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Haute Couture

What's up in learning?

Key Learnings

- The latest trend in workplace learning is to increase training without increasing training costs.
- The use of cheaper learning tools and a laser focus on meeting specific training goals can increase learning without inflating training budgets.

Idyllic as it sounds, learning professionals have recognized that they can find suitable replacements for multi-day classroom sessions and expensive, hard-to-get trainers. The trend in workplace training and development is thus to use new but cheap learning tools and methods, thus curtailing an increase in training budgets.

"Coming together in a classroom is not dead. Virtual classrooms are the coming things," informs Pat Galagham, ASTD's vice president of content. With globalization and the MNC culture spreading its wings, workplace learning the world over is poised for dramatic changes. Here we attempt to track a few of these imminent changes.

Cost Reduction

The next big thing, according to recent ASTD statistics, is flat training budgets. Stagnant or decreasing training budgets would have been a cause for worry a few years back. However, this is no longer the case. With 'high-dollar' classroom sessions and trainers giving way to e-learning, the Internet and outsourcing, organizations can increase the amount of instructions without a corresponding increase in training costs or classroom time.

Contrary to common belief, technologies used in day-to-day training need not be highly sophisticated or expensive. The use of cheaper electronic learning tools like the Internet or computers, coupled with an increase in outsourcing, can:

- Decrease spending on training and development
- Increase training hours received per employee

The Wonders of e-Learning

Learning professionals believe that a shift to e-learning is what makes cost reduction a possibility. A study revealed that organizations now recognize online Web-based courses as suitable alternatives to traditional classrooms. In the late nineties, 80 percent of learning was done in classrooms. This figure dipped to 63 percent in 2004, while the use of e-learning has risen to more than 29 percent. During that same time, organizations reported that the hours of instruction received per learner increased from 27.9 to 29.8.

New Kid on the Block



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Another theme that is now common to all training and development initiatives (from job safety instructions to executive MBA classes to diversity training) is the need to demonstrate returns on investment. Even when training is conducted at an employee's desktop, organizations expect learning professionals to produce measurable returns. These organizations strongly believe in quantifying training returns as monetary savings to the organization.

Calculating training returns is difficult. Nevertheless, the only way to convince organizations to invest in e-learning programs is to demonstrate their cost effectiveness. Most organizations are put off by the high start-up and installation expenses of online ventures. However, with the trend of quantify training returns catching up, organizations can measure their cost savings through e-learning.

Most consultants and researchers report an average cost savings of 50 percent, boosting the image of e-learning. All this would not have been possible without the attention given to training returns.

The New Wave

Probably one of the best developments in this movement is the laser focus on defining problems and identifying or developing exact solutions. "*In the good old days, people in our business were mostly about getting onto the podium or hiring the right person to get to the podium*", says **Allison Rossett**, a professor of educational technology. However, today a learning professional is considered effective if he can look at a challenge, analyze the causes and develop solutions, of which training might just be a part.

Organizations now realize the futility of measuring training success in terms of the number of students sent to an instructor-led course. A fast-growing trend is to measure training success in terms of how well a given problem is analyzed and solved.

New Demands

Instead of offering generic or standardized classroom training, learning professionals are expected to generate customized solutions and at times even suggest to organizations when training is not part of the solution. "*It sometimes makes sense for organizations to forgo a training program entirely*", says **Roger Kaufman**, a leading consultant.

Studies show that nearly 90 percent of traditional workplace learning has a poor impact on improving performance. Employees either ignore or forget poorly designed and conducted training programs. "*I have seen organizations that have spent mega-bucks on training and things do not get any better*", says Kaufman. So what can organizations do to ensure that their training programs have the desired impact?

The answer

At the outset, organizations must understand why they need training. Kaufman was hired by a multinational company to conduct values training for employees in their new South American unit. Before starting off, he asked the senior executives to list out the company's core values. Topping the list were standard values such as maintaining high standards and customer satisfaction.



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Probing further, Kaufman asked, "Are your core values any different from those of the industry?" The answer was a "no". He then asked them, "*Does the company believe that it has hired workers in South America who were oblivious to basic principles that are universal to the industry?*" "No", said the executives. Kaufman's interrogation helped the executives understand that what their workers required had little to do with values training. He recommended that rather than waste money imparting values training, the company should train workers in the specific skills they lacked.

Haute Trend

Another change underway is that traditional classroom courses are losing steam as the primary means of delivering training. In modern organizations, a lot of learning is done through informal exchanges. Employees prefer learning from peers, managers or even by watching someone perform a job. A learner is comfortable accessing systems that offer relevant and current information and knowledge on demand. He or she is usually more willing to find solutions through an online database or a panel of experts.

Quick orientation programs can do lot more than multi-day classroom sessions. They teach employees how and where to find the right information.

In Waiting

Yet another trend on the horizon is that of extreme training. These programs are highly intensive with compressed learning sessions where managers are asked to solve difficult problems. Often, the sessions are comprised of simulations where learners experience real-life situations.

These changes in training and development are here to stay - at least while the going is good. And for as long as training success is defined in terms of results, adopting these changes makes good business sense.