

Rethinking Corporate Education

Nick Shackleton-Jones, Director for Learning & Performance Innovation at PA Consulting Group, tells us why corporate training and development needs to change





Organisations understand that they can achieve competitive advantage through people.

As a result, in the UK alone businesses invest almost £43 billion a year in employee training – much of it in running conventional ‘stand and deliver’ courses or developing e-learning modules. But how effective is this investment and what are employers actually trying to achieve?

The Act of Forgetting

In terms of effectiveness, the results are often disappointing. Many training initiatives focus on squeezing as much content into employees’ heads as possible – and they rarely succeed.

As German psychologist, Hermann Ebbinghaus, demonstrated more than a hundred years ago, we struggle to retain information for longer than a few hours, unless we actively try to remember it. And why would we need to? It’s easy to find the information we want by just searching online.

Employers invest in training to help people do their jobs better. However, if employees forget most of what they’ve learnt almost as soon as they escape the training room, courses will have very little impact on performance once people get back to their jobs.

Welcome to the 21st Century

How does the corporate learning experience look from an employee’s point of view?

These days few people join an organisation expecting to make steady progress up a career ladder. Instead,

“How does the corporate learning experience look from an employee’s point of view?”

many are looking for a series of positive development experiences, perhaps in different parts of the organisation.

They want support to perform successfully in each new situation, not training in the core capabilities

required for a single, specific role. They expect to be able to ‘figure it out’ for themselves.

There’s another thing. All too often, employees’ experience of learning at work fails to reflect the way technology has transformed their lives outside of it.

Conventional courses and e-learning can feel fixed, enclosed and ponderous compared to the fast, connected, social way knowledge is shared in the outside world.

A New Manifesto for Learning

All this suggests that it’s time to refocus corporate education – to put less emphasis on conventional courses and give greater emphasis to providing employees with resources that actually improve their performance on the job. It’s also time to start making better >



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A build-up of silos, bureaucracy and legacy-thinking means that many large organisations struggle with the notion of agility.

Rather than abiding by traditional practices, how can leaders create a flexible workforce where employees can move around the business to share knowledge and skills?

My advice is: don’t get comfortable. What worked before will not necessarily work now; there is a shift towards a more collaborative, inclusive style of leadership.

In order to adapt, constant learning, being curious and seeking new experiences are essential. For senior executives, meeting peers to share best practice, seeking out case studies and experiential learning are ways of doing this.

Educational initiatives from the bottom to the top of organisations remain relatively unchanged. Encouraging learning on the job, as well utilising digital technology to track and measure progress should be used as ways of updating development for the wider workforce.



use of technology that offers employees a more modern, satisfying and effective learning experience, one that provides just-in-time guidance and direction to enhance performance at the point of need.

After all, why waste days in a classroom when you can achieve the same outcome within minutes while at work?

Need to Know Now

How does this shift from courses to resources look in the real world?

Take employees moving into a leadership role for the first time. They are a prime target for a conventional training course or event. But checklists, running through key tasks associated with each new responsibility, can be a more effective way to improve performance.

In his book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, Atul Gawanda, has explored the potential of lists to help people get important things right.

Large corporates, including BP have put this approach into action with great success, developing checklists, short videos and one-page guides for new leaders covering, for example, 'ten things to do in your first week' and 'what to cover when you talk to new recruits'.

A Sat Nav for Everything

Checklists are a simple and highly effective way to give guidance, but modern technology offers a more sophisticated option – an App.

Think of the way Apps monitor our progress as we make a journey (whether we're travelling across town

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or improving our fitness), providing directions and prompts that come at exactly the right time. Now, imagine an App that can help new leaders engage with their teams. It could regularly collect data on each team member's activity, interpret this to report on individual levels of engagement and suggest appropriate interventions to increase motivation and boost engagement.

Counting the Benefits

Refocusing corporate education in this way – away from courses and towards resources – can benefit employers and employees alike. For employers, it eliminates the organisational inertia that comes from training employees for specific roles.

Focusing on just-in-time performance support instead can help create a more flexible workforce – one in which people can be easily moved into new roles to respond to changing priorities and challenges.

For employees, this new approach puts an end to days spent out of action on training courses. Instead, they get the

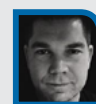
guidance they need to develop in new roles, delivered in a way that is mobile, social and available exactly when and where they need it.

The methods of teaching and learning are always in evolution. We'd be shocked to enter a classroom today and find schoolchildren learning by rote as they did a century ago.

It's time for corporate education to speed up that evolution process. ■

This article was originally published as a blog on PA Consulting Group's website. Find out more [here](#)

Nick will be speaking about how leaders can develop their workforce at an upcoming Criticaleye Discussion Group. Find out more [here](#)



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He has worked in consultancy, Siemens, the BBC and BP in roles encompassing learning strategy, leadership, culture, innovation and technology.

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