

Move aside CPD – UPS is on its way!

Lars Hyland investigates how continuous professional development is being transformed by digital connectivity and challenges how we assess competence and performance in the workplace

The worst recession since the Second World War is having a profound effect on the workplace. Jobs are being lost in almost every sector, some being hit harder than others. Nearly half of the UK workforce plans a career change, by choice or otherwise. So, having relevant, marketable skills and experience is more important than ever and a priority for those wanting to stay in work or search for new work.

Training professionals are in the same position and must also remain skilled, as was recently demonstrated by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which responded to the changing economic conditions with its own set of redundancies in April. More significantly, perhaps, is its attempt to update its own professional development programme and help build the skills of the HR community.

The new HR Profession Map replaces the current CIPD Professional Standards and is a result of detailed consultation with HR directors across the main economic sectors, as well as with senior professionals and academics. The map describes key

HR knowledge areas, associated behaviours and sets out four bands of competence. This is designed to be more relevant to today's HR organisational landscape and deliver "sustainable capability".

Now, this could be said to be the goal for all workers no matter what their discipline, be they engineers or accountants. How do you stay relevant in a highly interconnected, global marketplace? Where does the responsibility lie for L&D? Is it with the organisation you work for or with you, the individual?

Personal brand challenges professional qualification as a sign of quality

We all have anecdotes about our educational experiences, about how little we remember and how what we do remember has little practical value to the activities and jobs we do. Clearly, education strives to provide a platform for transferable skills, to give us adaptability and resilience to apply what we know in new and constructive ways.

Once in a job, continuous professional development intends to keep skills fresh and relevant, building on our real-world experience. But does it? Too

often qualifications misrepresent the value and capabilities of the person holding the certificate. All too frequently, the curriculum fails to keep up with the highly bespoke and rapidly changing realities of the workplace.

In today's digitally connected society, the value of a qualification is in danger of being superseded by a highly public individual record of activity and achievements – **the personal brand**.

Marshall McLuhan famously wrote in 1964 that: "The medium is the message." He recognised the impact that new technologies have on our social and professional lives. The technology available today, from internet-enabled personal blogging to social networks such as LinkedIn, enables the individual to provide the message personally and truly gives rise to **the individual as the medium**. This is a seismic shift in the flow of communication and information.

A controlled hierarchy has been replaced by a multi-nodal, interconnected network where



each one of us controls what we send, receive and participate in. The Internet works this model efficiently and cost-effectively. The commercial world is now realising the shift in consumer attention, which has resulted in exponential growth in online advertising and marketing. We have always liked connecting, sharing and creating with others, but we now have the tools to do so easily. Television, news and print media are struggling to redefine their roles in the aftermath.

Education and training will follow this shift, as individuals realise they can consciously control their own L&D. Crucially it doesn't have to look and feel like the classroom and lecture halls of old – although this remains a revelation to most adult learners.

Your personal brand – or, in other words, your **social capital** – could be described as a product of your academic, professional and life achievements and your network of contacts. Online media tools such as social networks (eg Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Xing) and content sharing (blogs, wikis, Youtube, Flickr and Twitter again) make it easy for individuals to control their own personal learning and sphere of influence.

This social capital cuts right across normal organisational boundaries and structures. The speed with which contacts can be made and expertise shared renders many traditional learning experiences achingly slow by comparison and frustratingly one-dimensional. It is this movement that has significant implications for the design of CPD support.

Impact of informal learning on CPD

Jay Cross, an active proponent of informal learning in the USA, recently said: “As networks continue to subvert hierarchy, successful organisations will embrace respect for the individual, flexibility and adaptation, openness and transparency, sharing and collaboration, honesty and authenticity, and immediacy. Training is obsolete because it deals with a past that won't be repeated. Learning will be redefined as problem-solving, achieving fit with one's environment and having the connections to deal with novel situations.”

Disappointingly, this world-view has yet to establish itself in any widespread reality. Much workplace learning is primarily formal in its delivery, using methods that at best make cursory use of technology to support and nurture a more effective and lasting learning experience.

