

June 17, 2011

Volume 6, Issue 25

Compressed Knowledge from getAbstract: *Building a Learning Culture through Holistic, Environmental Support for On-Demand Learning*

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Introduction

Learners are becoming more accustomed to finding business knowledge resources informally on their own. While knowledge resources have always been available to employees, today they are available at their fingertips – to be reflected upon, shared, commented on, added to and recommended. This trend is one of the reasons why forward-thinking companies are shifting the focus away from company-driven, formal learning to building expertise through multiple channels.

Along with an increasing recognition that most learning is informal, continual and learner-initiated, this shift in how knowledge resources are found, accessed and shared is behind the renaissance we are seeing in learning and development (L&D).

Rather than fight this renaissance, today's high-impact learning organizations realize the extraordinary potential that they can offer to their organizations as enablers and brokers of learning, not just as sources of formal programs. They are rethinking their processes, and reallocating resources to help the organization serve its own needs

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KEY POINT

While knowledge resources have always been available to employees, today they are available at their fingertips – to be reflected upon, shared, commented on, added to and recommended.

through on-demand learning environments, knowledge-sharing and collaboration, all of which facilitate continuous learning.¹

Such tactics influence learning by helping to build an organizationwide belief that the organization's strategy, missions and operations can continuously be improved through an ongoing process of individual and organizational learning.

Of course shifting focus and rethinking processes are just two of the tactics that we use to drive change. We have found that, without a strong culture², the collective learning of an organization (the capacity to socially accumulate and share common and creative knowledge, giving rise to cumulative know-how and problem-solving) will not take place.³

Why is that? A lot has to do with how the organization views learning. In our *High-Impact Learning Culture research*⁴, we examined learning and learning culture as a holistic process. Figure 1 is our simplified depiction of this overall learning culture model, and shows the relationship of the learning culture to learning and to the business.

¹ For more information on understanding these new areas of the training program, please see, *The Impact Measurement Framework: An Update for the Measurement of Informal Learning*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 4, 2011. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library.

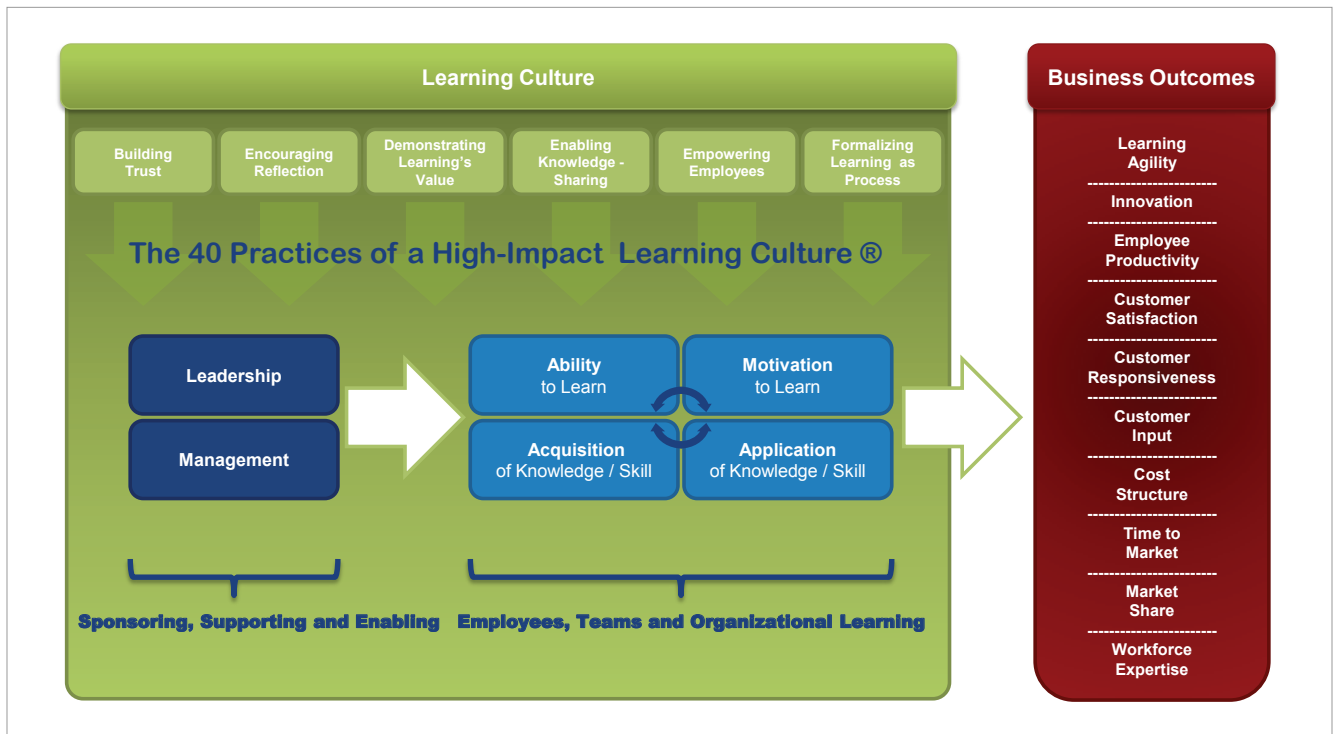
² Bersin & Associates defines "culture" as the collective set of organizational values, conventions, processes and practices that influence and encourage both individuals and the collective organization to continuously increase knowledge, competence and performance.

