From Push to Pull: Matching the beautiful technology and engaging content at home and work
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Consumer technology continues to evolve at break-neck speed and human resources (HR) professionals need to take note. In their everyday lives, employees experience ever more beautiful technology and engaging content. What is more, they rely on technology to get appropriate, personalised content to them when they need it, as they need it. This paper explores the implications of this for the workplace and specifically for learning and development (L&D) programmes. The argument is not to extoll the virtues of new technology for technology's sake, but to present the compelling and demonstrable business reasons why today's employee needs a synchronised content and usability experience between their personal and professional lives.
The concept of an organisation’s employees being internal ‘customers’ when it comes to the HR function is not a new one. What is new however, is the paradigm shift in the employee or ‘customer’ experience when it comes to L&D.

The industry is experiencing a massive move from the ‘push’ to ‘pull’ of L&D content and this has huge consequences for HR departments and the organisations that they serve. The formulaic approach is dead, and the user experience needs to change dramatically.

There can be no doubt that the influences in our social and consumer lives are showing up in the workplace. Our shopping behaviours serve as a good metaphor. As consumers we expect instant access to information, instant answers to our questions, the ability to order within just a few clicks or few minutes and, of course, speedy delivery or receipt. We have also become increasingly accustomed to personalisation such as recommendations for complimentary products. We expect to be able to compare products and use reviews and feedback from other shoppers. As if all of this was not enough, as consumers we are soon disappointed if the level of services varies from channel to channel. In other words, standards should be consistent whether shopping in-store, online, via catalogue, by phone or through some other means.

With all of this in mind, how do L&D departments keep pace? It is imperative that they do, because user experience has clear business consequences for talent attraction, engagement, empowerment and retention across all generations of employee.

It is time to embrace the concept of employees taking ownership of their own learning pathways. The new, changing formats for L&D content provide evidence that this shift is already well underway. Ever-changing technological developments will continue to play a huge enabling role in creating more compelling, customised learning programmes. The trick for many organisations will be to understand how to manage this nexus of colliding forces.

**EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP**

Employees at all levels acknowledge that ‘the learning curve is the earning curve’. So, it is understandable that they are putting L&D departments under increasing pressure to facilitate the training and development they want, when they need it and how they want it. Indeed, the younger generations of the workforce have never known any different.

The proliferation of always-connected mobile devices makes learning potentially available to almost anyone just about anywhere. Learning content is available on a huge range of subjects – all accessible from home or on the go. Indeed, in our consumer lives, we can learn almost anything from social channels and find expertise online from around the world via conferencing technology, video and podcasts. This new world of on-demand learning puts employees, not organisations, in charge.
Advances in technology, shifts in demographics, and the constant competitive necessity to upgrade workforce skills are disrupting corporate learning. These forces are pushing companies to develop new ways to put employees in charge of the learning experience.

This proves challenging, because on the one hand employees across all levels are demanding dynamic, on-going and self-directed learning. On the other, despite their best efforts to evolve learning programmes, many organisations are wrestling with internally focused, static and out-dated platforms.

The trend continues regardless; the modern organisation no longer simply pushes out content it has developed. Instead, it enables employees to access a wide range of internal and external content to create individual learning programmes.

In effect, corporate learning departments are changing from education providers to content curators and experience facilitators, developing innovative platforms that turn employee learning and development into a self-driven pursuit.

There is much research to demonstrate that when employees feel empowered and have a sense of ownership for their jobs, their engagement is significantly higher.

THE MEGA TRENDS

Employee engagement and retention have long been a priority for HR departments, because their direct cost and impact to the business is so clear. It continues to be significant to L&D departments today and shows no signs of fading, particularly when dealing with the new, most prominent generation of workers.

Only a third (29%) of millennials are engaged at work, meaning only about 3 in 10 are emotionally and behaviorally connected to their job and company. Another 16% of millennials are actively disengaged, meaning they are more or less out to damage to their employers.

