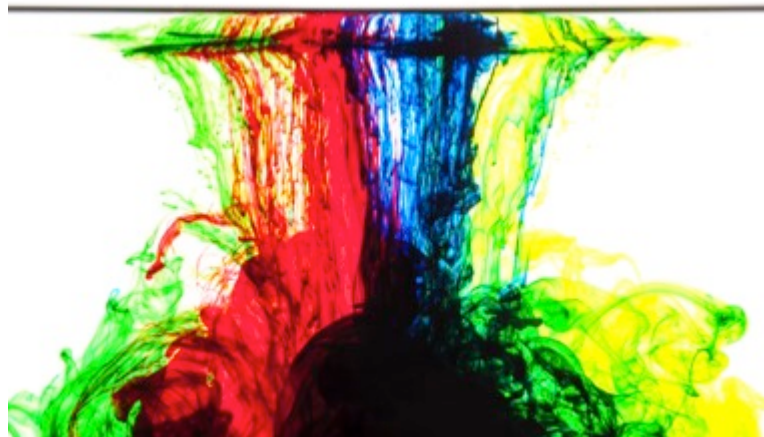




Performance catalysts

The role learning professionals should play to support organisational performance

Our friend, Clive Shepherd was one of the VIPs invited to the preview of the official publication of this year's Towards Maturity Benchmarking Report. Following this, he posted to LinkedIn Pulse, to share his first reflections. These thoughts confirm what many suspected but perhaps hoped was not the case:



“the call seems only to be heard by the already converted. What TM calls the ‘Top Deck’ (those organisations that are showing the best results from their L&D efforts) are shooting ahead, overcoming barriers and exploring all the possibilities for workplace learning in all its contexts, formal and informal. The rest have been stuck for years.”

As Clive says, the future is already here and there's never been a better time to truly facilitate learning if we can shake off the shackles of the past. During the

launch webinar of the report on 5th November, the audience expressed clear frustration at the lack of significant shifts in approach by L&D and equally the engrained perception of learning and HR by the business. The top deck organisations are reporting learning shaped by models that encourage learning as part of the workflow, rather than a separate entity.

Learning in the workflow

This isn't new – when I first met Debbie Lawley, CEO at WillowDNA, we were both working for global Knowledge Management at France Telecom back in 2003. I remember her developing and presenting her vision for the global learning strategy for the organisation. A design where learning was embedded in the workflow, as enablers of performance improvement, where the inputs and outputs of each key business deliverable were understood and knowledge and skills to deliver the business deliverables were aligned.

By doing this, the concept of a catalogue or a course was always far too restrictive, far too binary. There may well have been occasions where a learning need that emerged from the workflow was something really practical, like know-how to use a CRM, where some formal content was entirely appropriate.

However, deep understanding of customer experience of our products and services (if the business flow showed that we were falling behind our competitors) couldn't be captured in a course, it required a community of clear purpose to engage and uncover the real experiences.

“The most significant question for an HR professional to ask a business leader is, “How can I help you deliver what’s really important to the business?”

Dave Buglass, Head of Organisational Capability and Development Tesco Bank for the Towards Maturity 2015 Industry Benchmark Report

