Tackling today’s learning challenges with tomorrow’s technology

by

Martin Belton
martin.belton@e2train.com
Tackling today’s learning challenges with tomorrow’s technology

by

Martin Belton
martin.belton@e2train.com

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Meeting Learning Challenges
   2.1. Identifying today’s learning challenges
   2.2. Learning Challenges Surveyed
   2.3. 12 Tweets you must know
   2.4. Dealing with the dichotomy
3. Case Study: How O2 met its internal learning challenges
   3.1. Working with departments
   3.2. Engaging learners in blended programmes
   3.3. Companywide metrics
4. Tomorrow’s learning and performance system: five must haves
   4.1. The Learner experience
   4.2. Formal and informal blended learning
   4.3. Sharing and communications
   4.4. Performance & Skills management
   4.5. Integrated reporting
5. Summary
New web 2.0 tools and technologies offer an exciting range of possibilities for the learning professional...

...But how do they enable you to actually deal with the day to day challenges of running a learning and development function? This whitepaper considers takes a fresh look at those challenges, both through research and in practice and identifies the features and capabilities you will need to effectively meet those challenges in our increasingly informal and challenging business environment.

1. Introduction

During the last five years, many organisations have seen a marked change in their working processes and subsequent learning challenges. Some of this change at least must be attributed to technological innovations. But these innovations are many and diverse. It is relatively easy to find descriptions of them and how they might enhance business operations and, in particular learning programmes.

But the emergence of new technology brings its own challenges and questions. Will this technology actually help me address my business challenges? Can I conglomerate these technologies into a usable system to add real business value? This is especially true of systems aimed at learning professionals. The emergence of new management information systems and web 2.0 technologies has thrown up a bewildering array of new options.

This paper addresses these challenges and requirements. Firstly we will seek to identify the key learning challenges faced by learning professionals today. Secondly we will look at how some of those challenges are being faced in a real life situation. Finally, as a conclusion, we will look at the critical functionality that may be leveraged from the new technology to create a ‘best practice’ system.

2. Meeting Learning Challenges

2.1 Identifying today’s learning challenges

There is no question that the current hot conference topic today is informal learning. It has easily surpassed rapid authoring as ‘presentation of the day’. Visit any learning orientated event and you will find yourself practically knee deep in people explaining about the amazing array of toys and tools there are to blog, wiki, twitter or generally tell people your life story.

This fascination with these tools however is not entirely reflected by the real world challenges faced by learning professionals. They are, of course, far too complex to be resolved simply by the introduction of a few new routes to learning. Indeed, they bring their own problems. Organisations are becoming increasingly conscious of ‘information overload’. A recent survey from industry analysts, Bersin & Associates found that 68% of knowledge workers now feel their biggest learning problem is an ‘overwhelming volume of information’. Directors have other concerns; according to a report from Basex in 2008, ‘28% of all employee work is wasted by people multi-tasking between email, Google, and various other forms of informal learning.’

2.2 Learning challenges surveyed

In the UK, the Learning & Skills Group in conjunction with e2train, conducted a survey of these challenges more than 100 learning professionals. Some of the key
findings concerned the question ‘what is the greatest single challenge facing your organisation at present’. 28% of respondents found that linking learning closer to organisation needs was the greatest test (see figure 1).

When the survey asked the same question, but from a personal angle, the results were similar, possibly reflecting the complexity of, and frustration with this issue (see figure 2). Note that, although absent from the organisational challenges, social learning and use of web 2.0 tools is seen as a significant issue.

This may suggest that, while organisations as entities are not aware of the opportunities presented by these technologies, learning professionals are far more attuned to the possibilities and feel pressure to not be found wanting when the time for implementation comes.

But despite the size of the challenge of aligning learning to business objectives, there is not necessarily any reluctance to share their data with others. A significant 45% of learning professionals said they would be keen to share more or more frequent information with the board, were they to have the means or opportunity.

Another key challenge identified the issues of working closely with different departments in the organisation. This was evident at several different levels. Learning professionals found difficulty getting the original buy in for the learning programmes and coordinating learning across different departments. This came through both at a personal and organisational level. The proliferation of issues cited around the learning team’s relations and contribution to the success of other departments is significant.

The greatest single mitigating factor on these working issues has been the adoption of performance management solutions. More specifically, by learning professionals integrating performance management systems and techniques with their training operations. Some analysts see this as the single most critical issue today. Jay Cross (Chief Learning Officer Magazine, February 2009) for instance asserts that
his wish would be to ‘...close the training department... shifting our focus from training to performance...changing my title from VP of training to VP of core capabilities. My assistants will become the director of sales readiness and the director of competitive advantage, respectively. The measure of our contributions will be results, not training measures...’ He concludes by stating the ‘...scope of the L&D officer’s job is mushrooming. They will neither prosper, nor even survive, if they fail to take responsibility for the overall learning process in their organisations’.

