A Trip Down the Rabbit Hole

EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT AND THE RISKS OF THE STATUS QUO

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It takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.

If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.

The Red Queen
Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking Glass
Change is never easy. Some organizations just never seem to embrace change of any kind, and before you know it, those same organizations seem to disappear. Rather than take notice of what is really happening around them, it’s easier in a way, to hold onto what they’ve always known and done. So they end up in a place where nothing is really as it seems, and it’s easy to get confused. It’s like clinging to a version of reality that those organizations want to be true, but reality has a way of slipping past them. It’s almost like they’ve taken a trip down the rabbit hole with Alice.

Victoria Swisher, author of a new book called Becoming an Agile Leader is quoted in the January/February issue of Human Resource Executive in an article titled, The Importance of Agility using the acronym “VUCA.” She says this sums up the world we live in: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The fact that our world is more complicated and is changing rapidly isn’t news. Organizations struggle to keep up and find ways to compete, and that means we have to find ways to help our employees succeed and develop the skills they need. But we are confronted with so many choices and information, it’s easy to just get paralyzed and do nothing to address the learning and development needs of our employees.

So we see organizations stay with their current employee training programs. Sometimes they stick with the status quo for very good reasons. For instance, their current program meets their needs and employees are well-prepared and are performing well. But some organizations stay with the status quo because they just don’t know what to do next.

We’re going to try and help you with that next step. In building the business case for making strategic changes to your employee training and development program, the first thing you have to do is understand and explain why you need to make a change in the first place.
As you begin building a business case for your employee training program, you want to make sure you cover the following five fundamental elements:

1. Analysis of the most likely outcome and worst case scenarios.
2. Explanation of the cause and effect of business issues addressed by program
3. Key Performance Indicators for each benefit expected from the program
4. Assessment of the financial risks of inaction or no action
5. Demonstrate alignment of the program to organizational goals

This e-Book will focus on the fourth element, the risks of inaction, or the risks of staying with the status quo. If you are going to stay with the status quo, make sure you do so for good reasons, and that those reasons are directly tied to the achievement and realization of your organization’s strategic goals. You can decide if the status quo is a viable option after you develop answers to the following three questions:

- How closely does your current program match the 10 characteristics of best practices training programs in today’s market?
- In today’s marketplace, strategic agility will become more and more important. Does your current employee training and learning program support the development of strategic agility as a core competency?
- Does your current program have the tools needed to develop agile learners?
Ultimately, the best training and development program for each organization will be uniquely tailored and delivered to meet the needs of that organization and its employees. Training Magazine recently recognized its Top 125 training programs for 2012, and the wide variety of approaches and program designs proves this point clearly. The best programs are not cookie-cutter designs, however, they share some common traits or characteristics, and these common denominators can teach organizations of any size a lot about how to think about and analyze their own current training efforts. Not every top program will include each of these elements, but the top programs will include most of them. The question for each organization to ask and answer is - how well does your the organization incorporate these elements into your employee training program?

**Senior Leadership Support.** This single element is probably the most important. By support we do not mean simply signing off on a budget item. Top programs have fully engaged senior leaders who actively participate in communicating strategic initiatives to employees, mentor employees, and participate in development programs.

**Training Goals Directly Support Organizational Strategic Goals.** In the popular industry journals and literature you will frequently see the concept “alignment.” Top programs do more than pay the concept lip service. Top programs ensure each employee’s training efforts support the fulfillment of goals and objectives that support and contribute directly to the organization’s strategic initiatives.

**Measurement.** The old saying that “you can’t improve what you can’t measure,” rings true. Top programs have a clear and well-developed system for measuring the effectiveness of every level of the training programs, from participation, to the quality of courses, to the key business impact. The business impact metrics at top programs are always stated in terms tied directly to the strategic objectives of the organization.

**Blended Learning & Technology Platform.** Employees learn differently, and different topics and types of skill development require different approaches. Top programs take all of these things – and more – into consideration. All learning resources, whether classroom or online, are managed and/or delivered on a learning platform.

**Curriculum is Linked Directly to Specific Business Needs and Objectives.** When a top training organization has a strategic objective of increased sales, the training program does not simply include “sales training.” The actual curriculum delivered may include foundational sales skills, but content will also be targeted to meet the needs across departments. Further, the curriculum is linked to each organization’s unique needs, and that may also require industry specific content or custom content.

