

Technology's Role in Leadership Development

BY JESSICA DUBOIS-MAAHS

Learning technology is proficient at technical skill development, but how are such tools used to teach often-elusive soft skills?

The workplace is increasingly dominated by technology.

The trend is especially apparent in corporate learning. As learning leaders look to cut costs and improve efficiencies, e-learning, point-of-need performance support and other Web-based tools have taken over the space formerly occupied by the classroom.

The shift has been particularly effective at teaching technical skills. A call center worker can easily and efficiently master the process of fielding calls through a business simulation or e-learning module. Likewise, a generous portion of sales training can happen over a mobile application.

But as more businesses look to virtual classrooms, webinars, self-paced e-learning courses and mobile technology,

many wonder whether being on the cutting edge — and saving money — is better when it comes to developing employees' soft skills, the kind organizations are keen to develop in the next generation of leaders.

Technology plays an important role in leadership development: 86 percent of companies report a significant investment in learning technology such as webinars, videos, mobile applications and simulations in soft skill development, according to a 2013 survey by Impact Instruction Group, a corporate training and development firm.

Technology overall is also making up a bigger piece of the learning pie. Technology-based methods accounted for 37 percent of formal learning hours in 2012, according to

a report from the American Society for Training & Development. That's a nearly 21 percent increase from 2000, when technology-based learning methods accounted for 16 percent of formal learning hours.

Still, many industry professionals question whether technology is the most effective means for soft skill development — skills that learning leaders say are difficult to master even in a face-to-face environment.

Online Soft Skill Development Is It Possible?

Business and academic leaders are split on whether learning technology can develop employees' soft skills. Some companies claim technology has worked in this context, but many still rely on some component of face-to-face learning to develop and master certain soft skills.

On the other hand, even if learning technology isn't a panacea for soft skill development, companies run the risk of being perceived as antiquated and inefficient if they rely too much on classroom and face-to-face learning.

Academics say the most important thing for learning leaders to keep in mind is context. Some soft skills may transfer well if taught through technology, while others require more of an in-person learning environment.

Ronald Riggio, a professor of leadership and organizational psychology and director of the Kravis Leadership Institute at Claremont (Calif.) McKenna College, said public speaking is one skill where technology can play a large role and be effective. Watching videos of skilled speakers, for instance, can help the learner get a baseline for the ebb, flow and structure of giving a presentation or speech.

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Still, “technology is limited in terms of how much we can develop, and it’s hard to give the kind of personal feedback and personal instruction that is often needed,” Riggio said. “To learn all of the subtleties of interpersonal communication, there’s nothing like face-to-face interaction, practice and feedback.”

To maintain its usefulness, Riggio said companies should incorporate as much technology as possible in soft skill development while critically assessing its effect through follow-up evaluations and learner surveys.

Technology-based soft skills training, however, may not be the best practice for companies facing a time constraint, said Bryan Austin, CEO of Game On Learning, a game-based learning company. Because most soft skill training requires reinforcement, companies with limited time might consider jumping straight to in-person training.

“Leadership skills, or any type of business skill, are really difficult to teach because of its complexity,” Austin said. “The way a lot of training attempts to teach those skills, they don’t allocate enough time for applying and

TECHNOLOGY CAN BRIDGE THE NEEDS GAP AMONG YOUNGER WORKERS

Recent graduates entering the workforce are expected to have a core set of soft skill competencies such as interpersonal skills, problem-solving abilities, a strong work ethic and an ability to learn from constructive feedback. But many companies report a soft skills needs gap among young employees, according to a 2013 International Youth Foundation study.

Further, 77 percent of 2013 graduates expect their first employer to provide formal training, but only 48 percent of 2011 and 2012 graduates actually received formal training in their first job post-graduation, according to an April Accenture survey of some 1,010 students graduating from college in 2013 and 1,005 who graduated in 2011 or 2012.

To combat this soft skills gap, many companies have invested in technology-based training programs, mobile initiatives and company-wide social media websites, according to the survey.

The study suggests companies create a “community of learning” among young employees where they can participate in experiential activities to enhance the learning experience.

— Jessica DuBois-Maahs

mastering the skills.

“Learning and development professionals in the business world, both corporate and government, get tons of pressure from their internal clients to reduce formal training time. Managers want two-day classes shortened to one day, and one-day classes shortened to a half-day. Let’s be realistic — the acquisition, mastery and internalization of complex skills requires hours of practice in a safe environment, not minutes,” Austin said.

Therefore, for technology-based learning platforms to be worthwhile in developing soft skills, they must be tailored to an employee’s specific needs, including areas of weakness, said Thuy Sindell, founder and coaching practice leader at Skyline Group International, a human capital performance firm.

Understanding and identifying an employee’s needs allows a company to cultivate leaders at various levels through targeted applications of skills in technology-based programs. It also reduces the amount of time and energy spent in soft skills training by only focusing on areas of weakness.