³ Source: *Spatial Transfer of Knowledge in High Tech Milieux: Learning vs. Collective Learning Processes*, Dr. Roberta Capello, <http://www.sre.wu-wien.ac.at/ersa/ersaconfs/ersa98/papers/359.pdf>

⁴ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Culture: The 40 Best Practices for Creating an Empowered Enterprise*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, June 2010. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/hilc.



Figure 1: Bersin & Associates High-Impact Learning Culture Model®



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2010.



KEY POINT

Bersin & Associates has found that, without a strong culture, the collective learning of an organization will not take place.

This model for understanding learning and learning culture as a holistic system, together with our definition of learning culture and the process of collective learning, provides a basis for our discussion of on-demand learning.

In this bulletin, we profile one unique solution provider, getAbstract, Inc. (a specialist in providing organizations with compressed business knowledge), and the ways in which its solution can facilitate the building of a learning culture that is both holistic and supportive of on-demand learning.

What Is “Compressed Knowledge?”

Over the past two decades, technology has enabled the exponential growth of information. As a result, new and experienced employees can develop broad knowledge on a variety of topics.

We can see that content is getting smaller, faster, fragmented and more mobile. For example, in the music industry, we once bought full albums.



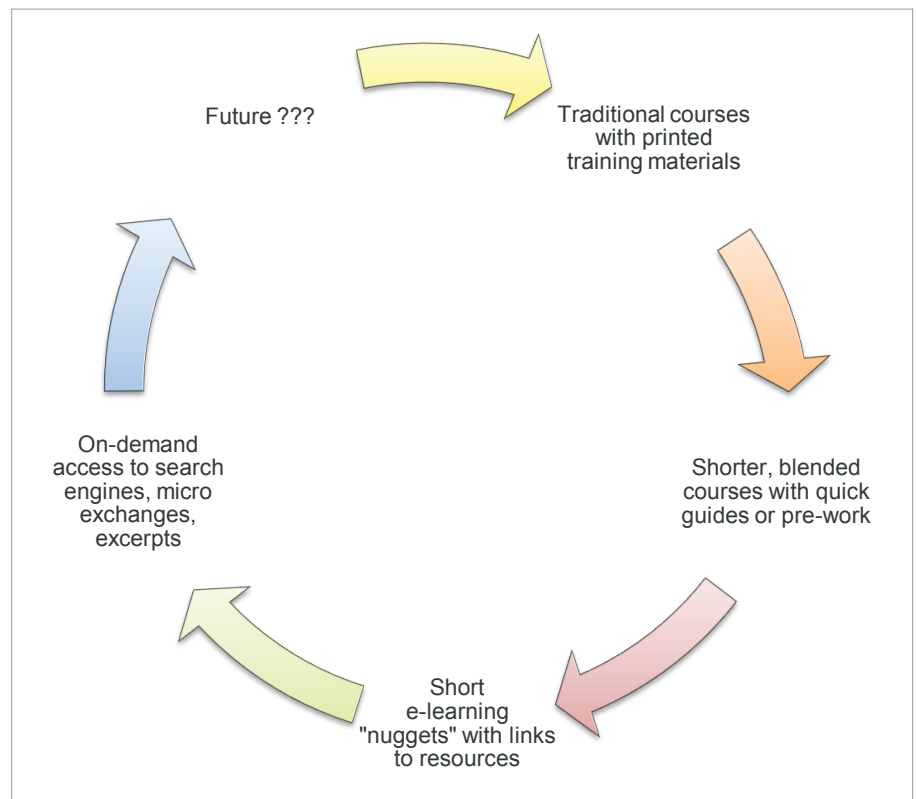
We now purchase songs a la carte and even smaller ringtones from those songs for our mobile devices. The same trend exists in learning. Our knowledge resources are smaller, faster and more fragmented. We can read a book abstract on an iPad while waiting to board a plane, get up to speed on a particular topic and serendipitously solve a business problem by sharing what we learned with our co-workers – all on the fly in a fraction of the time.



