ELEARNINGNEWS ARTICLE

Year 6 - number 210 Wednesday 6 july 2022

Openness to change in the company: the role of eLearning

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For a company, managing its wealth of knowledge and skills is the best way to compete. Learning fast, spreading the culture of training and maintaining flexible procedures are essential elements to be able to seize opportunities when they arise.

What is a Learning Organisation

Competing in the marketplace means being able to **seize the best opportunities for growth** whenever they arise. Not all companies are able to do this to the best of their ability. Those that do succeed can strengthen themselves by expanding their presence in some profitable niche or by optimising costs and procedures. Those most prone to innovation can introduce new products or production processes. Conversely, those companies that are not receptive and flexible are condemned to suffer a double penalty: both the weight of the missed opportunity and the threat of the strengthening of competitors who have seized it.

Moving towards a path of **virtuous growth** rather than vicious contraction is the result of many small decisions repeated or procrastinated. The main discriminator lies in the quality of the management and the team as a whole. Trained and competent decision-makers will be better able to portray the critical situations in which their company finds itself. Likewise, qualified and up-to-date employees will be better able to perform their executive tasks. Training in all its forms, including eLearning of company courses, is the element that can make the difference between a healthy company and one in crisis.

It can make a difference, but it may not be enough. The market is a dynamic mechanism and competition an ongoing interaction. There are few companies that owe their longevity to a distant period of glory. Even fewer can say exactly what that single right business decision was. Conversely, it is more likely to be those that face some difficulties or have not overcome them that can point to what those individual bad decisions were. Like good business management, training must also be continuous. Both must become a habit, not the exception of a transition phase.

In summary, to be competitive in the long run, a company must make itself a **Learning Organisation (LO)**, i.e. become an organisation that puts the continuous learning of its employees at the centre of its value system. The prerequisite for this is that top executives are fundamentally convinced in the value of lifelong learning, so much so that they take care to make this corporate culture alive and ubiquitous. In pragmatic terms, this means adopting a broad framework for measuring an investment in training: the **Return on Learning (ROL)** calculation will thus be measured not only on current data, but also on potential developments.

Is Learning Organisation born or made?

So far the concept. The central question is then whether and how a company can initiate this organisational transformation. The subject of transforming an enterprise into a Learning Organisation is dealt with extensively in the article published by the Harvard Business Review, ' Building a Learning Organisation'. There are three key points:

- A plausible definition of the Learning Organisation
- The adoption of management practice guidelines
- A precise method for evaluating learning

Against the risk of pursuing a vague goal, the definition of a Learning Organisation must be actionable and easy to apply. A proposed definition is as follows:

"A learning organisation is one that is adept at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights."

That is, the definition is based on results rather than intentions: creating new ideas and modifying one's behaviour are the key. There is an obvious reference to **psychological theories on learning**, such as Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism: performance, of the individual as well as of the team, only occurs as a result of a modification in their knowledge and skills - first -, and in their behaviour - then. This definition makes it possible to define useful guidelines for business management: operational advice, rather than generic plans.

The last topic is the one that most closely concerns eLearning tools: the article, published in the July-August 1993 edition of the academic journal, predates current IT advances by many years. Admittedly, distance learning is an ancient practice, but technological progress allows the automation of all learning management. The article, for instance, refers to surveys, questionnaires and interviews for measuring learning progress. The principle itself remains the same, but nowadays it is possible to integrate these practices within the training course itself, if delivered in eLearning. In particular, thanks to tools such as **xAPI**, eLearning platforms can **monitor users' learning experiences**. Actions such as reading a document, viewing a film or participating in a forum attached to the course can be easily measured, without interfering with student behaviour or hindering teaching. Thirty years after its publication, it is now possible to provide a customised course experience, depending on the performance of the learners. In this way, training programmes - a direct consequence of the guidelines in the list above - can be better designed and actual learning can be measured.

Thanks to these metrics, it is possible to close the feedback loop and modify courses in case of unconvincing performances. These can be supplemented with additional teaching material; the duration or number of lessons can be modified; or the method of delivery can be changed if it is observed that the audio-visual format is the best option for follow-up of classroom lectures.

Admittedly, a valuable tool such as eLearning cannot be the only tool one can rely on to transform one's enterprise into a Learning Organisation, but the detail of analysis to which the technological component allows one to assess whether investments and organisational practices are being directed in the right direction. Course **learning metrics** can be flanked by measurements on the effectiveness and efficiency of employees while carrying out their tasks; to these can be added the results of product or service improvements, perhaps by comparing them with those of the competition; and finally, the comparison with market performance, before and after the administration of training courses.

An LO is such if it is competent in five main activities:

- The systematic solving of problems
- The experimentation of new approaches
- Learning from one's own experience and past history
- Learning from the experiences and best practices of others
- Transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently within the organisation

Transforming a company into a Learning Organisation is not an immediate process. On the contrary, it can take a long time to adapt procedures and corporate culture. However, there are a few steps that can be followed to begin the journey:

- Create an environment conducive to learning
- Open company boundaries

An **environment conducive to learning** is one in which the subject can reflect on how he or she works and how he or she can improve. This also implies that there is a proper workload, which allows for both the use of part of the working time in training and its subsequent evaluation. Opening up the company boundaries means allowing the company to be permeable to the experiences and best practices of others: attending conferences, presentations and symposia, both industry and non-industry, can be a method of allowing mutual influence to spread.

Obstacles to change

So far the actions that enable a company to transform itself into a Learning Organisation. The outcome can be frustrated by certain obstacles that can affect both individual employees in their learning journey and the organisation as a whole. A non-exhaustive list includes:

- Resistance to change
- Lack of motivation for personal growth

- Transition discomfort
- Lack of leadership
- Short-term vision
- Asymmetrical focus
- Limited resources

An employee may find it difficult to see the benefits of training. Or he/she may not be able to adapt to the new procedures that the training is supposed to introduce. Finally, he or she may lack a vision of the long-term benefits that training could bring to the individual and the work group. This kind of difficulty can also be alleviated by adequate design of the courses administered. An eLearning course may also be conceived as an open course, thanks to the configuration of the software as a **Learning Experience Platform (LXP)**: thanks to this configuration, the employee is incentivised to explore his or her own growth path, once he or she has addressed the necessary topics required by his or her supervisors.

Resistance to change may also be intrinsic to the company and entrenched at all hierarchical levels. Transformation of the company organisation tends to occur in conjunction with specific crisis phases during growth: arriving at a measured reliance on bureaucracy is one of the physiological steps.

What is important is that new procedures as well as training and eLearning programmes are carefully introduced and managed by managers. The autonomy of employees in the use of courses must not turn into an excuse for complete disregard, neither by them nor by their managers of what is beyond their remit. As a rule, employees are asked to achieve objectives on projects or programmes involving their tasks, while at the various hierarchical levels the focus shifts to the functionality of the organisation. The risk is that the former do not take the needs of organisational improvement into account when attending training courses, and that the latter do not evaluate the impact on production output of a change in organisational procedures with due importance. Again, **measuring the right metrics is one way of bringing these two different visions together**: eLearning systems can be a great tool in the right hands.

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