This is quite frightening; not only in terms of lost productivity but also in terms of reputational risk. So, when it comes to organisational culture, style of management and engagement through L&D, this large section of the workforce is not having its needs met.

This remains a corporate headache because against a backdrop of skills shortages, the old ways of filling the talent pipeline aren't working and people turnover remains expensive. This is a critical consideration because every year, more and more of that talent will be recruited from the

ranks of millennials. In fact, according to Gallup, 21% of millennials say they’ve changed jobs within the past year, which is more than three times the number of non-millennials who report the same.²

It is not all about the younger generations however. Satisfaction with career progression varies between generations too. The Future Workforce survey reports that a fifth (19%) of Generation X (born between the early 1960s to mid 1970s) are somewhat or very dissatisfied with their career progression. Also worrying is that Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are least likely to think that workplace training provides an opportunity to learn new skills.³

THE GENERATION GAME

The generational differences have become a major consideration in the world of L&D. It seems that never before has the workforce been so diverse. The universe of talent is changing significantly because every year, more millennials will fill the ranks as employees. One of the consequences for businesses is that making learning a desirable customer-centric experience is no longer a ‘nice to have’. It is urgent.

As PWC points out in a recent report, millennials matter because they are not only different from those that have gone before, they are also more numerous than any since the soon-to-retire Baby Boomer generation. By 2020, millennials will form 50% of the global workforce.⁴

It is also worrying that although millennials will soon outnumber their Generation X predecessors, they remain in short supply. In fact, CEOs reported to PWC that attracting and keeping younger workers is one of their biggest talent challenges.⁵

The affinity of millennials with technology is a contributing force in the push/pull shift of L&D. Their digital prowess really sets them apart. They have grown up with high speed Internet, smartphones, hand held devices, laptops and social media. Ubiquitous technology drives their expectations around instant gratification when it comes to information and execution. It is also worth noting their displeasure with rigid organisational structure, processes and information silos.

Those organisations with less structure and traditional business practices attract talented millennials in greater numbers. Brands like Apple and Google are synonymous with a relaxed management style and culture. No doubt that greatly enhances the ability of this type of organisation to attract and retain the best of the talent pool.

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L&D has never been more important to the modern workplace. This is not least because millennials tend to value career progression and development over financial reward. According to research by Robert Walters in “Attracting and Retaining Millennial Professionals”, 91% of millennials say the opportunity for rapid career progression is one of the most important things about their job.6

Millennials and Gen2020 diverge in communication and learning approaches too. One survey predicts increased use of video conferencing, texting and internal social networking as younger generations become a larger share of the workforce.7 What does this mean for the smart organisation? When it comes to L&D it means internal knowledge-sharing programmes, developing easy-to-use portals and video sharing systems, and promoting collaborative experiences at work that help people constantly learn and share knowledge.

**THE NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Many organisations are already en route to putting the ‘human’ back into human capital management with simplified, personalised, self-directed and meaningful L&D programmes for real development and growth.

The new learning environment will feel more like a consumer web site than a corporate system or database. It will provide videos, courses, content, access to experts and its recommendation engines will help people find exactly what they need.

**EASY INTERFACES**

In practice, this means that L&D systems and processes will feature easy-to-use, intuitive interfaces, placing content at the centre of self-directed learning. Simple, clean easy-to-use interfaces with strong search and discoverability functionality allow learners to quickly navigate learning content. The interface is the most important element to accessing supporting activities to drive knowledge retention and increase the value of organisational learning programmes – not least because it is often the first interface an employee has with their organisation.

It is not just employees that need this level of ease either. The administrators’ experience is equally important.

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CENTRALISED CONTENT

Being able to find everything quickly and efficiently in a single location is an important factor in assisting with the powerful search functionality that today's employees need. Today's L&D customers, especially millennials, have little tolerance for information silos and disparate systems. All of this makes the centralisation of content a fundamental consideration.