Slowly, this is changing. Various market research surveys and studies in the past six to 12 months reveal a transformation towards a more blended learning experience. There is also an increasing use of e-learning and online collaborative exercises amongst geographically-distributed groups of peers and mentors.

Brightwave's *E-learning Trends Survey 2009* demonstrated this transformation by polling L&D specialists within large UK



organisations (5,000+ employees). It revealed that, while 80 per cent of total training budgets are likely to be cut or stay the same, half of the organisations are expecting their e-learning spend to rise.

This shift is being driven by the learners themselves, rather than HR, it seems. An independent study commissioned earlier this year by training provider Cegos found that “half of employees across Europe want more e-learning and blended learning during the next three years, while only about 40 per cent of HR professionals plan to develop more programmes using these techniques.

“Learners are also keener to embrace collaborative tools like blogs, forums and wikis – 44 per cent of employees want to see these techniques developed, compared to just 32 per cent of HR professionals. Face-to-face learning is more popular among HR, with 42 per cent of respondents wanting to see more classroom learning compared to 38 per cent of employees”.

With time and cost pressures growing, there is a real appetite for more flexible forms of learning. The same study found that more than 80 per cent of employees were pleased with their e-learning and blended learning experiences. Employees were even calling for more work-based scenarios, self-assessment and tutor/peer support, rather than a return to traditionally exclusive classroom formats. This implies that HR professionals need to understand how to leverage technology to avoid being completely bypassed in the future, as predicted by Cross.

CPD in real time: ubiquitous performance support

With the advent of real-time, anywhere access to learning opportunities, it is now possible to offer what might be termed **ubiquitous performance support (UPS)**. Using a flexible, integrated set of tools that centre on your Internet-connected mobile phone,

you can instantly query your networks of contacts to provide advice and guidance at the point and time of need.

At the same time, you can gain access to your own personalised repository of knowledge, learning tutorials and other relevant content. The outcomes of how you perform in each situation can thus be recorded and self- (and peer-) assessed to help you improve your performance the next time you find yourself in a similar situation.

Just think of the power this environment has to support individual learning and performance. Instead of the inherently ‘just-in-case’ model of CPD, which is subject to problems of updates and relevancy, UPS offers a ‘just-in-time’ model that delivers actionable learning and accelerates the acquisition of practical experience. E-learning is crucial in underpinning this whole process from pre-induction (getting new starters up to speed) to ongoing performance support.

This thinking also extends the concept of personal learning environments. Using Wikipedia (the reference resource of choice for the digital learner), PLEs are defined as “systems that help learners take control of and manage their own learning. This includes providing support for learners to:

- set their own learning goals
- manage their learning (both content and process)
- communicate with others in the process of learning and achieve learning goals”.

CPD will need to find ways to accommodate this model of learning, providing a higher degree of flexibility and adaptability than ever before. This is more than likely to create some tensions. As the learning experience becomes more bespoke, it will increasingly challenge the concept of standards and levels of competency that are

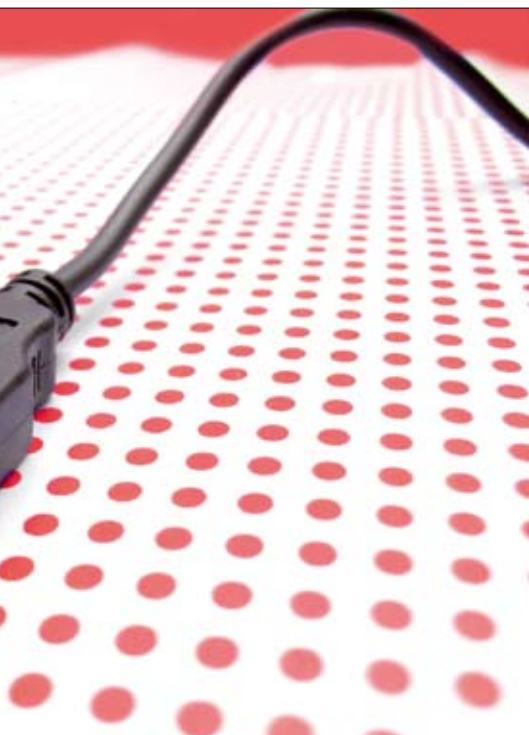


often used for comparison and assessment purposes.