KEY POINT

Digital book abstracts are a perfect example of the type of compressed knowledge that can provide task-specific, just-in-time performance support, ongoing development and a quick way to obtain knowledge on a variety of topics.

Figure 2: The Progression to Compressed Knowledge Resources



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Digital book abstracts, like those offered by getAbstract, are a perfect example of the type of compressed knowledge that can provide task-specific, just-in-time performance support, ongoing development and a quick way to obtain knowledge on a variety of topics. What is unique about compressed knowledge, such as book abstracts, is the potential to combine similar themes in aggregate, thus providing a loose structure





KEY POINT

“On-demand learning” is about bringing personalized content to a learner at the point of need, often integrating the learning experience with other enterprise systems, processes and supplemental content.

that can be embedded in workflows.⁵ This is an important step in learning transfer.

What Is “On-Demand Learning?”

“On-demand learning” is about bringing personalized content to a learner at the point of need, often integrating the learning experience with other enterprise systems, processes and supplemental content.

In addition to learning, there are many other ways to use on-demand content, such as:

- Leadership development;
- Developing new ideas;
- Employee development;
- Decision-making;
- Sharing and collaboration;
- Trend-watching; and,
- Increasing one’s range of knowledge.

⁵ For more information on the “micro” nature of content, please see *Outline of a Microlearning Agenda*, Theo Hug and Norm Friesen, 2009, <http://www.elearningeuropa.info/files/media/media20252.pdf>.





KEY POINT

Organizations with a strong learning culture are also taking better advantage of the collective expertise and experience of their workforces, and are more apt to encourage the open flow of knowledge including to / from their customer bases.

Figure 3: Usages for On-Demand Learning



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

Beyond usage, finding the right knowledge resources on-demand is an important component for becoming an agile learning organization. Learning agility, as we know, is highly dependent on a strong organizational learning culture. It is a simple concept but significant in terms of business outcomes. Organizations with a strong culture of learning simply perform better than those that do not.⁶

Organizations with a strong learning culture are also taking better advantage of the collective expertise and experience of their workforces, and are more apt to encourage the open flow of knowledge including to / from their customer bases. By bringing personalized content to a learner at the point of need (on-demand),

⁶ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Culture: The 40 Best Practices for Creating an Empowered Enterprise*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, June 2010.



organizations can develop the capacities and perspectives that will facilitate a nimble response to change.

General Electric (GE) is one example of an organization that changed processes to support on-demand learning.

**KEY POINT**

The skills developed through on-demand resources are viewed as critical at GE – because they support the global aspect of business, and provide information and knowledge to employees when they need it.

Case in Point: Developing Learning Agility at General Electric

At GE, on-demand learning is an integral part of leadership development programs across all locations globally – from Shanghai, China to Crotonville, New York. The company’s on-demand learning resources touch all employees, whether at the desktop or on a mobile device. The skills developed through on-demand resources are viewed as critical at GE – because they support the global aspect of business, and provide information and knowledge to employees when they need it.

GE turned to a library of on-demand book abstracts from getAbstract, Inc. because employees needed broad knowledge on a variety of topics. The company makes the book abstracts available enterprisewide to all professional employees; such resources are a part of GE’s employee value proposition. The operations manager for GE global learning and leader of “Crotonville” (also known as the John F. Welch Leadership Development Center) noted that people are more valuable when they learn. According to the operations manager, global learning’s responsibility is to,

“... Encourage and articulate that. People love coming to Crotonville but, with only a few touch points, on-demand learning resources support continued learning.”

The global learning group views an on-demand book abstract resource as a way to support a marketing strategy that is all about creating content. GE’s approach is not to think of on-demand assets as specific to learning but, instead, to think of them as base material for the business.

Case in Point: Developing Learning Agility at General Electric (cont'd)



KEY POINT

learning assets via direct feedback from employees – who have self-reported a 10 percent to 25 percent improvement of their targeted skills.

The operations manager for GE Global Learning views on-demand learning resources as pieces of a mosaic. Context is created by the business; individual business units disaggregate content into topical areas.

The value of on-demand learning resources comes as GE employees gain a greater perspective and point of view. For example, a vice president at GE had a meeting with a Nobel Laureate professor and wanted background on the professor's books. By reviewing book abstracts, he was able to reference the work of the professor and a very engaging discussion ensued within his group. It is a great example of relevant and timely on-demand learning.

Powerful leadership resources have influenced leaders. For example, on the topic of running successful meetings, leaders are "hooking in with the hearts and minds of people" versus starting meetings with a traditional agenda. For learning, GE aligns on-demand resources with courses, so that there is a logical connection.

