



Robin Ryde scans the horizon for trends that will affect L&D over the next ten years

Possible futures for learning and development

Ten years ago I directed a major residential leadership programme. It was delivered in a wonderful 19th century mansion tucked far away in the Hampshire countryside, and the programme itself required senior leaders from a variety of sectors to commit to an entire month of learning and development... a whole month devoted to nothing but L&D.

The very same programme (and, yes, its longevity is a marvel to us all in this day and age) has been shortened by a quarter, is now modularised into three separate weeks with one of those weeks delivered in India, and the programme marketing team work harder than ever to secure participation from what used to be 100 per cent reliable sponsor organisations.

If we wind the clock forward a decade, what do we imagine will

again be different? And, perhaps more importantly, how should L&D professionals be operating if they are to deliver real value to the individuals and organisation with whom they work?

A little bit of horizon-scanning

A good starting point for a nice bit of horizon-scanning is a fascinating book written by Richard Watson entitled *Future Files: the five trends that will shape the next 50 years*. In it, he identifies the top five trends that he believes will make a difference to the world we live in:

1. Ageing (a rapidly growing ageing population in the West)
2. Power shift eastwards (a global economic power shift to India, China and the Middle East)
3. Global connectivity (increasing social, economic, health etc global interdependence)
4. GRIN technologies (Genetic, Robotic, Internet and Nano)
5. Environment (related to global warming, overall population growth, CO2 emissions etc).

"Fascinating stuff," you might say, "but what have these macro trends got to do with the L&D profession?" So let me offer a few thoughts for what a couple of these trends might mean and, in particular, as we view them

from the position of a world and a country that is deep in an economic recession.

If we look half way down the list to the “technology explosion” (or GRIN technologies, as Watson puts it), the implications we might immediately think of relate practically to the impressive (although not uniformly successful) developments in the field of e-learning and e-networks. Here I don’t wish to reprise where the profession has got to in the way it has deployed technology. Instead I want to draw attention to the relationship that now exists, in this Internet age, between the assumed topic expertise held by L&D professionals and the assumed lack of topic expertise held by learners.

Without wanting to oversimplify this too much, this asymmetry of knowledge and information is the basis of L&D because it is what individuals don’t know, for example about change management or leadership or project management, that L&D professionals can teach them.

The problem is that, because of the Internet and the phenomenal power of Google and a plethora of other search engines, our learners are getting considerably smarter. As an example, I was in a room of 50 people running a strategy and change session recently and when I asked “has anybody heard of the Kubler-Ross change curve?” about 40 hands were immediately thrust skywards. Ten years ago, I would have been surprised if there had been half as many hands.

While, of course, it does not necessarily follow that all 40 will understand it as they should or understand where it sits in a broader field of organisational development, the fact is that our learners are smarter than they used to be and this trend will quicken.

Added to this challenge to the expertise of L&D professionals is the distinctly modern phenomenon best described as ‘the death of deference’. Because of the Google trend that empowers individuals



to challenge experts and authority, people are inclined to push back much more. But it is deeper than this. The combined distrust created by events such as the Enron-Anderson scandal, the recent MPs’ expenses debacle, the Gen Y challenge that we have messed

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up the planet for them, the global financial meltdown caused by our biggest banking institutions and more, the ‘trust me, I’m a trainer’ defence won’t work anymore.

Trainers are, unfortunately, tarred with the same brush as

doctors, bankers, teachers and leaders and may no longer be seen as experts or infallible.

So what are some of the implications for L&D of the technology explosion coupled with the ‘death of deference’? These give rise to a move towards a subtly different *modus operandi*, one that invites a shift from the model of trainer-as-topic-expert to trainer-as-expert-facilitator.

In times gone by, the trainer’s expertise would have taken the foreground; it now needs to be as strong but firmly sitting in the background. The skills of facilitation that replace this topic expertise need to be geared towards sense-making, helping practitioners assimilate increasingly complex issues and helping people work through the heap of dilemmas and paradoxes that now characterise organisational life.



The 'right answer' mindset is dead and, in its place, lives the thoroughly post-modern cry of 'the best answer for us'. It is the L&D profession that needs to help this movement occur through sharper skills of engagement and facilitation.

As power shifts from west to east

Moving on to Watson's references to global connectivity and the power shift eastwards, we can see that L&D needs to bring into the centre of its being an appreciation that individual and organisational success is a function of an international mindset.

As the economic power slides towards the east, and as technology brings people from across the globe closer together, L&D needs to audit its own conventions to consider how best it supports this development. For example, how much learning focuses on cultural

diversity? How many programmes physically get participants out to the countries where the greatest growth is occurring to understand what it signifies? How many programmes implicitly continue to prosecute a Western one-size-fits-all model of management excellence within a world that will increasingly be dominated by management practices delivered some 5,000 miles away?