ENTERPRISE INTEGRATION

Centralised content also assists with integrating L&D platforms with other systems. It is well-documented that the modern organisation deems it important - if not critical - for the learning management system (LMS) to integrate seamlessly with sister systems such as talent management, workforce management, compliance platforms, human resources information (HRIS) and enterprise resource planning (ERP).

Not only does this empower employees to satisfy their needs quickly and efficiently, but it also allows a single sign on facility, thus enhancing the simplicity and ease-of-use for all.

MICRO LEARNING

Micro learning is set to increase yet further as overwhelmed employees grapple with balancing increasing demands on their time with a need for knowledge. According to Bersin by Deloitte, spend on content is increasing in both custom and off-the-shelf elearning (up 10%). Classroom training is down 9% and is forecast to continue declining.8

So, there will simply be more learning in less time – something ideally suited to the growing talent pool of millennials. This means extremely focused content available in bite-sized chunks.

Video is perfectly placed to meet this need. However, video assets that were once 30-60 minutes long have been replaced with the 3-5 minute wonder. The better learning platforms will also improve the sequencing of micro assets in order to enhance the content, presenting modules in an order that allows learners to choose just what they need in the moment.

MOBILE GOES MAINSTREAM

With almost two-thirds of all digital media accessed on a mobile device, it’s not surprising that organisations are turning to dedicated learning apps for L&D content. Expanded device support allows employees to access learning content on iOS and Android smartphones and tablets. So it will come as no surprise that mobile learning continues as a mega trend too.

Apps can put personalised learning in the palm of the learners’ hands anytime, anywhere with targeted videos, courses, books, and audio from world-class thought leaders. They can be highly functional too. For example on-device alerts can instantly notify employees about fresh and featured topics. On some platforms, learners can now even tag certain topics and content to access their eLearning topics with the touch of a button.

The need to create, assemble and deploy content quickly for employees in the office or on the road renders traditional approaches to course development unsuitable. Using mobile technology, on-the-go sales teams can still work through their development plans while in the field and travelling executives can access on-demand content to help them deliver more effective presentations for example. Mobile learning functionality offers an important ability to stay aligned with time-critical business initiatives.

Mobile learners have less time to spend looking for resources they require and must be empowered to act quickly, decisively and more frequently while away from their desk. So it is significant that mobile learning content delivery has even evolved to the point where organisations can create, publish, and deploy their own mobile content.

PERSONALISATION

With new technology and the use of Big Data, some learning management systems are now able to recommend learning content to employees based on previous choices as well as the choices of their peers. This ‘Amazon-like’ experience really supports personalised, curated learning pathways capable of playing to the strengths of an employee’s learning style and preferred format.

Animation is also seeing a surge in popularity. This is a positive move, because for international organisations it makes the localisation of content far easier and more cost effective.
SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY FUNCTIONS

The use of social media platforms to promote content is on the rise - Jive and Chatter are good examples. They are business social network and collaboration platforms being used to promote resources and encourage employees to share content that they have found valuable.

These social tools are effective in the workplace because they follow the same format that employees are so familiar with in their personal lives. Fast, relevant and familiar, employees can be quick to apply social and community functions to their work.

Email, of course, continues to have a role in promoting L&D content. Calendar invitations have also made their way into the communications mix, not only connecting learners to relevant content, but encouraging them to carve out time for development.

SUMMARY

This current evolution in L&D is an exciting one. L&D departments are becoming the architects of learning experiences, building attractive, dynamic, continuous, experiential offerings for employees while guiding them on how best to learn.

Using new technology and content formats, L&D is set to delight and deliver in the new always-on, hyper-connected age because there is a strong and urgent business case to do so.

Investing in current employees about opportunities within the organisation builds a more powerful, more engaged workforce where employees enjoy job mobility, self-development and a better quality of life. It also creates a more productive and stronger workforce that keeps companies competitive, driving the business outcomes that organisations need to prosper.
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