GE measured usage, paying particular attention to whether or not people return to access content. The company believes that, if people use the resources, then they have met a need, especially since they do not require people to read.

The company does not look at a particular return on investment. Rather, the organization determines the value of its on-demand learning assets via direct feedback from employees – who have self-reported a 10 percent to 25 percent improvement of their targeted skills. When GE informed its employees of the digital abstract resources, the feedback received was along the lines of "the best online resources we've ever had."

Employees access book abstracts and other on-demand resources through the GE global learning web portal. Increasingly, employees also access content on mobile devices, often listening to abstracts when they have idle time.



KEY POINT

As an organization, GE is achieving high-learning agility by continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills that give the company the ability to grow, change and innovate.

Case in Point: Developing Learning Agility at General Electric (cont'd)

The operations manager for GE global learning offered the following advice to organizations that are looking to add on-demand resources to their learning offerings.

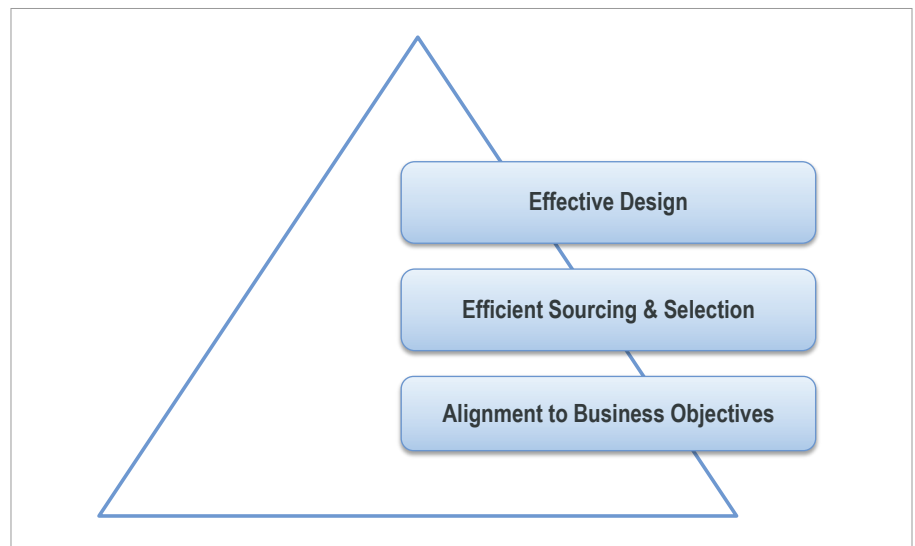
- *Go with an enterprisewide license over single-user licenses.*
- *Remember the marketing element is not specific to learning. Buddy up with a marketing person, and talk about how material is used and applied on the job.*

Global learning believes that learning is continuous – and on-demand learning is a big part of that. As an organization, GE is achieving high-learning agility by continuously acquiring new knowledge and skills that give the company the ability to grow, change and innovate.

L&D’s Role in Supporting On-Demand Learning

In the context of an organization, the role of L&D has been one of business support. L&D accomplishes this business support through effectiveness in design, efficiency in source and selection, and alignment to business objectives.

Figure 4: L&D Business Support



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.





