



Reflections on the 2007 learning and development survey

Latest trends in learning, training and development

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Foreword

The CIPD's annual learning and development surveys provide us with opportunities to examine and explore current and emerging issues facing the profession. In recent years, we have accompanied the survey reports with a Reflections publication that aims to provide a wider context for and understanding of the issues raised. For this issue, which accompanies the 2007 learning and development survey report, we invited five leading commentators to reflect on different aspects of the survey findings and to identify the main implications of the findings for practitioners and the organisations they work for.

- What is the real extent of line manager involvement in learning and development within organisations? **Sue Hutchinson** considers organisations' current practices and identifies some areas for improvement.
- **Carole Pemberton** examines what organisations are doing to build and strengthen their coaching capabilities, and challenges organisations to be clear about where they believe coaching makes a performance difference and who benefits from it.
- Just how close is the link between learning and development and wider organisational strategy? **Charles Jennings** takes a look at the progress that's been made in this area and examines the challenges ahead.
- **Martyn Sloman** looks at the use of competencies within the modern workplace, and argues that competency frameworks are an important vehicle for achieving organisational performance.
- **Daniel Wain** puts the spotlight on the latest trends in learning and development and questions how much progress has been made in recent years.

We hope you enjoy reading these short 'think-pieces' and that they give you some insights into current issues facing learning, training and development practitioners.

Victoria Winkler
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The CIPD's annual learning and development surveys can be downloaded from the CIPD website (www.cipd.co.uk/surveys).

Sue Hutchinson is currently a senior lecturer in HR management at the University of West of England (UWE) business school. She's currently involved in a number of research projects on the role of front-line managers, plus a joint project with the University of Warwick on the implementation of the Information and Consultation Regulations. Before moving to the UWE, she worked at Bath University where she was involved in a wide range of projects, including exploring the link between people management and performance, lean methods of working, flexible working, and implementing change in high-performance workplaces. Before entering the academic world, she held a variety of industrial relations roles in industry.

The role of the line manager in learning and development

Sue Hutchinson

This year's survey considers, for the first time in some depth, the role of the line manager in learning and development. This move reflects the increasing recognition of the role line managers play, and suggests that people management activities are no longer the province of HR or training specialists.

The importance of line managers in all aspects of people management, including learning and development, came to the fore in earlier research undertaken on behalf of the CIPD (Purcell and Hutchinson 2003). This research, based on employee responses, shows that the way line managers deliver HR practices and provide leadership can strongly influence employee experiences and thus their attitudes and behaviour.

In particular, significant relationships exist between the effective provision of coaching and guidance by the line manager and levels of employee satisfaction, commitment and motivation. This is supported by

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other research (Noe 1996) that shows that support from supervisors affects employees' willingness to engage in development activities and their attitudes to their careers.

Increasing line manager involvement

The clear picture that emerges from the CIPD survey is of increasing and significant line manager involvement in learning and development, with almost three-quarters of respondent organisations (74%) claiming that line managers have taken on

greater responsibility for these activities during the last two years. And there's almost universal support for the view that line managers are important in supporting learning and development activities in their organisations.

The potential advantages of line manager involvement in learning and development have long been recognised (Gibb 2003). It helps integrate the notion of learning and development into working life and promote positive attitudes towards these activities, opening up development opportunities to a wider group of people. The quality of learning and development should improve as line managers are better placed to understand both the organisation's needs and individual performance needs.

In addition, there are the benefits to managers themselves' as taking on these responsibilities should help them become more competent in people management activities more generally. And finally, it would be reasonable to expect that this can in turn contribute to organisational change and improved human relations.

Not surprisingly, conducting performance appraisals and agreeing personal development plans are the most common areas of involvement. They're also the main

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responsibilities of line managers in nearly all organisations surveyed, which reflects the widely recognised belief that performance management should be delivered and owned by the line.

But in terms of initiating learning and development activities, it's still the HR or training specialist who retains most responsibility, although this survey shows that line managers do play a significant role. In fact, in 29% of organisations, the line manager has the main responsibility in this area. And in just over half the organisations, there's clearly a shared responsibility between the line and HR/training specialists or the employees themselves. On the whole, we're seeing the role of the line manager broadening beyond just an emphasis on performance management to include other activities, such as support for newcomers through induction, providing formal and informal training and acting as mentor or coach.