Going further, how do you measure and certify completion? A common measure is contact time or hours learning. Using online tools, environments and peer networks means learning becomes interwoven with normal daily activity and is harder to quantify than attending a half-day course. Interestingly, the interwoven nature of the interaction is more effective in transferring the new learning experience into real performance improvement on the job.

Professional associations managing CPD credit schemes will need to work out viable and meaningful ways of measuring this learning activity when their target audience drifts away from more traditional learning.

The International Association for Continuing Education and Training (www.iaacet.org) is the caretaker of the Continuing Education Unit. The IACET defines the CEU as ten contact hours of participation in an organised continuing education experience under responsible sponsorship, capable direction



and qualified instruction. CEUs may be “awarded by a college, association, company or any other organisation willing and able to meet each of the ANSI/IACET 1-2007 Standards. Awarding IACET CEUs requires that a permanent record be established for each individual to whom IACET CEUs are awarded, and a transcript of that record must be made available upon request”.

When learning activity is interwoven with other activities, how does this get meaningfully calculated and measured? This is no doubt an interesting challenge, especially where learner activity records are spread out over numerous sites, services and personal interactions.

Even as I write this, there is a significant amount of online discussion about the vagaries of measurement, including comments from the popular bloggers Tony Karrer and Harold Jarche. A serendipitous Tweet pointed me to an amusing anecdote from Gloria Gery (<http://www.gloriagery.com/articles/whydont>).

Gery is a pioneer in the field of performance support systems and

seeks real measures for learning effectiveness. She says: “At a meeting one day, I suggested a new measurement criterion. ‘Why don’t we weigh the students and report on a cost per pound?’ A deep quiet overcame the meeting. It was finally broken by a softly spoken question. ‘What?’ I guess I was being given a chance to reconsider, but I didn’t take it. ‘Why don’t we install a scale in the entry way,’ I said, ‘like the one they use for cattle. We can have each student stand on the scale before entering class each day. We can then calculate the return on our investment by volume.’

“Needless to say, this attitude was a subject for much discussion both on that day and on my annual appraisal. While I wasn’t exactly serious, the idea didn’t seem any more irrelevant than some of the success indicators I was reporting on monthly. None of the measurements I was supposed to take asked if anyone learned anything or if our interventions changed their performance.”

Measures that matter

As Gery rightly points out, traditional training measures (including hours spent ‘learning’) demonstrate the separated nature of much training activity, which is divorced from the actual work context. Measures that matter – reducing errors, increasing productivity, reducing costs, increasing revenues – are actually easier to track when learning is woven into the workplace environment.

CPD in its current form does contribute meaningfully towards this goal, but we really need to go further. We need to inject similar real time support across the board, just like my example above.

Looking forward

In lean times, there is a tendency for organisations to cut back on overall training spend. However, this short-term measure can in fact cause more long-term

damage as it means you won’t be in good shape for the inevitable economic upturn and you risk losing the best talent.

In fact, there is an increasing importance of CPD during a recession, as re-skilling becomes more important for professional development with staff taking on new responsibilities if head count is cut. Furthermore, the recession is likely to have less of an impact on those that do take responsibility for their CPD, and they will come out with more skills.

Simply cutting training budgets is a mistake because, without effective investment in people and performance support when the economy picks up, opportunities will be missed. Indeed, many newly-redundant people will discover that they can work productively in new ways outside the corporate structures they have left behind, and they may not return.

Instead of cutting budgets, organisations should instead focus their training attention on the business-critical activities of the organisation. Thankfully, a new CIPD survey shows that, despite the recession, 70 per cent of the HR community feels training will remain a high priority and CPD remains top of the agenda.

Social capital will inevitably grow in importance and the increased control we demand over our use of media will drive a wider thirst to be in control of our own L&D. E-learning will continue to offer the most flexible learning opportunities and, with mobile broadband Internet access becoming more practical, my vision of ubiquitous performance support should become a reality for us all, not just the early adopters. ■

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