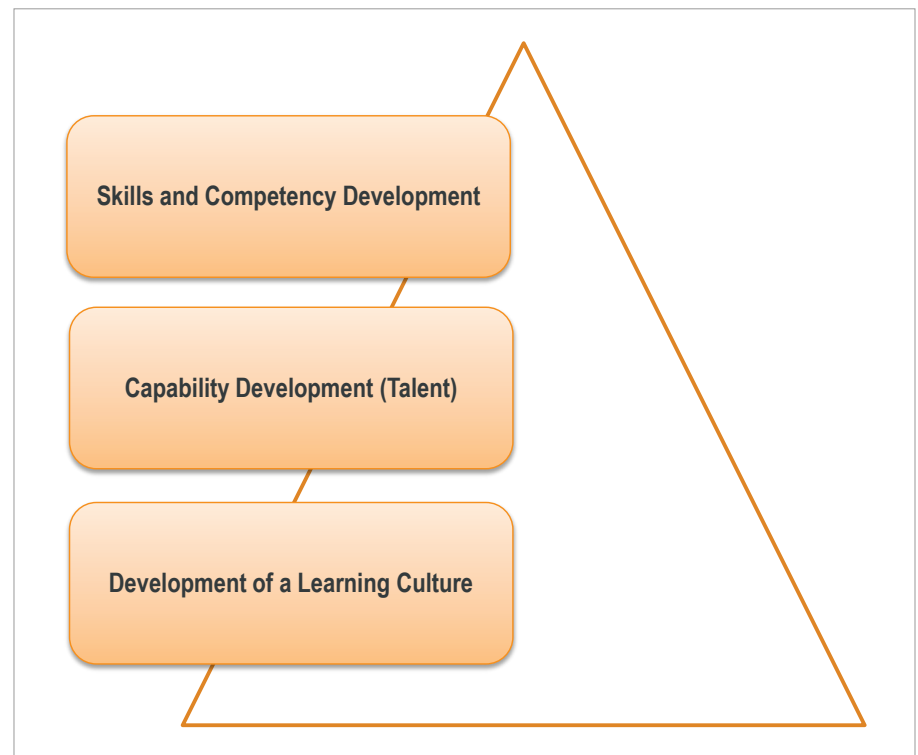
KEY POINT

L&D supports the business through effectiveness in design, efficiency in source and selection, and alignment to business objectives.

In our *High-Impact Learning Culture*⁷ research, Bersin & Associates identified a high-impact learning organization as one that is both exemplary in terms of those business supports and contributes to organizational performance in all three of the following ways.

1. Delivers timely, high-impact solutions that are relevant, efficient and effective, and which build and enhance operational skills and knowledge in the workforce.
2. Builds talent through longer-term programs that build deep levels of competency via many types of learning activities throughout an employee's career.
3. Creates, fosters and monitors the learning culture.

Figure 5: L&D's Contribution to Organizational Performance



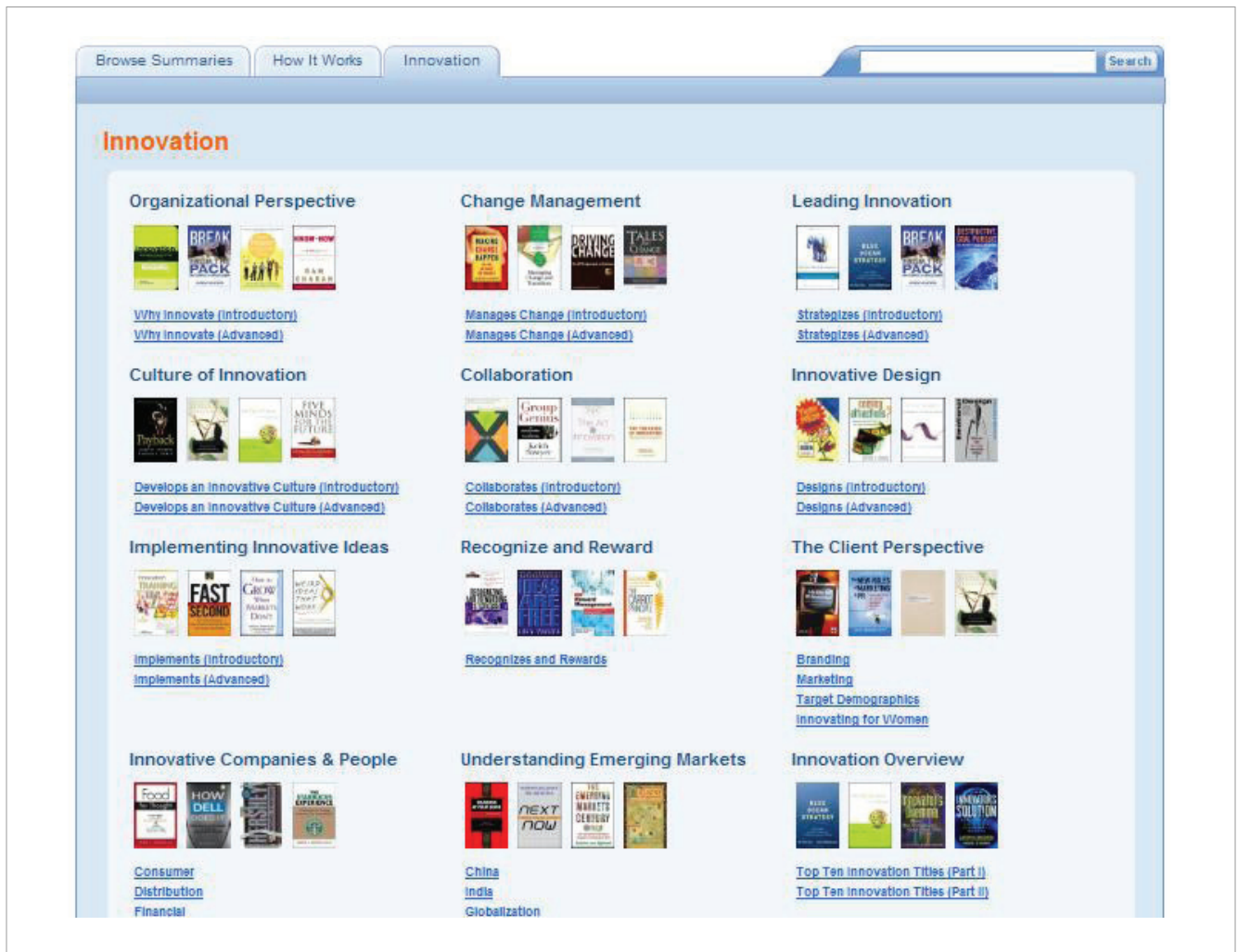
Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.