“In the context of leadership development, it is exciting to consider a future where the best knowledge, tools and expertise is available to all employees — individual contributors, current and emerging leaders — without the barrier of exclusivity,” Sindell said.

Technology in Action Firms Make an Effort

Some company leaders say they've been successful using technology in soft skill development. The trouble is many of those same companies have yet to directly measure if it's working outside of indirect metrics such as improved engagement and participation.

Employees at Signature Healthcare, a long-term health care services company, rarely have the time or means to sit in a classroom for soft-skill development. With the company's nurses working in three shifts, 24 hours a day, using exclusively brick-and-mortar development can become costly and difficult to coordinate, said Mary McNevin, the company's chief learning officer.

IS IT EASIER TO MEASURE A SOFT SKILL WITH TECHNOLOGY?

Businesses turning to Web-based development tools for soft skills training are confronted with the same conundrum traditional classroom-based training courses face: measurement.

Soft skills, however, are even more difficult to quantify, forcing learning leaders to rely on indirect measures to determine a platform's success.

For instance, an e-learning program's ability to instill soft skills in an employee might be measured through engagement, said John Ambrose, senior vice president of corporate development and emerging business at online learning provider Skillsoft.

"When you are using technology and involve technology, it is impossible to be a passive learner," Ambrose said. "The way the courses are constructed, the way the modes of instruction are interwoven with rich video, mobile prompts, quick assessments, interactive exercises and challenges, it really encourages the user to be not just physically present but mentally engaged. That's not the case in a classroom setting."

Because technology-based learning programs require more time for reinforcement, Ambrose said employees are more likely to be engaged as they participate. Many online learning modules meant to develop an employee's leadership ability can prompt frequent questions after every section. In a classroom environment, employees have less of an incentive to pay attention.

"Just because they are physically present does not mean they are learning," Ambrose said. "Whereas online with technology, you're able to make sure that they are engaged because you are constantly testing and validating."

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McNevin said developing employees through custom video, audio and online modules in interactive training and development sessions allowed employees to access more targeted exercises. She also said employees shoot videos that spur constructive discussion, developing an employee's ability to remain calm under pressure while leading a care team, which is important for hospital workers.

The company's nurses, for example, view vignettes for different types of patient care through 10-minute-long videos, McNevin said. After the scenarios play out, the nurses are asked how they would handle the situation, highlighting the best and worst practices.

"We use a hybrid approach where you can do a demo with technology and then practice them in the classroom," McNevin said. "With technology, you can slow down or speed up the class accordingly, and you can make sure it's communicated the same way every time. If you have learners where English is a second language, with technology, they can take content at their own pace."

Still, while the company's employees may use technology more frequently, the leadership skills addressed are reinforced, discussed and polished throughout the year in a face-to-face environment, McNevin said. The company's CEO, Joe Steier, will even conduct in-person leadership development sessions with the company's executive team and employees in the field.

Likewise, mobile technology has enabled talent consultancy Bluewater Learning Inc.'s employees to improve communication and team-building skills through social collaboration, said Keith Meyerson, the company's vice president of talent management and organizational strategies.

Bluewater employees have access to an online forum that is available across mobile platforms, which serves as an instant support tool for employees collaborating on a project or who need immediate feedback, and it provides communication skills training through real-time performance support.

"In the past, we would have to schedule instructors," Meyerson said. "Now, with social tools, people can go online and find people who are experts. An employee can post an open question in a public forum with an expert or with peers. Instead of taking a course, you can find a coach, mentor or expert and have a mentoring conversation where you can talk about challenges or bounce ideas off of them."

Meyerson said technology also can provide an immediate reference for challenging situations where an employee's leadership ability is paramount. For instance, when a manager is interviewing potential hires, he or she can access information through a mobile application about questions to ask and how to interpret body language or other important social cues a candidate might exhibit in an interview.

Some companies may even feed targeted videos and research to business leaders' mobile devices to stimulate soft skill development, said John Ambrose, senior vice president of corporate development and emerging business at HR technology company Skillssoft.

However, although many learning and development professionals are quick to assert they use technology-based learning programs to develop soft skills, measures of effectiveness remain mostly anecdotal, with few formal measurement tools available (see sidebar, page 20).

One way to measure impact is to track an employee's consumption of e-learning programs, Ambrose said. Learning leaders also could use interviews or employee surveys to determine how much technology has helped in the development of soft skills. Though limited, Ambrose said the findings can help an employer determine if an employee is developing new ways

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of thinking about a particular leadership situation.

"Technology can play a huge role in building soft skills," Ambrose said. "And, in fact, I'd say that there are far too many companies that are endeavoring to drive soft skills development through traditional classroom-based scheduled learning. Really, they are frankly wasting money and wasting time and resources by not at least considering a blended approach to using technology, in combination perhaps with more traditional types of live interaction." **CLO**

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