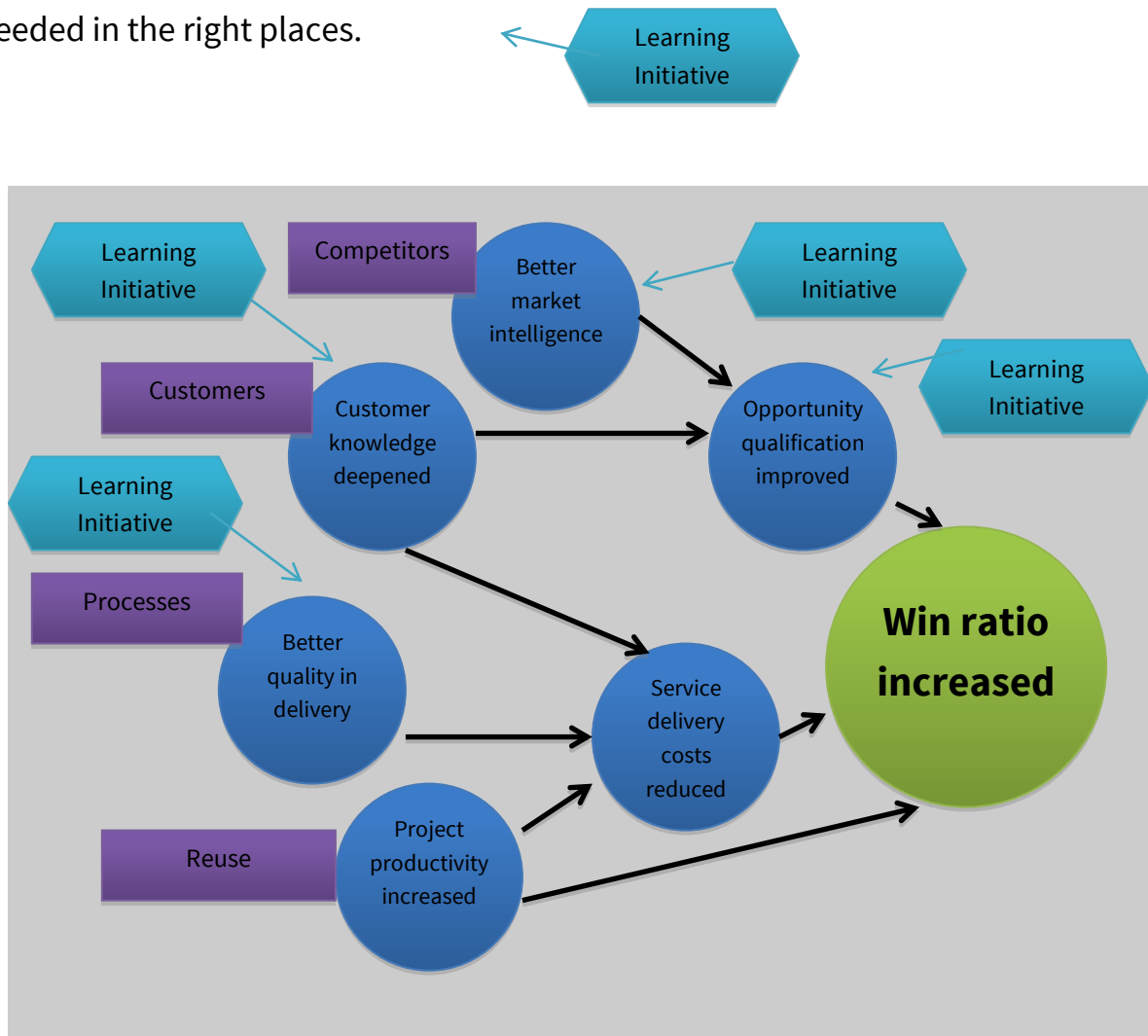
This takes us right back to the overall strategic fit of the learning ecosystem in the company design where the governance of the company and strategic direction of the organisation, flows through to implementation via projects and operations, neatly supported by the enabling learning strategy with suitable feedback loops.
