Developing Your Employees’ Learning Strategy
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Although Arie de Geus’s quote is now over 20 years old, it still remains true that in business:

**The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage**

Rapid innovations in technology have caused digital learning to emerge as an option that is no longer restricted to merely blending with face-to-face interventions.

Today’s organisations increasingly think, communicate and work digitally, and learning has had to evolve to keep pace.

These organisations exist in a cauldron of information, of global competition, and of financial constraint.

Individuals are always connected, always collaborating, always on, thanks to a wealth of new devices.

Yet individuals are pressured to make effective business decisions faster and faster amidst a sea of distracting content.

This creates a considerable challenge for leadership education; a need to devise strategies that help people to learn in a digital age even though there is little time or inclination to do so in practice.

So how can organisations develop digital learning strategies around mobile devices, online content, social networks, virtual community discussions and real time collaboration solutions?

How can busy employees find time to learn digitally in a world where there is barely time to think?

Is there a way in which new technologies can help learning rather than simply generate still more search results?

To answer these questions, Westbourne has explored the changing nature of three distinct areas:

- The needs of digital learners
- Digital learning objectives
- Digital channels and devices.

Each of these are considered in turn before exploring a framework for development of digital learning strategies that align with the needs of today’s rapidly evolving business landscape.
An average person consumes 10,845 words or 34 gigabytes on a typical day, not even allowing for information at work.

There is little doubt that digital learners have become extremely effective information processors, but current working and learning practices are somewhat less effective.

Individuals in the workplace are now more often expected to drive their own career development, but in the face of information overload, and of complexity in the business environment, distraction is rife; the need to align digital learning strategies to business strategies and learner needs is paramount.

Westbourne’s digital learning solution understands the learning objectives of a particular intervention, the preferences of digital learners and how they aggregate into a dominant digital learning ‘culture’ of individuals within an organisation.

The digital learner within a given organisation will vary in terms of three distinct needs as shown below:

**Technology**
the extent to which new technologies, social media sites, online collaborative courses, ebooks etc are embraced or shunned

**Timing of learning**
the idealised approach to learning on the job, just-in-time, or in the classroom, just in case

**Location of learning**
the place of ‘persistent presence’ where learners tend to spend their time and think.

By exploring these needs, an understanding of the most dominant digital preference of learners within an organisation can emerge, as well as ideas on suitable Westbourne learning design that may fit with the time, technology or location preference.

For example, a time-starved employee who prefers to learn ‘on demand’ will tend towards virtual and mobile learning solutions, whereas a new recruit getting up to speed in their field or studying for a qualification will tend to be more receptive towards more structured programmes and e-learning modules requiring formal attendance and assessment.
Even when digital learning interventions have been created, the behaviours that people exhibit when engaging with digital content is highly variable, with a new wave of digital learning styles starting to emerge:

**Surfers and divers** - characterised either by a desire to retain broad overviews of connected concepts or a preference towards detailed understanding of narrower subject areas.

**Contributors and consumers** – characterised by those who actively engage in digital learning activities or those who more passively observe with limited active participation.

**Steady learners or Socialites** - characterised by those (particularly those starting to build competence in their field) who tend to need more knowledge delivery and ‘scaffolding’: as opposed to those who are more willing to learn on demand through social and business networks.

**Activists and objectors** - characterised by those who are eager to engage and explore new learning technologies: as opposed to those who are less keen and more cautious.

Organisations inevitably contain a blend of these learner preferences which makes creation of a ‘one size fits all’ solution difficult.

As such, although learning solutions should be designed to reflect the most dominant technology culture to stimulate and support business priorities, there is also a need to provide some elements of fluidity and choice to support other learner preferences.

It is easy to become almost paralysed by the varieties of course design and technologies that could be used to support learning.

Schofield, West and Taylor highlight the challenges of adopting a suitable strategy for mobile learning in such circumstances but also stress the value of starting and sustaining a freedom to fail approach.

They also highlight the increasingly impatient attitude towards digital learning from all of the above groups, highlighting the need for content that is

**Just enough, Just in time, just for me.**
Having established the dominant types of digital learner need within an organisation, the focus moves towards selection of methods to deliver the desired experience.