There's also evidence to support the notion that individual employees have to take on greater responsibility for their own learning and development. In nearly two-thirds of organisations, employees hold the main or some responsibility for initiating learning-related activities.

However, we should treat this information with some caution. This survey reports the views of HR professionals rather than those on the receiving end of these practices – the line managers and the employees themselves. We know from an increasing number of studies that figures such as those reported here may mask the true picture and that significant gaps exist between, on the one hand, stated HR policies and senior managers' beliefs and, on the other, the reality of employee experiences in the workplace (Marchington 2001). It's often suggested that part of the answer lies in line management behaviour, particularly in their willingness to take on these additional responsibilities and their ability to do so. The current survey results allow us to explore some of these issues further.

Encouragingly, just over half of respondents (54%) feel that their line managers are effective in delivering learning and development, and over three-quarters (77%) feel that managers take these responsibilities either 'very seriously' or 'fairly seriously'. However, 44% feel managers are 'not very effective' or 'ineffective' and 23% feel managers don't take these roles seriously.

By far the biggest obstacle to effective line management involvement is competing work

pressures. This isn't surprising as it's likely that line managers have taken on these newer responsibilities without relinquishing any of their more traditional ones. Other concerns include a lack of senior management commitment (36%), cost and resource

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implications (33%), lack of understanding about the impact of learning and development (41%) and, linked to this, the view that these responsibilities are perceived as optional rather than essential (38%). Lack of training, a commonly perceived barrier, is only cited by 18% of organisations.

So, what can organisations do to support managers and encourage buy-in to learning and development? Training is the most obvious way, through development programmes for line managers and management training courses. Only 8% of organisations report that all their managers receive training – although a further 32% claim that most of their managers do. However, an alarming 10% state that none of their managers are trained.

A slightly worse picture emerges when we look at training line managers in coaching. New research from the CIPD (Purcell and Hutchinson 2007) suggests that, despite the availability of training courses, they're not always used (unless the courses are mandatory). This is often attributed to workload pressures or the training being insufficient on its own, or to a lack of commitment (though, of course, if managers are taking on these additional responsibilities, there will be less time for their own development).

The survey suggests other ways that HR professionals can provide support – for example, by identifying

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development opportunities for teams and gaining the commitment of senior managers by encouraging them

to act as role models. There's also a need to clarify line managers' learning and development responsibilities by perhaps relating them to managers' jobs through both job descriptions and providing feedback and assessment through the appraisal system. Linked to this is the recognition of the need to provide better evaluation of learning and development and to communicate the importance of learning and development activities. Interestingly, only a few suggest rewarding managers for their role in learning and development.

Most aspects of people management are a matter of choice for line managers, their success being dependent on individual discretion and/or ability. Learning and development is no exception. This situation contrasts with other responsibilities traditionally associated with the line manager role that are usually subject to much greater control and measurement and therefore take precedence. The danger faced by organisations is that, in devolving learning and development to the line, the potential benefits won't be realised and that these activities become marginalised.

Implications for practitioners

- Organisations need to encourage line managers' 'buy-in' and commitment to learning and development by clarifying their responsibilities through job descriptions and performance appraisal and communicating the importance and value of development-related activities.
- All managers need time to carry out their learning and development activities. Often the 'softer' people management areas of responsibility get driven out by other, more traditional, management duties.
- Line managers need training courses and development programmes. But they must be given support, both in terms of time to access them and through feedback.
- Senior management commitment is essential and leaders need to be encouraged to act as role models.
- It's important to select line managers carefully, paying particular attention to behavioural competencies that facilitate learning and development in themselves and others.

Carole Pemberton has worked with individuals and organisations on issues relating to career and personal development since the late 1970s. She has worked with groups as diverse as fast-track graduates and security industry managers and has covered all levels from first appointment to chief executive in settings ranging from universities to high-street retailers. Carole established her own consultancy, Career Matters, in 1997, and subsequently launched Coaching to Solutions to specifically focus on the coaching needs of managers.

Along the way, she has been involved in research, writing for professional, academic and popular publications including *Cosmopolitan*. For four years, she wrote a regular newspaper column for the *Guardian* on people issues in organisations. She's written a number of books on career-related and management topics, including her latest book, *Coaching to Solutions: A manager's toolkit for performance delivery* (2006).

