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The rise of the digital learning ecosystem

How the platform model is reinventing talent development

IBM Institute for Business Value

Workforce skills of the future

Business leaders are taking note of a looming global skills crisis. The IBM Institute for Business Value reports that 60 percent of executives globally confirmed they are struggling to keep their workforce current and relevant.¹ What's more, they recognize that the skills of the future may be unknown or entirely new to the organization. Tackling this challenge requires a new approach to talent and development based on a network of strong partnerships, a laser focus on user experience and the bold application of emerging technologies and learning science. Enter the digital learning ecosystem, where parties share and enhance every aspect of the talent development function.

Accelerating time to skill

There is a clear imperative to improve scale, experience and speed in learning delivery – yet many organizations are unsure how to forge a new path. Capitalizing on the shift in business to platform-model thinking is an effective first step. Platforms can serve as orchestrators in a living system, connecting needs, ideas, content and people to the benefit of all. At the heart of the platform is an ecosystem of producers and partners that can form tightly integrated networks powered by technologies such as cloud computing, mobile apps and artificial intelligence (AI).

The models of the past are not fit for this purpose. Consider how common it was for small, centralized training teams to create courseware in ratios of 40:1 where each hour of delivered in-class content took nearly 40 hours to build and publish. E-learning development has been similarly slow, and typical

development can range from 80:1 to 200:1, depending on the complexity of content, media and navigation in the design. These lengthy lifecycles are not acceptable in today's competitive environment. Employees demand consumer-grade learning experiences that fulfill their knowledge needs in dramatically accelerated timelines, when and where they need it. Moreover, skill requirements are nascent and shifting, which means that long design cycle times result in missed opportunities and business risk.

In the learning function, a digital platform model can enable organizations to accelerate time to skill in many ways:

- As a responsive, employee-centric “curator” of content who understands the fluctuating needs of the business and the workforce, the learning and development (L&D) function shifts focus to ensure coherent, relevant content is woven together.
- Employees can easily search for and find the right content at the right time, based on a blend of internal and external content providers in the ecosystem.
- New content is shared and updated continuously across the platform, so learners always have access to the most current knowledge.
- AI capabilities, such as machine learning and natural language processing, enable the platform to remember preferences and provide stronger recommendations with every learner interaction.
- Social capabilities can drive curation and quality control better and more effectively.

Effective ecosystem collaboration

Established in 2001, the Toronto Financial Services Alliance (TFSA) is a unique public–private partnership dedicated to growing the region’s financial services cluster.⁵ TFSA is an ecosystem comprised of members from the financial services industry, local universities and colleges, and federal, provincial and municipal government agencies. To capitalize on the region’s talent advantages, TFSA established a Centre of Excellence in financial services education. It has become an essential resource for information on talent demands, careers and education in the regional financial services sector. A comprehensive Financial Services Career Advisor allows new and existing talent to explore opportunities in Toronto’s financial services sector and provides in-depth information to member organizations about the state of talent and talent demands in the sector.

As traditional business models give way to platform models, another important shift has occurred in the expectations of the workforce. Employees expect work experiences that are personal, engaging and authentic. Organizations and leaders recognize the impact employee experience has on engagement and productivity, as well as talent attraction and retention.² As a result, there is increased focus on influencing and designing irresistible experiences across the employee lifecycle. The need to improve the employee learning experience is essential. Today’s workforce must interpret overwhelming volumes of information, and yet a recent study shows that less than half of employees feel their employers provide relevant training, and more than a quarter find the current learning content in their companies to be uninspiring.³

L&D leaders can benefit by emulating key strategies used in digital marketing to help better predict the right learning for their workforces.

From the digital marketing handbook

First, a change in thinking is required to see learners as motivated, self-directed “consumers” who understand their own needs. This shift in perspective can lead to learning content that resonates and inspires, while fostering active engagement and long-term retention. Considering the right mechanisms for delivering content is also crucial in marketing to meet the customer where he or she is.

Likewise, learners gravitate to the formats and channels that work best for them. Today’s workforce is both social and mobile, with nearly 70 percent of employees stating they are most excited by learning formats that allow for networking and connection.⁴ Finally, digital marketers zero in on the well-crafted design of every customer experience, and L&D must follow suit. Learning content must be designed to new standards, and delivered on a platform that is user-centric, simple and intuitive.

Personalized, bite-sized learning

The new digital learning platform addresses another reality of the professional learner, in that there is limited appetite today for lengthy, linear content that is firmly set. This aligns with the latest research into the neuroscience of learning, which reveals that human attention has limits of about 20 minutes before needing to be refreshed, and that incorporating space between learning sessions has a positive impact on long-term retention and recall.⁶

Bite-sized learning, or micro learning, is well suited to meet the needs of today's professional learners. Talent development leaders will recall the rise of this approach a decade ago in the early days of e-Learning. It gradually fell out of favor, however, due to misuse and the perception of over simplification. Today's micro learning focuses on specific improvements to address these issues and better align to what we now know about human cognition. Bite-sized learning is optimized for the attention span of the learner, and works well when paired with activities and experiences that invite application, generation and social connection.

The coherent arrangement of bite-sized learning with accompanying activities greatly enhances learning engagement and learning efficacy.

Bite-sized content:

- Created in single concept “bites”
- Developed at speed and scale within the learning ecosystem
- Prioritizes the how-to in direct language and rich media
- Arranged for the learner in coherent sequences
- Draws connections to related content to deepen knowledge
- Delivers content that is always up-to-date and easily refreshed
- Enables personalization through individual curation of content
- Activates “memory retrieval” factors to help retention

Rapid learning, faster skilling

IBM needed to significantly shorten time to competency for tens of thousands of technical specialists. An ambitious goal, the company wanted to accelerate the skilling of 40,000 employees around the world from 16 weeks to 6 weeks. To accomplish this, learning was created in 15-minute segments and carefully targeted to workers by role and experience. Cost per learner was significantly reduced and the time saving directly contributed to business results.

What now? How to begin the journey

Advances in neuroscience research, powerful new technologies and evolving employee expectations are intersecting in the workplace of today and tomorrow. Talent development leaders have a significant opportunity to rise to the challenge. Consider these three ways to get started on your reinvention of learning in the platform economy:

Build empathy and coherence for your learners. Take time to understand the needs of your workforce, and endeavor to design content with the learner consumer in mind. Apply the practices of personalization, transparency, simplicity, authenticity and responsiveness.

Explore new partnerships in the learning ecosystem. Look outside a traditional network and identify external organizations to provide relevant content that can be published rapidly. Consider a learning alliance within your industry to strengthen predictive capabilities for future skills.

Reimagine the learning function powered by AI. Add content at speed and scale, and dynamically personalize learning for every employee. Delight learners with easy-to-use engagement channels. Discover insights in your data to predict the critical skills of your business in the future and drive new content creation.

Modern learning platforms are structured as ecosystems to allow all types of content and functions to work together and multiple parties to connect and interact.

Notes and sources

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