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eLearning and team: because unity is strength

Interdisciplinary teams enable effective projects to be carried out efficiently in a complex environment. Let's find out how to apply this to training.

To say that unity is strength may seem an almost trite statement. From the three musketeers to the morality of fairy tales for children, the importance of teamwork is celebrated and taught at all ages. What is conveyed, through group sports, in school and business settings is also studied, as much in the studies of corporatism and business organization as in psychology, to apply this secret of success in all fields.

The importance of the group

According to Susan McDaniel, psychologist at the University of Rochester Medical Center and 2016 APA president, "The world is so complex, no one person has the skills or knowledge to accomplish everything we want to accomplish." Thus, interdisciplinary teams are the way to accomplish effective projects, efficiently, in a complex environment.

The ABCs of teamwork

But what enables these teams to achieve that necessary level of togetherness? According to research by Suzanne Bell, professor of industrial and cognitive psychology at DePaul University in Chicago, it is the "deep level" factors that do not readily emerge at first glance, such as the personality traits, values and skills of members, that tend to have a much greater impact on work teams. these factors are what define the ABCs of teamwork: in English:

- Attitudes, the attitudes
- Behaviours, the behaviors
- Cognitive states, the cognitive states

These three factors collectively influence the work of the team and are in turn determined and selected by the context in which a company operates. Thus, **in the formation of a team it is necessary to consider the objective**: if the element of innovation and experimentation is preponderant, as much of new products or services as of new organizational procedures, then it is important that the groups be heterogeneous in their composition, so as to encourage confrontation and place the members in a continuous state of open-mindedness with respect to the patterns already familiar to each of them. It is no accident that, in the biography of people like Steve Jobs, the first part of his creative adventure occurred immediately after a stay in an ashram in India or conversion to vegetarianism.

In contrast, when the goal is to increase management efficiency, more homogeneous groups, in terms of professional background, shared culture and even personal character, are better suited. Having to work much longer hours, deciding on which business areas to focus resources, maximizing returns by methodically controlling marketing and sales campaigns require total cohesion and conviction about the choices and efforts to be made.

Training and Teamwork

In the research "The Science of Teamwork," by McDaniel and Eduardo Salas, of Rice University in Houston, collaborations among teams are analyzed. Four types of interventions can help team development:

- Team training
- Team building
- The leardership training
- Debriefing

With team training, learning experiences are offered to improve the skills or abilities of team members. It is important to consider that this is not just a course in which each member learns on his or her own. Team training is not just about making sure that all attendees are "on the same page," but that by learning new concepts together they also develop procedures for using them within the team. Technologies in eLearning can definitely be useful for this purpose: not only because they allow ubiquity of content and immediate communication among all members. Rather, also because they can enable individual team members to explore areas of knowledge adjacent to the courses they have taken and proactively reintroduce them to the group. An eLearning course can follow two different philosophies: top-down and bottom-up. In the former, the course is presented sequentially, with a fixed path; in the latter, the user can choose his or her own path, and possibly digress, building a personalized culture. These faculties are enabled by the LMS, Learning Management System, and LXP, Learning Experience Platform, technologies that follow the two different settings.

Now, if the concept of Teamwork is applied to these, personalization paradoxically becomes an additional level of cohesion. The individual explorer, of new content, reports back to the group and proposes adoption into the collective culture. If the whole decides that these new skills, notions and abilities are useful for teamwork, they will be adopted. This may sound like something curious, in fact it is what determined the survival of groups back in the days when they were hunter-gatherers: whoever found a new hunting or gathering area would tell the others. Nothing different from the explorer ants. **The individual explores, the group adopts**.

Collaborative Design

Learning collaboration can be a recursive process: people collaborate not only to enjoy the learning content, but also to create it. In the creation of eLearning courses, there are some key figures, including:

- SME: the Subject Matter Expert, the expert in the subject matter to be taught
- ID: the Instructional Designer, the designer of the course
- CLO: the Chief Learning Officer, the person in charge of corporate learning.

Specifically, the SME is the one who has been trained on a subject matter. He or she could be a lawyer or a technician, expert in HCCP procedures for food preservation; a logistics manager who, after years of experience, decides to put his or her skills to good use and move into teaching; or a computer scientist who is intent on disseminating the basics of a programming language or the workings of software to those with a different job profile.

Bringing this content to those who will face it requires the work of an expert. The Instructional Designer is the real design center of an eLearning course: his skills range from training to the use of technologies that support eLearning. He or she is the translator who brings the message, from the expert to the learner and decides in how many and which languages to provide it: in audiovisual format; in written form, perhaps with quizzes at the end of the readings; with a Q&A at the end of each lesson; with a forum open to student questions, etc.

Finally, the Chief Learning Officer is that figure in the Human Resources office who cares as much about the progress of collaborators as he or she does about overseeing that the stock of active knowledge and skills-read, present in the heads of team members, not written down in some handbook-, is constantly updated and growing.

These figures make it possible to better manage online training. But this is only one side of the collaboration. According to Dorothy Kropf's researcher, Walden University Implementing, "collaborative design in the next series of elearning platforms" I best results from periodic, reciprocal collaboration between the two groups: those who teach and those who learn. The purpose of this collaboration is multidimensional: at a first level there is the normal need for periodic clarification between students and teachers. Not everything that is taught is always clear to students. Some passages may be obscure, even after some in-depth study: teaching is a difficult process because, sometimes, those who teach ignore what those who learn ignore. Sometimes, the best teachers only those who have struggled the most to learn that concept.

But collaboration allows another loop in feedback to close: the Instructional Designer can revise expository and technological choices, given content. A course could then be shortened, as much in terms of duration as content, if it were changed from a video to an infographic, or if an audiovisual file were presented instead of a written text. Again, it might be better to offer more mini-quizzes and atomize the learning assessment phase, to reduce the perceived workload of users.
This would be collaboration on collaboration: not just learning but learning how to learn.

Collaborative Learning and Cooperative Learning

A distinction must be made. Not all group learning is the same. An essential distinction is between collaborative learning and cooperative learning. The two mechanisms certainly have the same goal: to have an equally formed and competent group. What changes is the mode and strategy through which this goal is achieved. If the two concepts seem similar to us, it is because they are proposed early in the schooling process in one way or another. The differences are there and they are also important. The scope also changes depending on the environment, the composition of the groups and the goals to be achieved that we mentioned at the beginning.

Cooperative Learning

According to cooperative learning, a group of students is offered predetermined, structured and imposed content. With cooperative learning, tasks are assigned to the members of a team, so that as a whole, the group can perform an assigned task: if, for example, a final paper was required, each member could be assigned his or her own topic, which will make up the entire collective paper.

Collaborative Learning

With collaborative learning, the student is stimulated to achieve as much a collective, shared goal as personal ones. With these fixed, the student is incentivized to proceed in the ways that suit him or her best. The collaborative approach insists on the spontaneous and self-organized contribution of the members of a group: only those who wish to collaborate do so, and they do so according to their own aptitudes, without an externally imposed method or organization: each person contributes to the group in building his or her own skills.

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