Carole holds the Advanced Diploma in Executive Coaching from the Academy of Executive Coaching, has an MA in Education, is a qualified careers counsellor, a Chartered Fellow of the CIPD, an Associate of the British Psychological Society, and a Member of the American Academy of Management, the International Association of Career Management Professionals and the International Coach Federation. She's also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Maintaining coaching activity means increasing coaching capability

Carole Pemberton

The headline finding of the coaching section in the CIPD 2007 learning and development survey is that the amount of coaching activity in organisations is beginning to decline. From a figure in 2006 of 79% of organisations being involved in coaching activity, this is now down to 63%. Behind this stark statistic, the survey highlights important questions as to how coaching capability can be enhanced so that it delivers its potential.

The early adopters of executive coaching were often those who first extended its reach through developing internal and line manager coaches. But the figures suggest that the value of coaching is beginning to be questioned by some organisations. If the degree of coaching activity really is decreasing, it's an indicator that the expected business benefits haven't been delivered and that tougher questions are starting to be asked about its purpose and outcomes.

Sectoral differences

At the same time, the survey brings out sectoral differences. Small organisations and voluntary sector organisations still lag behind in the take-up of coaching. It's still most likely to be found in organisations of 10,000+ employees and least likely in organisations of less than 250 employees. Line managers in small organisations are still less likely than organisations with 5,000 or more staff to be involved in coaching their staff or in having internal coaches.

Conversely, in the voluntary sector, a higher percentage offer external coaching to their senior managers (74%) compared with the private sector (66%). In addition, voluntary sector involvement in internal coaching is

lower than that of the private sector (64% and 88% respectively).

The reasons for the disparities aren't difficult to surmise. Small organisations often have small training budgets, and voluntary sector organisations can find it hard to justify training spend when there's an imperative for funds to go directly to their cause. Ann Lewis, an executive coach and former HR director of two charities, has commented of coach development: 'It just doesn't seem to be on the radar even as part of basic leadership training.'

Yet the potential impact of investing in developing a cohort of internal coaches is far greater than one-to-one coaching of a small number of executives. Small organisations are highly dependent on their business leaders, and any spending on coaching is likely to be attached to their management of the business. According to Anji Marychurch of specialist small coaching practice Action Coach Business Coaching, they seek out

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coaching to help them 'work on the business, rather than in it'. They pay less attention to developing coaches within the business than to equipping themselves to lead the business more effectively.

The evidence on the value of informal learning

If questions about the value of coaching as a driver of business performance are now being asked, this presents a healthy challenge. Like any other development

approach, coaching isn't the answer to every development issue. But it would be premature to read any reduction in coaching activity as a sign that it was a 'management fad' that's reached or passed, its peak.

On the contrary, there are growing indications that the value of coaching hasn't been fully realised and that organisations could still gain far more from coaching than they have so far. In his studies of learning at work,

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Professor Michael Eraut of Sussex University has shown that informal types of learning are more powerful than formally organised learning events, even in areas of work like accountancy, which have a substantial programme of formal training. Looking at professional workers in their first three years of experience, he found that support and feedback were critical to their confidence, learning and retention and commitment, and that these were best provided by a person on the spot. Informal coaching was highly valued by new professionals. He concluded that managers have a major influence on workplace learning and culture that extends far beyond their being a 'role model'.

Marks & Spencer have come to a similar conclusion from a different perspective. Explaining their business recovery, they've linked it directly to a shift in how they train their staff. They've moved from the idea of learning being off the shop floor, in classrooms, to a new model of 'on the job' coaches. Head of Retail HR Jacqui Humphries says that the biggest change in learning has been the realisation that people learn best with and through others. There have always been individuals who, through instinct, have coached others on the job – the difference is that increased business awareness of the value of their input draws attention to how those skills can be learned more widely.

There is powerful evidence that equipping line managers to coach their staff has payoffs in terms of the learning and commitment of staff and the delivery of business outcomes. If those benefits aren't being realised, the focus needs to shift towards how line managers and internal coaches are being prepared to achieve them.

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Insufficient support

In looking at coach capability, the 2007 survey highlights the fact that many of those designated for coaching roles aren't being supported sufficiently to perform the role effectively.