Whilst there is no shortage of choice of tools, techniques and innovation in the digital learning space, there is still all too often limited user satisfaction.

The wealth of resources available results in what Schwartz calls ‘the paradox of choice’, whereby digital learning designers are almost paralysed by the choice available, anxious that they may not have made the right decision and frustrated at the gap between their expectations of good digital learning and the realities of their actual experience.

The e-learning market space demonstrates this paradox in practice; it continues to thrive, with the US market alone worth $22bn in 2011 and projected to grow to $27bn by 2016.

At the same time, however, Armstrong and Russell suggest that structured e-learning courses remain one of the least effective management development practices for middle managers.

To cut through this challenge and develop clear objectives for an appropriate digital learning design, three key factors again need to be considered.

Content strategy—in particular, the decision whether to actively curate and signpost to content, or to trust and encourage learners to make full use of available resources.

Delivery focus—the choice between knowledge delivery by experts as opposed to more active facilitation of group based discussion and problem solving.

Programme scale—the decision on whether to create more targeted learning opportunities or to encourage large volumes of users to learn in parallel.

The content available to support digital learners is currently influenced by the interplay of the declining physical book market, growth in access to free digital content and the proliferation of open educational resources and online collaborative courses.

The explosion in free online content (through blogs, tweets, whitepapers etc) creates immense choice and opportunity for knowledge creation, but can also add to the frustration of many digital learners.

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
Individuals are now accessing content on demand (for example via mobile) and frequently developing increased confidence in decisions made using this approach.

This, in turn, creates a need to consider the implications of new learning behaviours that might start to evolve as a result of our digital environment.

Sparrow et al have analysed this trend and suggest:

When people expect to have future access to information, they have lower rates of recall of the information itself, and enhanced recall instead for where to access it

Those seeking to develop digital learning strategies in the face of assumed continual access to learning materials must therefore consider whether it is sufficient to allow learners to find their path in a sea of content or to what extent distilled signposts to relevant (or perceived quality) content may be more appropriate.

There is also a need to build on the social nature of much of today’s knowledge base. Internet content can be enhanced through organisational adoption of Web 2.0 and Enterprise 2.0 principles such as collaboration and co-creation of content.

Although tools such as blogs, wikis and discussion fora have been available for many years, the improved recent adoption of these tools within organisations as well as improved access to debate via mobile devices now allows the wisdom of the crowd to be far more achievable in practice.

The advent of Westbourne’s more social learning models embracing these principles and empowered through technology has significant implications for digital learning design, as the knowledge of learners within and accessible to a community of practice can now frequently be as current, perceptive and powerful as the expert view.

The impact of social learning is, however, influenced by the extent to which such practices can be cultivated in a given learning context. Communities require engaged users who are relatively easy to create when:

- Networks are social (for example Facebook to keep up–to–date with friends)
- When there is business benefit (for example LinkedIn networks opening up job opportunities)
- When usage is at scale with a purpose (for example Wikipedia’s ability to maintain quality due to a belief in the value of sharing knowledge).

Westbourne’s learning designers cultivate similar social drivers of individual engagement, enthusiasm and energy within courses and learning interventions.
Crafting your approach (cont)

What are the consequences of not participating in a collaborative activity in an organisational learning community?

What are the benefits? Is there enough dialogue, diversity of opinion and debate to sustain the community?

Westbourne’s social learning models have challenged those delivering employee education to evolve rapidly from expert teacher towards a blend of facilitator, signposter, problem solver and critical reviewer.

The need to stimulate and sustain learning communities is now a given, one which can stimulate considerable engagement, participation and knowledge creation if successful.

That said, it requires some rethinking of existing models and behaviours.

For Westbourne, this has stimulated the development of the new modes of learning delivery that are now emerging at a pace to fit with new models for content and social learning.

At Westbourne the course programme has started to ‘flip the classroom’ with more theoretical principles, models and knowledge delivery delivered online in advance via our Learning Management System (LMS), in preparation for more detailed exploration of context and application to real business problems when in online communities and real-time sessions.