⁷ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Culture: The 40 Best Practices for Creating an Empowered Enterprise*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, June 2010.

On-demand learning resources, like book abstracts, can deliver against these business elements, thereby influencing an organization's learning culture.

1. **Skills and Competency Development** – Customized mapping of book summaries to corporate learning objectives and initiatives can align relevant compressed-knowledge to specific competencies.

Figure 6: Customized Mapping



Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.



ANALYSIS

Creating, fostering and monitoring the learning culture are primary actions in getting the most value from on-demand learning.

2. **Capability Development (Talent)** – On-demand learning fosters learning at the point of need by providing knowledge at employees’ fingertips. This better ensures that employees are developing their skills and know-how because the information is being sought out on demand, rather than being taught during scheduled training sessions.
3. **Development of a Learning Culture** – On-demand learning resources support a continuous learning environment by providing and delivering content in an informal manner. These resources can also encourage the exchange of information between employees. For example, getAbstract’s Virtual Business Forum (a collaborative knowledge-sharing tool) empowers employees to share information that they see as being valuable.

Creating, fostering and monitoring the learning culture are primary actions in getting the most value from on-demand learning. One such organization getting the most value from its on-demand learning is Ernst & Young. The company’s behaviors, norms and activities go beyond the notions of traditional training and L&D, and involve the organization’s “culture” – both its learning culture and workplace culture.

Case in Point: Ernst & Young

Ernst & Young, the ninth largest private company in the U.S., is one of the world’s largest professional services firms with 141,000 employees in more than 140 countries. Its collaborative culture supports the personal and professional success of each individual in the organization.

The organization uses getAbstract, Inc. enterprisewide as a knowledge offering to employees. Primarily controlled by the knowledge function (versus the learning function), the digital resource library is part of a comprehensive set of research tools that support employees’ daily work. The digital resource library is used extensively in 85 countries, with the heaviest usage in the U.S., U.K., China and Indonesia – in part, due to the multiple languages in which these resources are available.




KEY POINT

The value proposition for Ernst & Young's use of an on-demand digital library is threefold. First, it serves as a time-saver. Second is its cost-efficiency, specifically when viewed globally. Finally, the company finds that book abstract summaries provide employees with great knowledge and awareness.

Case in Point: Ernst & Young (cont'd)

While primarily viewed as a tool at the heart of how Ernst & Young does business, the digital library does not fall under the banner of what Ernst & Young calls, "learning." The learning function uses the digital library to identify specific resources to support learners. This, in turn, acts as an initial prompt to get people to pull the resources needed to support an employee's work. Ernst & Young's only formalization of its on-demand digital library resources for learning is tying milestone events, such as when an employee transitions into a new position. As well, some mapping is done as pre-reading for courses. However, Ernst & Young sees the digital library as a business tool first – as a part of its culture. Key to this are efforts to ensure that leadership thinks about using book abstract summaries by focusing on how summaries can be used, especially when adding value for clients. It is important that other employees in the company see leaders using on-demand learning of all types.

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At Ernst & Young, bridging knowledge and learning has been a key element in supporting a culture of continuous learning through the use of on-demand resources. It has improved business performance by impacting employee productivity, workforce expertise and learning agility. 

getAbstract: Compressed Knowledge Resources That Support Continuous Learning

Our *High-Impact Learning Culture*⁸ research shows how important on-demand learning is for continuous learning. getAbstract, Inc., writers

⁸ For more information, *High-Impact Learning Culture: The 40 Best Practices for Creating an Empowered Enterprise*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, June 2010.



KEY POINT

getAbstract has more than 450 publishing partners, more than 7,000 summaries and employs 120 writers.

of business book summaries for organizations and executives, is one solution provider for on-demand knowledge resources.

The company's first publishing partner was Bloomberg Press. Today, the company has more than 450 publishing partners, more than 7,000 summaries and employs 120 writers. getAbstract summaries are available in multiple languages, such as English, German, Russian, Spanish and Chinese, which allows the company to better cater to its global clients, such as McDonald's, Pepsi, GE (featured in this bulletin), Qualcomm, Vodafone and RBS.

getAbstract, Inc. has had an outstanding growth rate. Between 2009 and 2010, its growth was above 50 percent, a major feat in light of the current economy. We expect to continue to see growth in the on-demand learning resources market due to L&D's recognition that the number of training hours does not make a bit of difference if the training is not adding value to the organization.