Given that only 7% of respondents 'completely' agree that coaching is a formal part of a manager's job description, and 65% claim that only a minority of their managers are trained to coach, it's unsurprising that only 4% 'completely' agree that line managers take the coaching aspect of their role seriously. Line managers and internal coaches are primarily selected for their understanding of the business or profession and their

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understanding of leadership and management rather than their coaching experience. However, the value of business and leadership knowledge risks being lost if individuals are then not adequately prepared to coach.

Thirty-eight per cent of line managers are offered less than two days' preparation for the role of manager coach, and only 10% of coaches are being offered supervision. Line managers and internal coaches are being asked to help their staff without the support systems that an external coach would expect.

If organisations are to gain the potential benefits of coaching as a means of both supporting and enabling performance, coaching capability has to be grown more systematically than it has been to date.

Coaching has gained a legitimate place in UK organisations in the last ten years as executives have seen the performance benefits it's brought them and have looked to extend the benefits within the organisation. Rather than coaching having reached its peak, it has much more to offer, provided that those asked to deliver it are given both the responsibility and the capability.

Implications for practitioners

- To grow their coaching capability, organisations, both large and small, public and private, need to examine their own motives for instigating coaching activity and to be clear about where they believe coaching makes a performance difference and who can benefit from it. They need to understand where it can offer something distinct from any other form of learning.
- With that clarity, organisations will be better informed to define the qualities they need in line managers and internal coaches, both as a basis for selection, and in terms of development.
- If organisations are serious about coaching as part of their culture, it needs to be both a designated part of a manager's role and one that's reviewed and rewarded.
- No skill as demanding as coaching can be learned in two days. Any manager who commits to coaching needs ongoing learning and support.
- For some organisations, a coaching style of management is already in the life-blood of how work is done. Here, the value of that style can be increased by drawing more overt attention to the strengths of a coaching style as an inspiring part of the organisation's culture.
- While individual coaching is often linked to leadership development programmes, less attention is paid to developing the coaching capability of leaders. The most potent means of increasing organisational coaching capability is by those who lead organisations modelling that approach in their management of others.

Charles Jennings is Global Head of Learning at Reuters, the world's largest multimedia news agency and financial information service.

During the past 20 years, Charles has led a range of learning, e-learning and collaborative learning initiatives for corporations, the UK Government and the European Commission. He has wide experience in e-learning, having developed and run online courses across Europe and around the world since the early 1980s.

Before joining Reuters in 2002, Charles worked with consultancy companies at the forefront of the e-learning world. His previous experience also includes a role as a director of strategic technology for Dow Jones Markets, where he was responsible for designing and implementing global learning and performance support systems.

Charles was formerly Director of the Centre for Electronic Communications and Open Support Systems in Education (established by the UK Government) and professor of electronic communications at Southampton Business School, where, in 1994, he led the launch of the world's first MBA available entirely over the Internet.

Integrating learning and development into wider organisational strategy

Charles Jennings

The mountain we have to climb

The results and trends in this year's CIPD survey bring into focus a number of important challenges around strategy and alignment that are being faced by learning and development professionals in all sectors. These comprise a mountain of challenges in a rapidly changing, flattening digital world. But we're not alone. Our challenges simply reflect those facing organisations and societies across the globe as they grapple with the express train of change, technology and expectation that's been accelerating towards us for the past 30 years or so.

As our organisations accommodate new ways of working, our main challenge as learning professionals is to adapt our structures, strategies and activities, not just to keep pace but to work as agents of change and help our organisations move forward.

A large and growing body of research continues to reinforce the fact that, as societies move from production-based economies to knowledge-based economies, the importance of a flexible, skilled and highly motivated workforce increases exponentially.

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Unless organisations can develop employees who are capable and motivated, with the ability to deal with ambiguity and make effective decisions, they won't be able to remain competitive and continue to meet their

customers' expectations. Their learning and development function is a critical cog in building a workforce that can continuously learn, unlearn and relearn.

It's as simple as that.

Matching our aspirations to strategy

Most organisations aspire to make the best use of their people (their 'human resources', 'human capital' or any other term they use to describe the flesh and blood that drives their enterprise). And they need efficient, effective and dynamic learning and development functions to achieve that goal. Evidence shows that true learning organisations rely heavily on their learning and development teams to support their strategy and break away from the old ways of doing things. Without learning, organisations and individuals simply repeat old practices, change is cosmetic and improvements are either fortuitous or short-lived (Garvin 1993).