The Westbourne LMS can be isolated to your business community and managed by your own staff or integrated with other like businesses to build relationships.

The benefits of teaching at this scale include dramatically improved access to learning and immense scope for peer–to–peer interactions to build knowledge.

There are also, however, inevitable compromises, particularly when moving from knowledge delivery towards activities that may require more complex levels of dialogue and debate (for example strategy, leadership, change).

As a result, Westbourne has also benefited from interventions that blend global reach with online web conferencing tools such as WebEx, GoTo Meeting and Skype.

Successfully embracing such technologies demands both the recognition of different experience in such online environments and a need to develop new skillsets for our Westbourne educators.

In the broader context, Westbourne’s learning opportunities are now increasingly presented at scale, increasingly presenting better digital practice and increasingly at a low cost at the point of consumption by many global institutions.
The combination of improved choice of content, improved internet access and recent penetration of devices such as tablets and smartphones has revolutionised the digital learner’s ability to consume digital learning.

In 2010 more than 60% of the world’s population were using mobile phones, with smartphone penetration growing at over 20% a year and now exceeding 50% in the US.

The proliferation of such devices does, however, create three further challenges for our learning designers:

- Devices - the decision as to whether to support one or multiple devices
- Formats - the selection of content format to support a particular device or to compromise and apply best endeavours to work across multiple devices
- Innovations - the ability to fix learning for a period or to adopt a more fluid approach in order to keep pace with on-going technology developments.

Digital devices - smartphone, tablet, and laptop alike - have become learning lifelines, the veins through which knowledge can be exchanged and through which rich learning now needs to be stimulated.

Costs of these devices were previously out of reach of the typical consumer and many organisations adopted strategies based on, for example, a single software platform or mobile device, largely under the control of CIO and Enterprise IT departments.

Such centralisation brought with it considerable benefits; centralised storage of knowledge, centralised support, centralised security and common business systems which made digital learning design relatively straightforward with common standards.

Times have changed. Digital devices now support digital social lives and set high expectations for access to learning when the device is brought to the work-place.

Learning must now be as accessible as Google, as insightful as BBC.com and as fun as Angry Birds, with few rules, standards or systems to outline how to deliver on these needs.
Learning also needs to ideally work on multiple devices, since depriving individuals of access through their preferred device restricts a channel for knowledge delivery and creates a barrier to the discretionary effort that many individuals put in after hours.

As a result, Westbourne creates, manages and hosts our LMS allowing users to use their own devices and negating trusting them to both avoid accidentally corrupt company data through firewall breaches and to not spend excessive amounts of time on activities inconsistent with business needs.

Multiple devices are accepted within the LMS and content is stored in the cloud allowing for shared learning and social and business networking co-existing throughout the day.

Decisions must be made on appropriateness of learning object design in a manner consistent with device strategy; is it always fitting to deliver learning on demand in ‘bite sized chunks’ through a smartphone or is this merely a springboard to richer learning in the classroom, online or at work?

Westbourne’s content is suitable for mobile, tablets, desk top or laptops.

Even as such development decisions are made, the pace of innovation in the digital space creates an on-going challenge.

Each week brings new devices, new ideas, and new learning solutions. To remain relevant and appropriate to user needs, our learning designers maintain awareness of evolving trends, explore which solutions offer best fit and incorporate best practices as appropriate.
In order to distil the above trends into an effective organisational learning strategy, there is a need to explore three areas:

1. Business needs and available investment for learning.

2. The organisational response and position to the nine key challenges.

3. The resultant scope of both learning strategy and appropriate learning interventions.

These issues may not necessarily be explored in that order; new technologies could well influence business strategy, but the broad process is illustrated in below.

Given the variety of organisational needs, of potential positions available across the nine areas, and of potential learning objectives and strategies, it is hardly surprising that many different digital learning solutions have emerged.
Integrating Westbourne’s Learning Strategy (cont)

Our work with Westbourne’s clients, courses and contacts has allowed us to provide a variety of good practices that adopt considerably different positions and practices shown below.

For example:

For a retail client, a technology integration exercise blending an open source learning management system with a video based portal and content from Westbourne and other trusted content providers into a seamless user experience.