In our research, we found that many L&D organizations have redesigned traditional training programs to build deep specialization of skills. Learners need to be really good at certain things, whether in technical skills, leadership capabilities or satisfying customers – and to build this level of expertise learners need continuous, reinforced development.⁹

The strength of getAbstract lies in the breadth and depth of its library, which includes the following business categories:

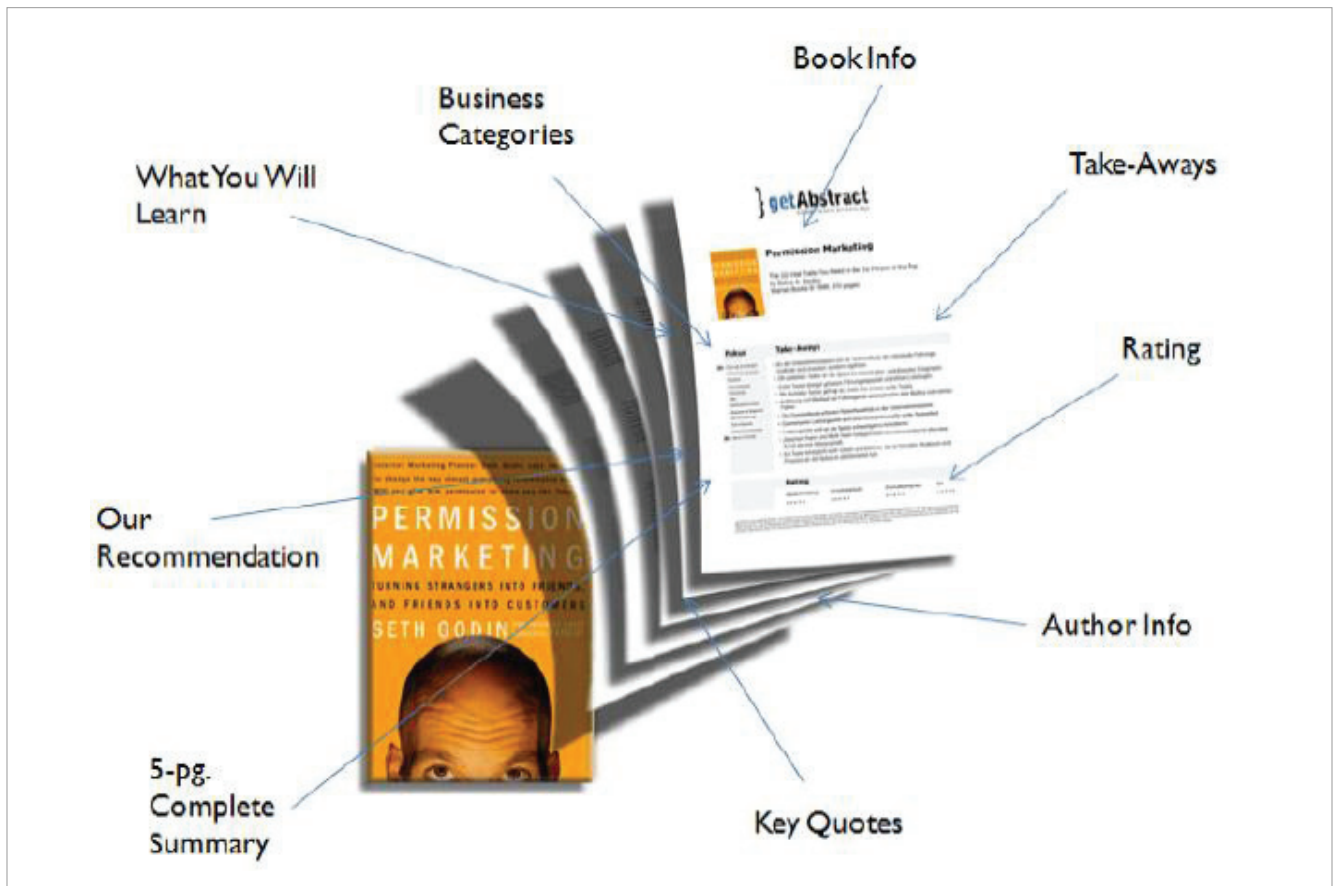
- Leadership and management;
- Strategy;
- Sales and marketing;
- Finance;
- Human resources;

⁹ For more information, *The Corporate Learning Factbook® 2011: Benchmarks, Trends and Analysis of the U.S. Training Market*, Bersin & Associates / Karen O'Leonard, January 2011. Available to research members at www.bersin.com/library or for purchase at www.bersin.com/factbook.