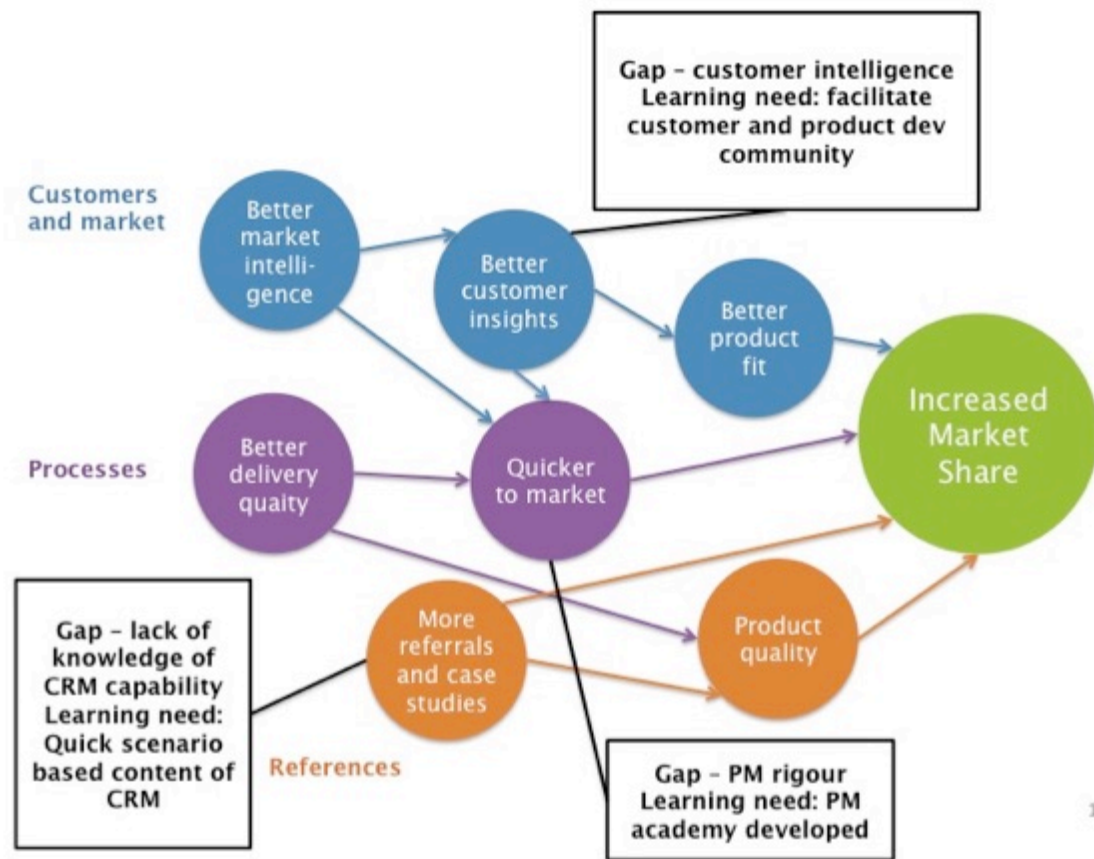


Fig 1. How learning needs and potential solutions emerge from workflow analysis (based on value chain)

Now, did everyone in HR and L&D at the time get it? Probably not, but this was over a decade ago, when the availability of appropriate enabling technology was not as great and the overall tenor of the conversation was not where it is now.

As learning and knowledge professionals who had come to the discipline from operational roles, our view of the world was not encumbered by the perception of L&D and HR's role in the organisation and their separation as distinct business units. That just wasn't our history, our world. Learning was an integral part of everyday to get stuff done. The stuff from simply needing to know how to build a pivot table in excel (where a short piece of performance support content would do although still always alluded me!) to effectively on-boarding new graduates (where a blended joiners academy developed) through to developing a brand new piece of technology (where innovation communities were fostered). The role we played with our view of learning was as **catalysts**, enablers of the most appropriate and effective solution:

catalyst

noun cat·a·lyst \ˈka-tə-ləst\

: a substance that causes a chemical reaction to happen more quickly

: a person or event that quickly causes change or action

This is not to suggest that what L&D needs is a new name and that every LinkedIn profile is now updated with the title ‘Performance Catalysts’ – the problem of learning and HR speaking a different language to the business is in itself one of the problems.

I offer the term performance catalyst as a concept and one inspired by Tom Spiglanin, senior project leader with The Aerospace Corporation. When I met him a month ago in the US and discussed what L&D bring to the organisation (especially when your organisation is very complex and comprised of highly skilled individuals) he offered the phrase ‘catalyst’ as a way to describe how learning adds value:

“we facilitate learning between peers...we provide interesting ways to start conversations. A catalyst acts in a unique way to make a lower barrier to cause a reaction to happen. Putting the right people together in the right environment at the right time with right tools, that’s how we catalyse that learning.”

Tom Spiglanin, October 2015

So the catalyst needed and the barrier it is trying to reduce will depend entirely on the context and it’s from that context that the blend of solutions needs to be defined.

Learning as catalysts for performance

Jane Bozarth wrote an insightful piece titled '9 critical elements of performance support' based on her session at DevLearn 2015. Drawing on her personal experience, supporting her husband Kent through the diagnosis, treatment and care of a brain tumour, she offers up some useful questions any learning professional should ask. Here are two of my favourites:

“A problem well-stated is a problem half-solved.” ~Kettering

Kent presented with occasional blurry vision. He thought he needed glasses. Our family doctor sent him to an ophthalmologist.

Discussion: What evidence do we look for to confirm our understanding of the performance problem? How often do we treat symptoms vs performance problems?

**“You and the cause of all of your problems are part of the same system.”
~Senge**

Kent's recovery depended on many moving parts, from transportation arrangements to visits to additional facilities such as outpatient PT office and the eye center.