Equally interesting is the absence of some issues as key learning challenges. Little mention, for instance, is made of developing e-learning content (or any learning content for that matter). This, despite the fact that this topic has been a previously ‘hot’ conference issue until recently. In their place are new challenges centred on interactions with the organisation, and how to leverage new web 2.0 technologies. This could constitute evidence that the learning professional’s role will move away from the assimilation and delivery of training. Instead, it is how we manage, deploy and record access to our learning that may take to the fore.

2.3 Tweets: thought leaders views on a learning department’s challenges

e2train recently asked some of the UK’s thought leaders and magazine editors to provide us with their views on today’s learning challenges. In the spirit of the day, they were each restricted to a 140 character ‘tweet’ to convey those views. The comments opposite were generously provided:

Again, the prevailing view is that the real challenge is integrating learning with organisational objectives and developing it as a mainstream business role. Two analysts refer to the issue of formal and (by implication) informal learning challenges. Others are interested in the issues surrounding the integration of employee performance, skills gaps and ‘getting out into the business’. Perhaps surprisingly, few make reference to the ‘prevailing economic conditions.

2.4 Dealing with the dichotomy

At a recent presentation, industry analyst and consultant David Wilson, summarised by noting that a dichotomy exists today in the opportunities available to develop our learning systems. On the one hand, we are keen to leverage all the benefits of the new web 2.0 applications to encourage learning within our organisations. On the other hand, we are becoming increasingly aware of the need to drive data back into the corporate board rooms. This is essential to contribute to the broader company metrics and therefore success.

It is evident that this dichotomy is grounded in technology itself. On the one hand we are all well versed in the growth of informal learning solutions and all the applications available. On the other, we have seen a massive rise in implementations of management information systems (MIS) and ERP system. This is indicative of the demand by senior company executives to drive their businesses forward using clearly defined metrics. These systems have been largely responsible for an increased faith and dependency on these metrics. This has in turn led to an increasing demand from learning professionals to demonstrate their achievements.

Irritatingly though, informal learning does not lend itself to easy measurement. Course completion can no longer provide supporting evidence. Instead, we made need to turn to other measures such as performance measurement if we are to leverage both formal and informal opportunities.
In my opinion the greatest learning challenge facing L&D professionals today is:

Laura Overton Breaking down walls – between learning & business, traditional learning and technology enabled, formal & informal, trainer & e-L specialists – Managing Director, Towards Maturity

David Wilson Being hardwired to impacting the performance of the business and therefore a priority for investment.” – Managing Director, Elearnity

Debbie Carter How to have the confidence and business acumen to have those 'difficult' conversations with managers in their organisations. – Editor, Training Journal

Marc Rosenberg Learning professionals must shift their focus from training to workplace learning or risk irrelevance as frontline managers do it themselves – Author and e-learning expert

Charles Jennings We need to move from the current focus on creating content and formal learning towards a focus on creating experiences, interactions and self-managed learning. – Director, Duntroon Associates

Dr. Peter Honey Get people to appreciate that learning, their only sustainable competitive advantage, is a learnable skill and effective learning is the answer every time! – Author and learning guru

Fiona Leteny To pick their way through the maze of learning technologies while assuring senior management they can add value with decreasing budgets – Managing Director, Feenix e-Learning

Verity Gough Retain and pass on the skills and knowledge of the older generation before they disappear and we are left with a bigger skills gap than we already have. – Editor, TrainingZone

Clive Shepherd The biggest challenge is to keep the show on the road in harsh economic conditions. This also provides the biggest opportunity. – Fastrack Consulting

Donald H Taylor Being relevant. A schedule of training is not enough. What is? Get out into the business and find out. – Chairman, Learning and Skills Group

Karyn Romeis Increasing relevance. Moving out from the annex into the main house. Aligning learning goals with the organisation’s business objectives. – Learning Anorak

Nigel Paine Two HUGE ones: leveraging technology to save costs but not decline standards and doing less directly but facilitating more. Learning Consultant
3. Case Study: How O2 met its internal learning challenges

O2 is one of the leading providers of mobile services to consumers and businesses in the UK. Its internal learning and development team places a sizeable emphasis on identifying and anticipating company-wide requirements for various skills and competencies. Equal emphasis is placed on working with the learners to make sure they get a learning programme that suits and maximises their potential.

3.1 Working with departments

Charlotte Drake is responsible for the internal training operations. Explains Charlotte: ‘The real challenge isn’t just about writing content to meet learning needs. Instead we concentrate on working with directorates (or company departments) to identify and manage talent so the right skills are brought to the fore. And then being able to demonstrate the success of that activity.’

