Rating ?

6

Qualities ?

Applicable
Concrete Examples

Transforming Training

A Guide to Creating a Flexible Learning Environment: The Rise of the Learning Architects

David Mackey and Sian Livsey • Kogan Page © 2006 • 282 pages

Human Resources / Learning & Development

Take-Aways

- Corporate training has changed substantially in recent years.
- Coaching and mentoring are becoming more and more popular in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- If you're serious about increasing productivity, upgrade employee skills.
- "Learning architects" provide the structure you need for successful training activities.
- They provide an essential interface between external training providers and internal company managers.
- Learning architects must "sell" their programs to senior management and then to employees.
- They may employ road shows and similar marketing activities to promote e-learning.
- Developing a learning program that works requires understanding your company's culture and hierarchy.
- Position the learning function at the senior planning level of your corporation.
- Involve managers at the earliest stages of the training planning process.

Recommendation

This exhaustively detailed book reports on how to create a successful workplace learning program, and explains the challenges corporate trainers face. It provides a step-by-step plan to develop a learning environment flexible enough to meet the ever-changing needs of the company and the individuals within it. Some U.S. readers may need to familiarize themselves with U.K. abbreviations they may not have seen before, such as NVQ (National Vocational Qualifications) and CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development). A tendency toward dense jargon is outweighed by the book's numerous assets – a wide compilation of best practices, useful checklists, illustrative case histories, insightful suggestions and proven recommendations. *getAbstract* considers this book a valuable guide for anyone charged with planning, setting up and implementing a corporate training or learning program.

Summary

"The Learning Architect"

Corporate trainers – professionals who organize and administer business workshops and other educational and career enhancement sessions – have been going through some heady career changes in recent years. This is perhaps fitting because most did not begin their careers as educational specialists. Often, they migrated into training from positions in human resources, sales or management. But wherever they came from, they are positioned precisely where the action is in today's fast-moving business world. Nowadays, business downsizing and cutbacks mean greater responsibility for remaining employees; corporate trainers and their staff people (if they have them) bear the responsibility for quickly and efficiently teaching company workers the new skills they need to shoulder their increased burdens.

> *"Learning is the effective and efficient acquisition and skilled use of knowledge by the organization and its stakeholders – internally and externally."*

Since a company's profits are likely to suffer if its employees cannot do the work, corporate trainers are more important than ever. In their enhanced role, trainers develop "architecture," that is, the carefully planned and structured system that will best support proactive educational activities within the company. They are now "learning architects."

> *"Organizations are looking more and more to outsource nonessential functions. This may lead to the transfer...of some staff, but it demands increased competence of those remaining."*

Increased challenges come with their increased stature. Learning architects must design educational programs that will stay ahead of the constant changes taking place in the business world. They must provide training that will have an immediate and positive effect on the organization. But despite the constant rush, the learning architect must develop and deliver educational and training programs that are expertly planned, correctly budgeted and – most important – aligned with the organization's short-term needs and long-term goals.

"Establishing the Learning Function"

So, as a learning architect, where do you start? This depends on whether you operate in a "reactive mode," in which senior management provides guidance, or in a "proactive mode" in which you personally are responsible for planning and implementing training that not only meets but also anticipates the company's needs. In this latter, more ideal case, you must be plugged in at the very top of the corporate structure. Otherwise, your programs may not meet the company's objectives. Indeed, without first-hand knowledge that comes from conferring directly with senior executives and other corporate stakeholders, your training programs may be off-target, or even at cross-purposes with the company's strategic goals.

> *"The desire and ability of an organization to continuously learn from any source anywhere, and rapidly convert this learning into action, is the ultimate competitive advantage."*

If your company is like most, you probably operate within the human resources division. Typical components of an HR learning program include the following:

- A "learning strategy" that meets the company's strategic and HR objectives.
- A "needs analysis" directed at specific corporate departments and groups.
- A "learning policy" that focuses on the "learning entitlements" of employees.
- An "implementation plan" that includes "learning design and facilitation."
- A plan for evaluating learning initiatives to ensure that they meet stated goals.
- A means to report program status to senior executives.

"Planning Your Strategy"

Central to the planning of any corporate training program is the learning strategy. You must fully detail your training plan to senior management, while explaining its rationale and primary benefits to the corporation. It should cover these essential points:

- The learning function's primary goals and performance objectives, as well as metrics to evaluate success.
- The "learning journey," that is, where things stand now and where they will be when the program is completed.
- How the strategy supports the company's plans and goals.
- An outline of "learning methodologies," along with explanations of resources and program costs.

> *"Establishing measurable benefits of learning has always been a primary challenge, although there are legendary difficulties in evaluating the true impact of any learning initiative."*

Developing a learning strategy requires substantial time. Make sure that you are on the right track from the very beginning. Discuss the company's training goals with senior management. Create a "learning policy" that stresses the company's commitment to employee training and education.