**The Characteristics of Top Employee Training Programs**

- Test your goals against the SMART criteria:
  - Specific
  - Measurable
  - Attainable
  - Relevant
  - Timely or Time-bound
The Characteristics of Top Employee Training Programs

**Competency-Based.** Employee development is centered around critical competencies needed to effectively perform duties and functions tied to strategic goals. Sometimes “less is more” in top training programs. Great employee development programs find a balance between the right amount of content and training and on-the-job learning. An example of how to layout competencies is outlined below:

- **Core Competencies**
  - Cultural or organizational

- **Job-Family Competencies**
  - Sales, operations, administrative functions, customer service

- **Job-Specific Competencies**
  - Perform a particular job at a successful level

**Leadership Development.** All levels of leaders are identified and developed based upon strategic objectives and clearly identified competencies.

**Video-Based Content.** One of the most significant developments indicated in the Training Magazine Top 125 was the prevalence of online video in training programs. More and more top organizations are turning to video for short bursts of learning content. (Mobile learning – using video content – is frequently cited as something top companies want to provide employees.)

**Internal Expertise.** Top companies find ways to tap into the internal knowledge and expertise of their employees and share it with the rest of the organization through training, development, and education opportunities.

**Social and Informal Learning.** The top training organizations fully appreciate the value informal and social learning bring. In varying degrees, top organizations are finding ways to incorporate informal learning and social learning tools into employee development programs.
Let’s return to Victoria Swisher’s acronym description of today’s market – VUCA. What can organizations do to stay ahead in a market place characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity? In order to stay in step with such a market, organizations have to learn to adapt and evolve rapidly, otherwise they will be left behind. One definition of strategic agility is:

The ability to continuously adjust and adapt strategic direction in core business, as a function of strategic ambitions and changing circumstances, and create not just new products and services, but also new business models and innovative ways to create value for a company.

Yves DOZ, Solvay Chaired Professor of Technological Innovation, INSEAD

What this will require is a new set of core competencies for organizations, and this means organizations will need employees who can function and succeed in this environment and who likewise possess agile skills and competencies.

And that leads directly to a key question: where does employee training and development fit into the picture?
Building Agile Learners

Agile organizations will need to be able to remake themselves quickly. They will need to see the market and comprehend it quickly and adapt, discarding ideas, products, services, and business models that no longer make sense. In order for organizations to become as fluid as the market, organizations need people who are equally agile.

According to a white paper titled, Learning About Learning Agility, from the Center for Creative Leadership and Columbia University’s Teachers College,

“All agile learners are unafraid to challenge the status quo, they remain calm in the face of difficulty, they take time to reflect on their experiences, they purposefully put themselves in challenging situations, they’re open to learning and they resist the temptation to become defensive in the face of adversity.”

All of those attributes that describe the business world of today are tailor-made for someone with learning agility…. It’s almost become a price of entry for success now, especially in leadership and executive roles.

The Importance of Agility, Andrew R. McIlvaine, Human Resource Executive, January/February 2013
What tools do our employees need to be successful in this market?

Alice needed a pill so she could get smaller. That’s how she got down the rabbit hole. So what do we need to take the journey towards strategic agility and towards guiding our employees towards agile learning?

Start with a careful review of those ten characteristics of top training programs. The beginning is usually a good place to start! But make sure you look at things a bit differently. We need to rethink how we deliver learning to employees.

Traditional “push” training will simply not work if that is the primary method for delivering knowledge and information to your employees. If you aren’t sure, try a little test. Find a place where a group of employees are gathered, and ask them a question they will not know off the top of their heads? Tell them you’d really like an answer right there, and see what they DO. Some (maybe most of them) will reach for their smart phones and look up the answer.

This on-demand access to information is how our employees live. Why shouldn’t we help them work the same way? In today’s market and “connected” world, doesn’t that make sense?

Start thinking about employee learning as:

- Access to knowledge
- Job assistance
- On demand
- Anytime, anywhere, any device
- User generated content
- Connecting employees to each other
- Asking and answering questions

Bring the world of social and informal learning that exist all around you to your employees as an integrated PART of your learning strategy.

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end; then stop.”

Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland
Informal and Social Learning

Do the distinctions even matter???

The answer is – no, the distinctions no longer matter. Maybe they never mattered, but they certainly no longer matter in today’s world. It’s all about learning. For one thing, your employees don’t care, so you shouldn’t either. Social and informal access to information will be crucial to building the agile organizations that will succeed in this market, and we need to make knowledge and information available any way we can to begin developing the agile learners our organizations will require.