For a public sector client with a limited budget, a Virtual Westbourne portal provides access to digital learning content on demand, any time, any place for a large volume of organisational learners.

For a group of high potentials seeking to energise social networking, a series of bespoke online conference sessions supplemented by an online portal combining Westbourne content and community features to seed and support discussion.

For busy managers, a fully virtual online leadership programme to blend content, collaboration and certification, and balance academic requirements with business relevance.

For a manufacturing sector client working globally, virtual facilitation to engage the group and to consult on paths to better practice.

For a course made up of time-starved, technology savvy learners seeking to access knowledge on demand, a mobile solution based on video delivered to multiple smartphones, supplemented by face-to-face sessions to build richer understanding and networks.

Digital learning is an area of rapid change, with few silver bullets, few right answers, and a multitude of possibilities where good practice can be developed.

To succeed, our research suggests it is appropriate to first consider organisational needs, then the optimal position in the context of current industry trends, and only at that point to focus on exploration of detailed learning interventions and technologies.

The transient nature of the digital learning space means, however, that any given strategy – even in the instances outlined above – will need to remain fluid.

There are risks that excessive investment at a time of rapid change could result in outdated or inappropriate solutions, and yet failure to embrace digital could also result in considerable loss of learning opportunities.

This is why Westbourne bears the risk and costs in investing in your e-learning capabilities allowing you to enjoy the benefit of an engaged work force in a positive organisational learning culture.
The future for digital learning is one of accelerating change, of rapid shift towards self-managed development and of demand for virtual learning solutions that blend quality content, rich community interaction and application to real world problems.

Digital learning has evolved rapidly and the principles of learning any time, any place and anywhere are not just possible, they are now a critical business requirement.

Inevitably, such changes will continue to create questions: Where is the classroom? Where is the learner? Where is the trusted content? What is the comparative value of a certificate of completion for a current MOOC as opposed to a programme taught for a formal qualification? What financial models are appropriate for this new world of learning?

The answers to such questions will evolve in response to the volume of learners who are now starting to experience learning digitally.

These challenges to the learning industry mirror those of the digital music industry 20 years ago, a world of vinyl, record shops and marque labels almost unrecognisable from the digital music sector today due to innovations highlighted by Bono:

‘What turns me on about the digital age, what excites me personally, is that you have closed the gap between dreaming and doing. You see, it used to be that if you wanted to make a record of a song, you needed a studio and a producer. Now, you need a laptop;

The digital music industry highlights the benefits of embracing, exploring and shaping new possibilities; and this is where Westbourne is already an established business partner evolving with your employees’ learning needs.

At Westbourne, we are passionate about helping people from all walks of life achieve their aspirations and dreams. Westbourne is leading the charge in online education – Your future, Your choice!
Westbourne is a world class education and consultancy provider that has been operating worldwide for many years.

Unlike many other e-learning companies, we operate based on this expertise of educating business people and not just on our technological expertise in building online learning solutions and training provision.

**Throw away the idea that e-learning is just an e-book**

Based on our research, we understand that not all learners learn the same way.

Westbourne provides content in standard text formats for easy reading but also lets users learn through videos and webinars, audio books and snippets, and visuals such as infographics.

Make learning interesting again for your staff with our diverse range of materials.

**Take individual learning to a new level**

Westbourne is not just another collection of online content. Your staff can login to the system and self-evaluate with our on-board tools, their results will help them plan their development route and suggest Westbourne content relevant to their needs.

Successful companies can and do incorporate their own content into their L&D reviews and planning using our LMS.

**Learn from top trainers, anytime, anywhere**

Westbourne content is produced by our education designers and trainers from across many industries providing content on a wide variety of core topics.

This top quality content is available to your staff from anywhere in the world, and at any time they require training or development.

**Integrated into your company**

No need to throw away your current L&D plans; Westbourne content can integrate into your current solutions, complement face to face training and be designed to fit your brand.

Westbourne content can be designed to match your competency frameworks and can be mapped to fit perfectly with your current strategy. It is also aligned to the Australian Qualifications Framework.

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