To that end, O2’s learning and development department recruited a team of ‘business partners’ with a remit to support individual directorate’s functions. Their role is to identify business needs and feed them into the knowledge framework. This creates ‘recommendations’ that then drive the activities of the learning and development consultants. This in turn shapes and structures the courses for the Learning Zone (the O2 learning portal) to effectively develop that talent. Confirms Charlotte: ‘By putting the Directorates’ skills demands at the centre of our activity, we can create programmes matched to the organisational business needs. That puts us in the best position to demonstrate business value’.

3.2 Engaging learners in blended programmes

Another challenge surrounds understanding the way employees learn. One of the accusations often levelled at e-learning as a solution is that it really only suits the theorists (someone interested in theories and enjoys reading about these ideas). The claim is that it does not suit the ‘activists’ (someone who enjoys new experiences, travelling etc). In creating a blended learning programme, the challenge is therefore engaging the activists.

In dealing with this, Charlotte strongly believes the key is to engage the learners on as many levels as possible. Continued Charlotte: “We have to make sure that, when our learners visit the ‘Learning Zone’ it has material precisely relevant to them. We’re talking about podcasts, articles and other material tailored to their departmental, group or individual needs, in addition to their formal learning. Engaging the activist really is about making the learning environment an exciting (and therefore desirable) place to visit.

The O2 Learning Zone seeks to do just that. Presently the system is personalised to each directorate (marketing HR, technology etc) and then matched with relevant formal and informal learning. But such is the value attached, they are now in the process of developing the Learning Zone even further. Explained Charlotte: “We are now putting the finishing touches to a new version of the Learning Zone with even more communications tools, personalised home and learning pages and an ‘Amazon-style’ course rating system for so learners can understand what the course offers in familiar terms. Our objective is to make this system increasingly dynamic to encourage learners to want to engage with the system”.

3.3 Companywide metrics

But perhaps the most significant challenge for the team remains the management reporting. Concludes Charlotte: “We have to make sure that we get the right metrics at the right time back to the top individuals. Of course we have to demonstrate ROI – but these metrics are about much more just demonstrating the directorate’s success. Our senior management has to know that it has access the right talents to place in the right positions. We need to be certain that we are not only ready for the next business challenge; this is fundamental to keep a business ahead of the game. The real life solution to that is to integrate learning and development data, via a management information system, with other real life departmental business metrics to create a broader picture of the company’s genuine human resources.”
Five new ‘must haves’ for learning management technology in a Web 2.0 World

1. The learner facing home page must be dynamic and active, rewarding visitors with new, interesting and relevant data each time they visit making it a ‘must-go to’ site, not a training chore.

2. Your learning technology must be capable of managing your formal AND informal learning tools to reduce time spent by learners multi-tasking between applications.

3. Your system must enable learners to communicate new ideas and thoughts to each other – and contribute their own learning evidence and information.

4. Your system must be able to define and record personal skills and competencies, set training interventions against them, and measure the results.

5. Your system should report in depth, not just on training and performance data, but also against other key company metrics such as sales and health & safety records.

4. Tomorrow’s learning and performance system: five must haves

The lessons from the 02 case study are interesting. Firstly they are exactly consistent with the challenges cited in our earlier polls and those outlined by our learning thought leaders. Today, most LMS’s and VLE’s (and for that matter many training department’s successes) are judged on their ability to deliver e-learning to individuals and groups. But that capability alone would in no way meet these challenges. Instead, if they are to be of real organisational value, tomorrow’s systems must provide learning managers with a service that reflects the real changes in their role – and meet the demands of senior executives in the organisation. Therefore based upon this it can be reasonably argued that, for a learning and performance technology system to add real value – and meet the new learning challenges inherent in that mission – there are five critical ‘new’ features that are absolutes (see summary table above).

4.1 Learner home page

The learner facing home page must be dynamic and active, rewarding visitors with new, interesting and relevant data each time they visit making it a ‘must-go to’ site, not a training chore.

Visiting an organisation’s learning management system can be a pretty uninspiring pastime for the learner- which is kind of odd really given the other lengths we go to inspire them. Learning professionals speak at length of the need to make learning exciting and compelling – but then serve it up on the computing equivalent of a limp bed of lettuce. Most learning menus in a LMS are simply a list of courses. Little is done however to make those learners want to go to their LMS and discover what resources are available to help them learn. e2train’s research, though discussions with those learners, has revealed a real gap in the thinking of most providers and corporations. In short, the LMS must compete for attention with many other work demands and computing opportunities available to the learner. To do that successfully, we should learn the lessons of our website designers (of which much is written) and make our LMS ‘stickier’ – both by encouraging more visits and then increasing the length of stay by the learners. Some of the most common suggestions for doing this are as follows:

- Make the home page as dynamic as possible; parts at least must be easily updatable
- Communicate the changes: either by email or RSS feed.
- Make the content as relevant as possible.
- Change the content often

This is the first step towards engaging with the active learner rather than just the theorist that e-learning traditionally captures.
4.2 Managing all learning

Your learning technology must be capable of managing your formal AND informal learning tools to reduce time spent by learners multi-tasking between applications.