Learning agility as a competency will likely look different for each organization, but generally, employees who are agile learners will exhibit some combination of the following characteristics: willing to challenge the status quo, remain calm in the face of difficult challenges, reflective about their experiences, seek out opportunities to learn, and are self-aware.

The type of learning function needed to build this crucial competency will look and function much differently than traditional employee training departments. Push training events like classroom training ought to be the exception and not the rule.

Employee learning needs to be more about connecting employees to information as it’s needed, where it’s needed without regard to how it’s delivered or who generated it. Forget about how learning is labeled, and worry about whether your employees are actually learning what they need to know when they need to know it.

That’s how you lay the foundation for learning agility.

70% of learning is informal
4 tips to harness the power of informal learning:

**Accountability.** We know people are more motivated when they have a sense of autonomy. Give it to them, but hold them accountable for improving their skill, knowledge, and performance.

**Work Smarter.** Shift the focus of management and leadership from control of work or overt efforts to influence employee behaviors to an emphasis on collaborating with employees and helping people find ways to do their jobs better by sharing knowledge and information more quickly, simply, and broadly.

**Model Behavior.** We know how powerful informal learning can be. Let employees see you engaged in sharing of information, asking and answering questions, sharing - publicly - ideas to further business goals and objectives.

**Get the Right People & Tools in Place.** Information comes at us in huge volumes and at faster and faster speeds. Organizations must make continuous learning an organizational core competence, because if organizations can't learn quickly, adapt, and apply new knowledge to solve problems, they will be left behind. Organizations need people committed to continuous learning. So we need the right tools on hand to facilitate the rapid and efficient sharing and dissemination of information and knowledge to a continuous learning environment and we need the people who can apply this learning to solve business problems.
Technology + Behavior = New Reality for Employee Training

Ten or fifteen years ago, video was used by most organizations for training. They’d use a library of VHS tapes, show the videos in a screening room for employees or they’d host group sessions to watch the videos in a classroom.

BizLibrary, then known as Business Training Library, allowed smaller companies to borrow and exchange hard copy DVD’s and VHS tapes. We actually had shelves and shelves of videos all cataloged and organized in the lending library. Then with the shift to e-learning and web-based training, text, images and integrated knowledge checks became the norm. Many organizations even chose to convert their videos to flash-based e-learning. Now—

the demand for videos has come full circle. There’s less of a focus on traditional four to six hour e-learning courses and more demand for short mobile-friendly streaming videos.
Why Video?

According to popular research – in 72 hours the average human can retain...

10% of text

65% of images

click to play >

95% of video!
**Engagement:** Videos provide greater engagement than text or images. What got your mouth watering on the previous page? The written recipe, the picture or the video of chocolate cake?? Also, video can be a great medium to demonstrate positive – or sometimes most effectively - negative behavior.

**Performance Support:** Videos make it possible to have troubleshooting, performance support, refresher training, and how to guides available on-demand. Record webinars or instructor-led sessions and make them available after the event.

**Cross Platform/Mobile:** According to the Fall 2012 Mobile Learning Pulse Survey by The MASIE Center, at least 50% of employees already use their own smartphones/devices to access work-related sites or information. With increased use of mobile devices, we need access to learning resources that works well on large range of devices from desktops to mobile devices. If done well video presents an opportunity to bridge the gap across multiple platforms.

**Low Costs:** Video production costs have come down drastically in last few years. With camera phones recording video is a breeze and at little cost. This sort of “quick video” works well when you need to explain a process or create how-to videos.

**User-Generated:** Video tends to be more shareable than other learning resources. Many organizations have employees spread far and wide. In most cases they can use their phones to record events, processes, and problems. Also an added benefit is that by viewing ratings, sharing comments and the videos themselves, your employees will find the relevant resources they need and it's a great way to get feedback and suggestions from colleagues and peers.
It’s not too late!

Your employee development and training efforts are not doomed for failure if you are relying upon formal training and have not figured out how to incorporate social/informal learning elements, and video resources, into a broad learning strategy. That’s part of why this is such an exciting time to be in employee training and development – so much is changing so fast, there is plenty of time and opportunity to get your organization and employees moving in the right direction.

We offered four steps to get you started. We suggested online video as a great tool to enhance the rapid and on-demand training needs of your employees. So there are some starting points for you. The rest will be up to you. One of the best things about informal learning is that it happens whether you want it to or not. Your challenge is to learn how to make it work for you and to become a facilitator of the exchange of useful knowledge and information.

To learn more about how BizLibrary can help visit bizlibrary.com/rabbit