

New Learning Agenda part 2: Learning Transformation - turning talk into action!

In November Towards Maturity Launched 'The New Learning Agenda' outlining recommendations for the business and L&D professionals as a result of their 2013-14 Towards Maturity Benchmark. In the second of three articles, we look at learning transformation and why we have to turn talk into action.

This year, Towards Maturity's Benchmark celebrates a decade of collecting data and insights into the use of learning technologies to support organisational transformation. Over the last ten years, I have seen countless presentations and delivered a fair few myself, that discuss how organisational learning needs to change to keep up with the nature of today's (and yesterday's) fast paced working environments.

During that time, we've seen arguments that the learning department needs to become more aligned¹- changing from order taker to business partner. We've been convinced that delivery must move from discreet face-to-face learning events available to a few to anytime, anywhere learning opportunities for the masses. We've argued that we need to place as much emphasis, if not more, on supporting informal learning as delivering formal learning (in fact 79% in the Towards Maturity 2006 benchmark agreed that they wanted to place greater emphasis on supporting informal learning within the organisation). Across the last three years, those arguing for the learning transformation story have built on these themes and have widened the scope to include the need to support workplace performance, embrace the 70:20:10 Model and more.

Technology has a significant role to play in this type of learning transformation and ten years is a long time in the technology world. Over that period, we have become comfortable with how technology can enable the delivery of learning and automate standard offerings. As a result, we still have catalogues of courses – only now they are accessed via the LMS and are an hour long instead of a day. We still have lectures laced with PowerPoint but now we can access them virtually. We've learned how to bring efficiency to learning but is this enough?

The Oxford Dictionary defines transformation as 'A marked change in form, nature or appearance'. So have we seen a marked change in nature and appearance of learning over that time or has it been mainly talk of change with action on cost reduction? Well, Towards Maturity's unique data from 2,900 participants over the last ten years provides some deep insights into how learning is changing. Or in many cases, how it isn't!

Despite the rhetoric and excitement we still find that in 2013:

- When it comes to alignment only three in five organisations strongly agree that their learning initiatives support the skills businesses need
- When it comes to using technology to increase learning opportunities, still only 26% of formal learning is e-enabled

¹ See Part 1 of this series looking specifically at alignment in November 2013 Inside Learning Technologies

- When it comes to redressing the balance of resource allocation, only 18% of L&D resources are allocated to supporting informal learning
- When it comes to even the most basic opportunities to support performance, only 26% of L&D teams provide staff with access to job aids online

In the 2013-14 Towards Maturity Benchmark report we use our anniversary to draw on this year's findings, the views of over 2,000 learners and the wider context of the ten-year longitudinal study to identify recommendations for the future. You won't be surprised to know that learning transformation is at the heart of our recommendations – but this time we need to take action rather than just talk about it and here is why!

Technology is driving change in all other walks of life

The stark fact is that in all other aspects of business life, technology is completely turning the way we work inside out and upside down. Business leaders are very clear that technology is a key **driver** not just an enabler.

In businesses across the private, public and not for profit sectors, products and services are being redefined and reinvented as a result of rapid technology change. You only have to look at banks and the travel industry – at a minimum, they have to offer new ways of checking balances, checking in, and now we can pay directly from our mobile phones.

Speed, change, performance, nimbleness and agility are all watchwords for the future of business and these have been driven by technology. If this is true for the businesses we serve, how much more so for the future L&D department?

It is also interesting that technology is really starting to drive a shake-up in more formal education establishments. In July, Anant Agarwal, President of edX, talked about the role of Moocs in transforming learning in higher education where self-paced programmes that are assessed using techniques such as Artificial Intelligence and peer assessment. These are challenging formal academic programmes².

Transformed learning function delivers business transformation

It is unfair to argue that learning has remained completely static. Over the years, we have found that the top learning companies in the Towards Maturity Study³ are actively challenging their assumptions about learning delivery and are taking steps to deliver learning transformation. The top learning companies are breaking down walls between performance management and learning with 71% of top learning companies integrating performance management into the learning function compared with just 41% on average. They take more risks (66% of top learning companies pilot new technology approaches under the official company radar vs. 30% on average); they deliver more learning online; they are more aligned to business; and they are twice as likely to be taking an influencing role in technology and business strategy. In short, they are acting on change and shifting both internal relationships and models of learning.

² FT.com article <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/102b69ec-dce4-11e2-9700-00144feab7de.html#axzz2mJZnYGly>

³ Top learning Companies are defined as those in the top quartile of the Towards Maturity Index <http://www.towardsmaturity.org/static/towards-maturity-index/>

More importantly, the shift is paying off. Top learning companies are twice as likely to agree that their learners put what they learn into practice quickly and twice as likely to agree that the changes made contribute to improvements in productivity across the organisation.

The title of this year's benchmark is the New Learning Agenda. In this report we outline nine action areas to help L&D organisations get started on the learning transformation journey – see table 1:

	<p>The New Learning Agenda:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Align learning to business and business to learning• Respond faster, deliver more• Transform traditional training• Support a culture of learning within the workflow• Integrate learning with Talent• Embrace new ways of learning to support new ways of working• Simplify the learning experience• Equip L&D professionals as agents of change• Treat learners as customers <p>Download for free at www.towardsmaturity.org/2013benchmark</p>
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If you are looking to move beyond rhetoric and start the journey of learning transformation there are two action areas from the New Learning Agenda that we recommend you consider immediately:

- Transforming traditional training
- Equip L&D professionals as agents of change

Transforming traditional training

Formal learning is not dead and is a good place to get started! Three out of five learners⁴ still report that the course is one of the most effective opportunities for learning what they need for the job, yet 88% of learners want to be able to learn at their own pace. This means thinking differently about how formal learning is designed.

The MOOCs model shows us that it is possible to deliver a structured course in a totally new way so that staff progress at their own pace but with an end in mind. Top learning companies also have lessons to share when it comes to designing. They do not spend significantly more of their budget on learning technologies than average but they are making the most of what they do spend by designing and commissioning learning in ways that are more engaging for staff.

This includes not only varying the approach to cater for different subject material and learning preferences, but also involving the classroom trainer, the learner and their line managers in the design of the most appropriate learning content.

Equip L&D professionals as agents of change

⁴ Taken from the responses of 2000 learners gathered in the Towards Maturity Learning Landscape study in 2013.

Only 29% of organisations agree their L&D teams have the right skills to design solutions that exploit learning technologies to business advantage, and just 45% are investing in continuing professional development for their L&D staff despite this rapidly changing and exciting field. Today's L&D professionals need the skills to be able to design for performance engage stakeholders and manage change whilst delivering the right mix of technology and content. Let's equip them to do it!

Turning talk into action

Those that are already on a journey of learning transformation are already discovering that change delivers to the bottom line but it demands a new perspective on how business, L&D and individuals work together. This requires new strategies linked to alignment, willingness for L&D to be open to, and to equip themselves for transformation and change. It also requires a new willingness to listen to the true learner voice in our organisations – but more of that next time.

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Download the **New Learning Agenda** at www.towardsmaturity.org/2013benchmark