Many of today’s employees have access to informal learning, chat groups, blogs, wikis and huge amounts of information online. Now, when someone needs to “learn” something, we must consider the ways these skills may be gained: they can go to a class, take an online course, look up support information on the web, they can read a book, or they can find someone who knows what to do and get help. The question arises therefore; how do we manage this array of opportunities? Industry analyst Bersin argues is that it is up to the learning professionals, to “formalize” this informal learning environment. He suggests investment should be aligned towards talent management and the needs to build deep levels of skill.

The nature of many informal learning applications (wikis, twitter etc) is the constant update and new information on offer. It is this that makes them compelling. The challenge for learning professionals is to capture this capability within their system to provide informal learning opportunities and add dynamic content to an otherwise flat world. By managing and formalising access to these applications, their benefits realized as part of a broader blended learning course. Fortunately, technology is at hand to make this process a relatively easy. Most informal learning applications can be squeezed into Google gadgets or web parts. By including this technology within your learning system (see Figure 4), access can be encouraged and managed to a degree that they can form a useful part of a formal learning programme.

4.3 Communications tool

Your system must enable learners to communicate new ideas and thoughts to each other – and contribute their learning evidence and information.

User-created content has been a lynchpin of the Web 2.0 learning environment. This takes more than one form. In defining it we should include and consider blogs, formal learning content, essays and multi site conglomerated content. All have their place as learning tools. As such they should be capable of becoming part of the learning process. Learning systems should address these by offering course relevant forums, chat rooms, blogs. Users should be enabled to upload their own content to the system. Sharing this data as part of formalised courses enhances the communications process.

4.4 Performance & Skills management

Your system must be able to define and record personal skills and competencies, set training interventions against them, and measure the results

Whilst the benefits of new informal learning opportunities are obvious, these new opportunities also bring with them other issues – notably how do we record these learning activities? No longer is it enough to simply record which courses were attended and completed (if it ever was!). Salvation instead can lie in the more useful measurement of competencies and improvement of personal skill levels. More than ever therefore it is important that
this becomes part of the learning manager’s remit. This requisite is borne out by our survey and thought leaders’ identification of the challenges of working with other business departments. It is in the performance function that learning professionals are able to play their trump card – and gain the kind of attention from both managers and employees – that might otherwise be missing. Typically that also includes a role within the personal review process. In fact many of today’s learning management systems are already equipped with a performance system which is able to integrate the personal review processes and associate competencies with learning interventions. But it in the implementation and specification of that system that sets up the last (and possibly most critical) requirement.

4.5 Integrated reporting

Your system should report in depth, not just on training and performance data, but also other key metrics such as sales and health & safety records.

Without question the overarching issue cited by both learning managers and our thought leaders has been that of the contribution of the learning and development’s function to organisational objectives and the recognition of that contribution. Figure 5 illustrates a report that compares a store’s overall sales with the successful completion of a recent sales training. It is demonstrating these kind of correlations which appeals to today’s metrics led board rooms. It can be argued that there may be other external factors that may have influenced the metrics. Though, in reality, that is hardly the point. In the long run, this demonstration will be the kind of indicator that will gain greater respect for the learning function within the organisation – and enable it to more easily meet its latter day challenges.

5 Summary

By identifying the learning professionals’ challenges, we have established a set of new ‘must have’ features and functions. Of course these are not the only ones that a system needs to run a learning and performance department. Seasoned users of LMS’s will testify to the importance of in depth e-learning content management functions, the ability to manage users, groups of users, create learning pathways, accreditations, manage and cost classroom functions and draw upon other resources. None of these capabilities has gone away or even reduced in importance. But to these existing functions and features, our research suggests that, we will not meet new learning challenges without these new solutions somehow incorporated into the learning manager’s armoury. Certainly to keep up with the demands on the learning department to demonstrate real business value, it is at least essential to take a broader view of learning and performance management and the reporting of that data. The upside of that is substantial though. For if applied correctly and efficiently, it is not unreasonable to envisage businesses becoming increasingly reliant on its learning and development functions.
For a demonstration or just more information about Kallidus, call 01285 883900, email: sales@e2train.com or go to www.e2train.com/Kallidus

Deloitte Fast 50 Technology Award Winner 2005 and 2007
101/102 Cirencester Business Park, Love Lane, Cirencester, GL7 1XD.