Take a subject close to my heart, that of leadership development. In China, the term 'leadership' carries very different connotations to what we might find in the Middle East and, in turn, very different again to what we might see in the US, where the vast majority of 'expertise' in organisational leadership has been derived.

As great as the pace of change occurs over here, it is nothing compared to what is happening in New Delhi, Mumbai and Beijing and yet many of our models of change have been based on steady-moving notions of change, where organisations have been through the unfreeze-correct-re-freeze cycle when, in the East, the best description for change is 'slush'.

Watson's trend in this regard reminds us of how our taken-for-granted ways of thinking might need to be re-visited.

Sweating the assets of L&D

But turning now to an issue that may feel far more pressing – that of the current global downturn, which, it can safely be said, will be with us for some years. Along with all other professions, L&D will be asked to add more value and to deliver more from less.

In our quiet moments of honesty, we acknowledge that the profession has always stood on fairly rocky ground when it comes to evaluation, and investment in L&D typically been more an act of faith than an enactment of scientific certainty. By the way, if there is anyone out there that violently disagrees with this statement, please do share the

recipe for scientific certainty with the rest of us.

So how does the profession deliver more from less? I want to suggest four strategies for how the assets of the profession can be sweated to greater effect:

- Strategy 1: using development programmes as change vehicles
- Strategy 2: using development programmes as research vehicles
- Strategy 3: using development programmes as resource-builders
- Strategy 4: using development programmes as vehicles for innovation.

In **using development programmes as change vehicles**, the proposition here is that development programmes are, from their inception, framed as a means to drive forward organisational change. This requires L&D to work closely with the top of the organisation and ideally to have a seat (formally or informally) at the 'top table'.

This does not mean that such programmes will simply be a vehicle for the leadership to tell the employees what to do – in fact, far from it. The development programme becomes an invaluable tool for employee engagement that sees a different quality of dialogue about change taking place – a dialogue that flows in both directions, in a safe space and focused on the real-world implications for change for those affected by, and implementing, that change.

A major and necessary feature of this approach is the personal involvement of senior leaders in the programme, who invest time and energy in securing its success.

In **using development programmes as research vehicles**, we view participants as learners but we also see them as producers of research ideas and as individuals who convert what they have learned into a benefit for the organisation as a whole.

An example of this that I was personally involved in related to an international programme →



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involving participants from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK. The programme was designed as a learning and research instrument and, as such, one major output was a 10,000-word 'think piece' focused on how, in the case of this example, public service leadership needed to improve¹. This makes a particularly powerful contribution to the notion of delivering more value from an investment in L&D because individual participants set out not only to learn more for themselves but to explicitly pursue the objective of capturing, understanding and disseminating learning for the benefit of the widest audience possible.

In **using development programmes as resource-builders**, we set out to construct problem-solving or 'SWAT' teams through the learning process.

During the course of such programmes, participants may acquire skills in key areas including organisational diagnosis, change management, facilitation, influencing and creativity (or other combinations) and the programme itself then forms the participants into a problem-solving (or internal consultancy) group. This group

is then marketed across the organisation and made available on these terms.

A set of skills that sometimes need to be strengthened to enable the L&D function to do just this will relate to marketing (of the availability of the SWAT teams and the process itself), connectivity to the business (so that the L&D function can quickly identify where SWAT teams can be helpful) and resource deployment (to assemble and deploy the right teams in the right way).

In **using development programmes as vehicles for innovation**, we deliberately deploy the learning approach to invite in new ideas, approaches and business models to the organisation. This is differentiated from traditional learning (which, one could argue, is also about bringing new ideas into the organisation) through the use of exploratory and practical encounters with distinctly different organisations.

An approach that achieves this particularly well is the 'live case study', in which groups of individuals from one organisation are set a real and serious challenge by another, very

different organisation and then, in the context of a development programme (perhaps over two, three or four days), the challenge is examined, explored, and tested from every possible angle so that proposals can be made to the host.

I have seen this work wonderfully with host organisations ranging from Yo! Sushi to BP and from Amnesty International to Orange. And the results are just astonishing. The 'live case study' approach is distinctly different from a classic historical case study design offered by many academic institutions and it is different, too, from the less real and typically more shallow business tourism that takes place.

Above all, though, this and other approaches help inspire profoundly new ways of thinking that can be channelled directly back into the organisation.

I have no doubt that L&D is, and will be, one of the most influential forces driving the success of our organisations today and in the future.

The profession has always understood, perhaps more than any other field, that, through difficult times as well as through times of growth, the secret to success is adaptation. Adaptation does occur naturally but without the injection of energy, insight and the space for exploration offered by L&D, it will occur too slowly for these times.

Learn and thrive or perish quickly – the choice is yours. ■

References

1. Ryde R *New Insights and New Possibilities for Public Service Leadership* on behalf of the Australian Public Service Commission, the Canada School of Public Service and the UK National School of Government

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