- IT, production and logistics;
- Small business;
- Economics and politics;
- Industries;
- Global business;
- Career and self-development; and,
- Concept and trends.

The summaries provided are five pages in length, with bulleted “Take-Aways,” objectives, a recommendation and the actual abstract broken into sections.

Figure 7: Example of a Book Abstract



Source: *getAbstract*, 2011.



KEY POINT

getAbstract offers full library implementation, marketing plans, impact measurement, usage analytics, portal design, solution mapping, LMS integration, mobile and on-the-go integration, and “Virtual Business Forum.”

In working with getAbstract resources, individuals select a summary, often with the aid of a rating or filtering process, and then download it to their device of preference, such as a PC, iPod, iPad, Kindle, Blackberry, et al.

A corporate subscription model serves companies of all sizes and industries, such as banking / finance, hospitality, insurance, pharmaceuticals, retail and technology. Some well-known customers include Microsoft, IBM, Citigroup, Daimler, Ernst & Young (featured in this bulletin), PricewaterhouseCoopers, Boeing, UBS, Credit Suisse, Novartis and MasterCard.

This solution provider offers full library implementation, marketing plans, impact measurement, usage analytics, portal design, solution mapping, LMS integration, mobile and on-the-go integration, and “Virtual Business Forum” (VBF). VBF is a platform for collaboration within the organization and university components of organizations.

getAbstract’s design elements include competency mapping, application development and distribution planning. These elements serve as an effective means of encouraging employees to utilize the getAbstract service. The company reports that:

- The average user downloads six abstracts a month;
- The average corporate client downloads more than 40,000 abstracts a month; and,
- Every abstract that is read is, on average, shared with five other people.

Unique features include “Knowledge Packs” which are available for those needing fast immersion in a subject and “Travel Packs” that recommend six business summaries according to a user’s personal profile. getAbstract also provides the means for users to seamlessly link to Facebook and Twitter from the getAbstract site. This personalization is an important element of success for on-demand learning, is a sweet spot for getAbstract, and is one way to encourage and support knowledge-sharing.

For organizations seeking an easy entry point for on-demand learning, getAbstract is worth a serious look.

Bottom Line: Building a Learning Culture through Holistic, Environmental Support for On-Demand Learning Is Becoming a Success Factor for Organizations

When properly embedded in the flow of work, compressed knowledge (like book abstract summaries) gives employees immediate access to the expertise and knowledge that they need to stay current on the company's products, processes, markets and knowledge resources. We found that integrating digital resources into the organization's learning culture is crucial to getting the most value and, therefore, impacting business performance.

Additionally, companies are increasingly recognizing that most learning is informal, continual and learner-initiated. High-impact learning organizations realize the extraordinary potential it can offer to its employees as enablers and brokers of learning, not just as sources of formal programs.

L&D must rethink its processes and resources to help the organization serve its own needs through on-demand learning environments, knowledge-sharing and collaboration – all of which facilitate continuous learning.¹⁰ On-demand learning resources, like those from getAbstract, are dynamic learning resources that are easily accessible, provide information on-demand, facilitate knowledge-sharing, allow for learning beyond standard business hours, remove knowledge boundaries and can be implemented at a low cost. The components of this value proposition clearly support the goals of organizations that are striving to create and / or sustain a strong learning culture.



ANALYSIS

Bersin & Associates has found that integrating digital resources into the organization's learning culture is crucial to getting the most value and, therefore, impacting business performance.

¹⁰ For more information on understanding these new areas of the training program, please see, *The Impact Measurement Framework: An Update for the Measurement of Informal Learning*, Bersin & Associates / Josh Bersin, May 4, 2011.



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- **Research** – Access to an extensive selection of research reports, such as methodologies, process models and frameworks, and comprehensive industry studies and case studies;
- **Benchmarking** – These services cover a wide spectrum of HR and L&D metrics, customized by industry and company size;
- **Tools** – Comprehensive tools for HR and L&D professionals, including tools for benchmarking, vendor and system selection, program design, program implementation, change management and measurement;
- **Analyst Support** – Via telephone or email, our advisory services are supported by expert industry analysts who conduct our research;
- **Strategic Advisory Services** – Expert support for custom-tailored projects;
- **Member Roundtables®** – A place where you can connect with other peers and industry leaders to discuss and learn about the latest industry trends and best practices; and,
- **IMPACT® Conference: *The Business Of Talent*** – Attendance at special sessions of our annual, best-practices IMPACT® conference.
- **Workshops** – Bersin & Associates analysts and advisors conduct onsite workshops on a wide range of topics to educate, inform and inspire HR and L&D professionals and leaders.

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