After you have a strategy, create a detailed blueprint that shows how you will implement it, including how many staff members you will need, with what skills. The "delivery team" should include experts trained in specialized areas important to the company, along with specialists in e-learning and distance learning. Finally, communicate and promote the plan to both management and employees.

"Managing Learning without a Team"

In today's era of business cost reductions, many companies employ only one learning architect instead of a whole staff. If your organization has a restricted training budget, focusing your training resources – that is, yourself – on the most essential learning initiatives is crucial. Organize a "virtual learning team" that includes midlevel executives who can add training to their other duties. "Train the trainers" so these new instructors will know what to do. Make sure your new training team does not inadvertently develop its own idiosyncratic learning programs that do not support the company's training objectives.

"The Business of Learning"

When setting up the finances of your training program, you have three main organizational models from which to choose:

1. "Cost Model" – The most basic paradigm. The company allocates funds as a percentage of its total operating expenses.
2. "Profit Model" – This model is self-sustaining. The company charges the training costs to the beneficiary departments.
3. "Outsourcing Model" – An external company handles training, either completely or in part. They charge your organization for this third-party service.

> *"A mentor represents a wise and responsible tutor. He or she is an experienced person who advises, guides, inspires, challenges, corrects and serves as a role model."*

In keeping with the current outsourcing trend, more businesses are moving in the direction of turning their training functions over to third-party firms. However, not enough external training firms are available to handle this increased demand. If your company wants to outsource training, ask yourself these questions:

- Will the training firm be able to deliver a learning program that matches the "culture, values, priorities and strategy" of your organization?
- Will the firm be able to deliver quality training over the long term? Work with multiple partners in case one of the firms fails to perform.
- Will you be able to structure your contract so that you can "(re)in-source" should this become necessary?
- Do you have a monitoring system strong enough to ensure that the learning function is meeting its quality and performance goals?

> *"Demand for coaching has grown with the emergence...of more alternative ways of looking after oneself both physically and mentally."*

Evaluating the learning function is critical, whether it's internal or external. Base your monitoring program on two primary criteria:

1. The program's main goals.
2. How you'll define success in meeting the goals.

Indices that often coincide with a successful program are:

- Clear delivery of a "positive return on investment."
- External recognition of the company as one that provides "world-class training" to its employees.
- Enthusiastic feedback from employees.
- Measurable productivity improvement that you can trace to the training.

"Delivering Learning"

The method by which you deliver corporate training often can be as important as the educational content itself. Some popular current methods are:

- "Planned formal training" – Structured endeavors that you conduct in a classroom setting either at the company's offices or at an external location. Examples include workshops at a company meeting facility, management retreats at a resort or courses at a community college.
- "Specialized lessons and demonstrations" – Enable employees to develop certain skills quickly, such as machine or vehicle operation.
- "Lectures" – Standard exposition from a podium that offers little or no opportunity for group participation.
- "Workshops" – Interactive training sessions that involve the maximum participation of attendees. The primary goal is to educate or to teach new skills. Seminars are similar, but focus more on the sharing of information by recognized authorities.
- "E-learning and computer-aided learning" – Self-administered educational activities at computer consoles using the Internet or the company intranet.
- "Open/distance learning" – Classes in which the instructor is at one location and the trainees at another.
- "Coaching" – A teaching arrangement in which an expert works directly with a single employee – the most common situation – or a small group. Coaching is similar to tutoring.

Topical Issues

Learning architects share their own special issues and concerns. Here are some of the most current:

- "Diversity" – More and more frequently, senior management asks HR departments and corporate trainers to develop and implement learning initiatives concerning the role of diversity within the corporation – for example, workshops on eliminating racism or sexual harassment.
- "Health and safety" – As society becomes increasingly litigious, corporations focus more on health and safety issues for their employees. HR and corporate training departments deliver the information.
- "Skills shortage" – Upgrading the skills of workers, many of whom enter the workforce with limited abilities, is now a central focus for most corporate training departments.

- "Engagement" – Companies must ensure that their employees are fully engaged in the company and its productivity.
- "E-learning" and "coaching" – These training delivery methods have become increasingly popular. The challenge for learning architects is to make them work for all employees.

You Are Your Company's Learning Function

Because of the highly specialized nature of corporate training, it is as good – or as bad – as the professional or professionals in charge. To develop and deliver the best possible training within your company, keep yourself up-to-date on learning theory, that is, how people learn. You must be well-informed concerning your company's strategy and goals. You must be able to develop trust with the senior executives who approve your learning initiatives and the employees who are the primary beneficiaries. Most important, you must be fully motivated to deliver a quality workplace learning effort that will enable the company to increase its productivity and thus succeed and grow.

About the Authors

David Mackey and **Siân Livsey** are independent business trainers and coaches who have assisted numerous corporations in planning, organizing and implementing their workplace learning programs.

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