Discussion: What other parts of your system influence your ability to achieve optimal performance outcomes? How do you incorporate systems thinking into your design of training and learning events?

Jane Bozarth, <http://bozarthzone.blogspot.co.uk/>, October 2015

Catalysts create the conditions for a new reaction to take place and that comes from instigating a new action. Ask for a course on decision-making for a team member following a performance review meeting and you might just get what you ask for!

Start a conversation on what factors are required for effective decision making in your work context and you'll get a much more relevant solution (and guess what, it might not be a course, it may be your people don't feel empowered to make a decision in the first place!)

Learning as catalysts for the learning journey

Another element to the debate comes in the form of an [article published by the BBC](#) on 3rd November 2015, on research from the US on the phenomenon of online charter schools. Having conducted their study across 17 US states, the team from University of Washington, Stanford University and the Mathematica policy research group concluded that lack of teacher interaction had significant negative impact on educational outcomes.

Up to a year's academic progress could be lost when comparing students who attended exclusively online and those in the classroom. As alarming as this is for those schools involved, it is another example of the critical role learning professionals play in the support of effective knowledge and skills acquisition.

The issue is not with online per se, it's the lack of support along the learning journey from a professional who can contextualise and help facilitate connections with prior knowledge and experience. So before we leap to entirely self-serve, a catalyst creates the conditions in which an action can occur. Creating learning scaffolds, being visible and available as part of the learning experience are crucial.

Catalysts that break down the barrier between learning and work

A significant barrier that should not be underestimated is how L&D is perceived by the rest of the business. Going back to Tom Spiglanin's definition of the catalyst; if its role is to break down barriers then this is the one to target. There are regular calls for L&D to be on the top table, which for many feels impossible, but the visionary, tenacious few that have done it and seen great results (such as CLO Silver Award winner at the 2015 Learning Awards, Rick Jackson at DHL or Dave Buglass at Tesco Bank, CLO Gold Award winner at the 2015 Learning Awards).



To break down that barrier requires the conversation to be stated in terms of performance challenges and understanding at a deep level as well as the inputs and outputs that make up the value chain to deliver your organisations products or services. It takes a true partnership approach, a systematic exploration of workflow, an open-minded view of learning and an understanding of how to maximise technology, informal learning opportunities and build effective learning scaffolds that will get you noticed.

It is another reason why entirely self-serve is a problem – to meet the strategic goals of the organisation, it cannot be all rudderless self-direction. Just as overly structured didactic programmes will crush innovation and patronise your people so abandoning new managers to a smorgasbord of content on a video platform will not enable an effective road to development in a new challenging role.

If you want to motivate your people behind the direction of the company, design appropriate learning solutions and encouraging people to seek out what they need, it takes utter clarity. Learning professionals can be the catalyst between the strategic goals of the organisation and the strategic leadership of learning. Through true understanding of the context in every sense of the word and linking your solutions to real business metrics, you'll pack a punch few senior teams could ignore.

As providers of learning content, platforms and consultancy, we are part of this picture too and our approach to learning design reflects this. If you want a supplier that's an order taker, perhaps we aren't the ones for you. Our instructional designers, media developers, platform developers all start from the business need and if its not apparent at the start of the engagement, we'll work hard until we get at it! It's only then that the solutions we develop, from e-learning content to learning portals will be fit for business purpose and support the learner in a meaningful, personalised way. It means we only employ the curious!

What's next

Benchmark reports like Towards Maturity help highlight the gap between those organisations that are making the move to learning as performance catalysts and undercover some of the actions they are taking to make that happen. In the end

though, its about results and I for one would love to see some more substantive research in the quantitate impact today of things such as thriving CoPs, utility and efficacy of e-learning content and optimal blends, learning ecosystems etc.

This may seem like a daunting task, but with learning as part of the workflow, it should entirely possible to look at its touchpoints into the business metrics of the organisation. We can shake off the ROI of a single intervention (which in itself is crazy, as life simply isn't that binary) if we look at the inputs to and knowledge needed to achieve key business objectives. Learning as a catalysing agent in business performance.

© 2015 Willow Learning Ltd

WillowDNA
Bristol & Bath Science Park
Dirac Crescent
Emersons Green
Bristol
BS16 7FR

Tel: +44 (0)117 370 7735
Email: info@willowdna.com
Web: www.willowdna.com

WillowDNA and The Digital Learning Company are Trading Names owned by Willow Learning Ltd