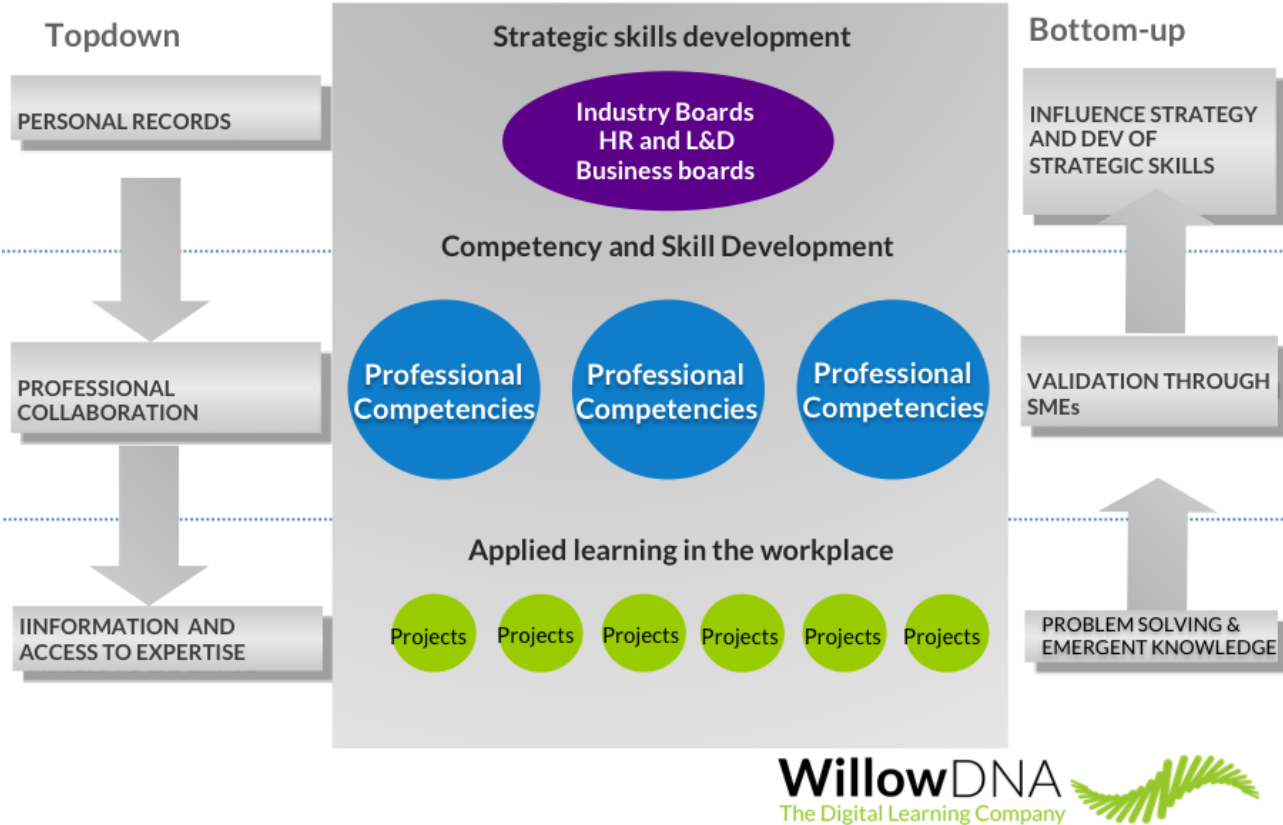
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The learning ecosystem approach is changing the way in which needs are defined, learning is delivered and outcomes measured (with technologies such as xAPI/TinCan driving new measurement definitions and possibilities). The partnerships between learning solutions providers and organisations will be key in delivering the new learning ecosystem.