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A Call to Arms

#FAIL

Let me be blunt: the current state of the learning & development (L&D) industry is failing. Badly. Overall, L&D is only doing a fraction of what it could and should be doing, and the part that it is doing, it is doing poorly. The L&D industry has, by and large, been in denial and a willing participant in complacency. As a consequence, L&D is on a steady path to extinction. The perception of L&D's value to the organization is largely one of irrelevance. Other parts of the organization are creating solutions for learning and performance problems by creating portals of self-generated resources, such as videos or their own social networks. Yet the potential is there, particularly in this emerging age of change, for L&D to be perhaps the most essential component of a business. This mismatch between potential and current status is, quite simply, disheartening.

Let me explain where I'm coming from. As an undergraduate, I became so excited about the potential for learning and

technology that I ended up designing my own major in what then was called "computer-based education." That was a long time ago, but I continued (and continue) to be excited about the ways in which our amazing advances in technology can facilitate learning. As an optimist, I'm always looking for the upside.

So imagine my surprise, ten years ago, stepping away from more disconnected research pursuits to the cut and thrust of the commercial market, to find that the typical approach to organizational learning was not only uninspired, but was flat out wrong. I'd expected the corporate world to have the need and the resources to be doing the best possible. I came in full of excitement to talk about cutting-edge opportunities, but ended up disillusioned to find those discussions were flying over everybody's heads.

A decade and more later, it's no better. Some of the names have changed, the technology is flashier, but there is a decided lack of effort to draw upon an intellectual foundation for decisions. As an indicator, the expo halls at the average learning conference are not only pushing outdated models with little impact, but they're the *same* outdated models. Worse, approaches are being presented as soundly based that are scientifically discredited or have been replaced by updated frameworks.

Consequently, the industry by and large is irrelevant. Let me get back to basics:

- The typical training event returns little for the resources invested. The notion that you can dump a bunch of knowledge into a person's head in a short period of time is a delusion that doesn't match the actual ways in which we learn.

- What we train on is too often focused on the wrong things. By and large, static knowledge isn't going to lead to any meaningful change in behavior.

- How we train doesn't match how we learn. We miss what's known, both in the ways we engage and in the ways we practice.

- How we have learners engage is often trivial as well. We may get them to interact with each other, or the content, but not both together.

- We miss big opportunities to assist the organization that we could and should own. Formal learning is widely acknowledged as only a small component of what leads to success, and yet that is most of what we spend our effort on.

- Finally, we frequently ignore opportunities to leverage technology that are literally in our hands. We don't understand the real opportunities technology offers, are swayed by flavor-of-the-month, possess unrealistic expectations, and, consequently, abandon real value after predictable disappointments.

What is the outcome?

- Folks who dread the words "training" and "learning."

- The use of gimmicks to maintain attention in the classroom.

- eLearning that has people staying away in droves.

- An industry that measures efficiency, but not effectiveness.

Let me be clear: I'm speaking from passion. I'm angry! The waste of resources that results is not only disappointing,

it's shameful. People need help, there are people who should be helping, and help is being dissipated in meaningless activities. It's a racket, and I'm calling it out.

Let me also say that I'm overlooking some good instances. There are companies with enlightened cultures, meaningful learning design, effective performance support, vibrant networks, and demonstrable contributions to the organization. Not all of the industry is in need of repair, but way too much is. Most, frankly. What you are doing in your organization is likely to be represented here in at least one way, perhaps more. Don't think you can drop out at this point, because I'll bet that there are situations in which you're not optimized.

More importantly, I'm calling you to task. I want to show you what could be, detail a path to get there, and inspire you to start moving. So what can, and should, the world look like?

HARNESSING MAGIC

"Any truly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

—Arthur C. Clarke

If we were doing it right, what we would see is:

- Relevance deeply embedded
- Experiences, not events
- Learning distributed across work, space, and time
- A focus on performance, on "do"

- An elegant segue from novice, through practitioner, to expert

- Social learning as an integral component, not an afterthought

This is not a pipedream; this is doable. Now.

This is not about technology, but technology is the lever, the opening we have needed. Quite simply, we have magic, as Clarke suggests; we can bring anything anywhere we want. Technology capabilities are no longer the barriers; the limits are now between our ears.

If we have magic, the question then becomes, "What are we going to do with it?" Which is a great opportunity to get back to our real motivations. Before we ask "What are we doing," we should be asking ourselves "What *could* we be doing?"

In 2009, SRI delivered a report to the U.S. Department of Education assessing elearning. The results of the report demonstrated (for the first time) that elearning was superior to face-to-face instruction. However, the report suggested "the studies in this meta-analysis do not demonstrate that online learning is superior as a medium"; instead, the likely reason was the chance to rethink the learning process, including elements such as "time spent, curriculum, and pedagogy" (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). We need to rethink design.

We have the opportunity to reinvent what we're doing. To do that, we have to look very deeply at how learning works, and at what we're trying to achieve. As we do so, we are going to see that many of the things we are doing are not consonant with how we learn and, in fact, are almost in opposition.

To start, we need a core focus. We need to look very closely, with fresh eyes, at what we want to achieve, and then work backward to how we get there.

PERFORMANCE

I suggest that our core goal is performance, and our role is performance augmentation. We seldom learn for intellectual self-gratification; instead we learn to be able to do new things or do them better. To do things we haven't been able to do before. To do things that will help us achieve our goals. The focus of learning and development is to prepare people, but we need to focus on people *doing*, and work backward to how we prepare them.

This implies, by the way, that it's also about finding ways not to have to put knowledge into people's heads, and to put (or find) the answer "in the world." Sometimes, in fact many times, what we should be doing is trying to avoid putting new knowledge and skills into their heads. It is typically very hard to get people to learn new things, and often it's easier to get answers out of other people's heads or to make answers available in the world.

Which also implies, very clearly, the need to be very explicit about what performance is needed and what is currently being observed. In addition, we need to look at the barriers to the behavior we want. We need to have very clear definitions of what needs to be done, tied to what the organization is trying to achieve.

We should be measuring our ability to impact organizational performance. Our metrics should be key goals of business units, whether it's higher customer satisfaction, increased sales, decreased errors, or faster problem solving.

The good news is that this is doable. Some clear methods are available to meet these goals. There are processes, technologies, and mindsets that together can give a very clear roadmap forward. The opportunity is on the table to move from irrelevancy to strategic value. It is just that these approaches must be the mainstream, not the exception.

The bad news is that, while these approaches are straightforward, it will take effort and resources. We have to get our minds around how we really learn, discover what technology options we have in hand, rethink our processes from the performance focus, and work through the organizational implications. No one said it was easy, just that it is necessary.

BOTTOM LINE

- What we're doing is not sufficient.
- (And we're not doing well what we are doing.)
- A different focus is needed *now*.
- The elements are known.
- There are paths forward.

Yes, you do have to change. But you can, and when you do, the benefits will be manifest. So let's get started.