

2010: Time to set out your stalls and bring in the learners

Charles Gould, Managing Director of Brightwave, explores how successful learning platforms in the next decade can motivate learners and provide the impact metrics businesses need.

As the noughties draw to a close - a decade in which corporate Learning Management Systems have become almost ubiquitous thanks to maturing interoperability standards - what do we (learners/staff) and employers want next?

I want to learn. Where do I turn?

As learners we have a myriad of tools available now which barely existed 10 years ago. Today I expect to be able to find the answer to almost any factual question within seconds of hitting my Google shortcut. Almost as fast, I expect to evaluate a full range of opinions on any subject or debate. I can see how to do practical things using YouTube or similar. I can find expert communities to whom I can post my own naive questions. I can explore complex subjects in great depth using specialist wikis. So what else do I need, as an employee? Am I getting what I need from my employer and, if not, why not?

Sometimes, I know I have to learn - for compliance reasons, so I know about new policies, systems and products. Sometimes, though, I want to learn - to help me solve problems, do my job better, enhance my career and sometimes just for intrinsic intellectual curiosity.



When I have to learn I need structure - just give me what I have to learn as quickly, painlessly and efficiently as possible. Distil the necessary information into a simple package. Yes, a course dammit - why not? Oh, and make sure management know I've done it so I can tick the box and move on. This is what most Learning Management Systems have been designed for. Don't get me wrong, there's a place for expertly designed pills of knowledge that provide just the right amount, as easy to swallow as possible.

But when I want to learn I must be allowed to explore, to move from high level awareness to in-depth knowledge. I'd like to know what other people think and then make up my own mind. I'd like to test my ideas by discussing them with others. I want something that meets my own specific needs, which solves whatever problem I'm confronting right now. Would I turn to my corporate LMS to help me here? If not, why not?

The learning spectrum: Engaged employee or automaton?

What do employers want from their learning systems? They might say to hell with what staff want to learn, just make them learn what they have to! In that case, any number of LMSs will do. But more enlightened employers will know that engaging the minds of employees will yield far better results than treating them like automatons. Instead, they will want ways of aligning employee motivation with business goals. Then they'll want to offer a range of tools and media that let employees get on and learn. Employees that do so will succeed, those that don't won't.

There's been a lot of discussion in the last couple of years about 'informal' versus formal learning. I prefer to see it as a spectrum. So, we have chatting at the water cooler at one end and classroom lectures at the other. Formal learning is organised to suit the employer. Very informal learning, by definition, can't be organised. But it can be encouraged and cultivated. And that's the challenge for Learning Management Systems in the next decade - the move along the spectrum to support more informal learning. Let's ditch the term LMS. Let's be honest and call them Compliance Management Systems. And let's think instead about learning services or learning and performance portals. Smart employers will treat their staff as customers of learning. They will present an array - a market place - of learning opportunities. They will put the onus to learn - and perform - firmly on the learner. They will remove any excuses and barriers, give them the responsibility to learn and expect accountability.

And what of the L&D professional - where do they fit in? One would hope they will act as valued advisers. Surely their role will also be to inject life into learning services. They will seed discussions, facilitate webinars, encourage sharing. They'll be expected to select the best tools and the best suppliers. At the risk of stretching the market place metaphor too far, they will set out the stalls and bring in the customers (the learners). Systems that let them do this easily, with

a minimum of technical fuss will meet the needs of the L&D professional from 2010.

Learning as a service

So, what should a corporate learning service look like? It will include Facebook, Youtube and ebay features that offer recommendations, feedback, sharing and networking. It will make it clear what you have to do and encourage you to want to learn. It'll refer to personal incentives and goals that are also business goals. It'll be relevant to your job and the industry you work in.

Brightwave has recently created learning services that we think move beyond the conventional LMS. Our onboarding portals for companies like Sky and Vodafone have front-ends that look nothing like a dull, data-centric LMS. They are organised around performance needs and engage the learner through video, competitions, simulations and social network forums. Yet they still have the power of an LMS behind the scenes. Our Local Government E-learning Service allows every council to design its own user front-end while sharing knowledge and learning that's common to all.

Portals to solve key business challenges

But a good learning service won't just support bottom-up learning. Not surprisingly, 96% of US CEOs want evidence of the business impact of learning but only 8% see it now in their own organisations. Learning and performance portals can be focussed on solving key business challenges. Where mission critical change is needed, these portals can be used to support specific campaigns. For example, when a client of ours launched a major new product, we set up a performance portal for them. Although it was an LMS, the learner didn't realise it. They certainly didn't feel like they were launching courses. Games, simulations, video clips and adverts were brought together to capture the product and immerse the learner into how to use, sell and support it. Underneath there was some seriously sophisticated data to provide evidence of return on investment.

Recently, we've built the concept of a campaign into our learning service platform so that learners are prompted and guided through a series of communications that progress through to a clear statement of performance (such as a test). If they get distracted or forget what they should be doing, the tool can be configured to remind and chase them.

Metrics and motivation – they must work together

The new generation of people entering the workforce for the first time are sophisticated managers of information who use and expect the full gamut of

online tools and resources. Employers will need to offer similar and equally effective services to enable staff to learn for work and learn for performance.

So, successful learning service platforms from 2010 will meet the needs of learners and employers alike. They'll support 'bottom-up' learning through tools, resources and informal networks. And they'll meet business goals by making it clear to the learner what they need to do and why. In short, they'll make the learner want to learn what the business needs them to learn.

Note to editors - About Brightwave

Brightwave is the UK's leading provider of highly engaging work-based e-learning that delivers results and helps change behaviour. Brightwave works in partnership with complex global clients to provide a complete e-learning service, from content development to innovative tools, hosting and management, performance support and evaluation.

Clients include BT, Bupa, DHL Logistics, EDF Energy, IKEA, ScottishPower, Sky, Swiss Re, T-Mobile, TUI, The Royal Bank of Scotland, Virgin Atlantic Airways as well as public sector organisations like the Healthcare Commission, City of Edinburgh Council and Office for National Statistics.

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