In other words, our learning and development functions are absolutely vital to our organisations' strategies and to the success of senior executives and business managers. It's only when we look at our function's role in this way that we appreciate the importance of getting our interfaces with senior executives and business managers absolutely right. We hold some of the keys they need to do their jobs. Equally, we need them to work closely with us. Without their close support, we simply can't do our jobs.

Engaging with managers

One of the important messages to come from the CIPD survey is that managers are taking on increasing

responsibility for learning and development activities (74% positive). This suggests a move in the right direction, even if it's offset by the survey findings that only 12% of managers take learning and development 'very seriously' and only 54% of managers are rated as 'effective' or 'very effective' in relation to learning and development. On the other hand, line managers are overwhelmingly seen by learning and development professionals as being 'very important' or 'important' in the process (96%).

This raises a number of questions. If managers' involvement in the process is so important, what can we, the learning and development people, do about accelerating their level of engagement? If there is an increase in the percentage of managers who are taking responsibility for learning and development activities, are we sure they really understand what's expected of them and what they should do? Are we educating them to understand? Are we exposing them to new approaches, increased efficiencies and the move from 'push' development to 'pull' development?

This is clearly something that needs to be focused on in the next few years.

Aligning learning and development with our organisations' strategy

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which are the most effective management levers to pull. We can then better align our people development aspirations and strategies with our organisations' wider objectives, rather than simply following behind.

This competency won't be developed without some work, but analysing the survey data is a very good starting point. The survey results give us a good idea of what's happening across a wide range of organisations. Armed with this data, it's easier to identify what needs to be done to improve the

alignment between our people development strategies and our organisational strategies as we move through 2007.

Where are we now?

The CIPD survey results tell us that about a third of organisations involve or consult their learning, training and development managers at initial planning stages when developing their overall organisation strategy. Superficially, that's quite positive. But, put another way, two-thirds of organisations only engage their learning and development people after strategic decisions have been made.

One conclusion we can draw from this data and from the qualifying questions is that senior decision-makers in most organisations simply don't think the views of those in learning and development are necessary or valuable when they're developing strategy. They don't think learning and development is important enough to be engaged when senior managers are talking 'serious' business.

Right here is one of learning and development's mountainous challenges.

Building the bridges

So how do learning and development professionals overcome this disconnect and make sure that learning strategies are woven into the fabric of overall organisation strategy?

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In many organisations, the learning and development function has been positioned and operated as a fulfilment service, responding to line manager demands (rather than requests) to provide training courses. Managers have demanded training, and learning managers have delivered it.

It's absolutely understandable that this customer-supplier model, which evolved to suit hierarchical organisational structures originating in the mid-1900s, is still with us. But it's imperative that a newer model is adopted to meet the needs of flatter twenty-first-century organisational structures. Peter Drucker coined the term 'knowledge worker' half a century ago. Many of our organisations have yet to adapt the interfaces between senior management and their learning and development teams to support their knowledge workers in building and maintaining their capability.

A business partner or client-consultant relationship model between the learning and development function and senior line managers is far more appropriate for a twenty-first-century organisation. But they need learning and development managers to gain the confidence of senior management and engage with them as partners, rather than simply providing a fulfilment service. For the newer model to work, learning and development professionals need to learn to speak the same language as those in top management.

Should managers care?

Some of us may be lucky enough to work with some senior business managers and line managers who really care about the learning process and are comfortable engaging in discussions about learning needs analysis, instructional design, evaluation models and so forth. We should be surprised and delighted when they do, but we shouldn't expect it. In fact, many business managers don't care about learning in itself. And why should we expect them to?

What most managers do care about is learning's contribution to growth and productivity, the role that learning can play in business transformation, and the strategic value learning can bring to help them and their organisation achieve its objectives. In other words, they care about performance – whether it's financial performance, organisational performance or their team's performance. Invariably, good managers care passionately about performance. They do so because that's what they themselves are measured on, and because they know that performance is the key driver of their organisation's success.

Bearing this in mind, learning and development managers need to work very hard at engaging their senior managers at every step in the organisational strategy development process. To have impact, they also need to work very hard to ensure that business managers respect their professional views and understand the value that learning and development professionals can bring to all stages of strategic business decision-making.

The CIPD survey results suggest that there is still a lot of influencing and marketing work for learning and development to do in this area. The survey indicates that, in most organisations, learning and development is only engaged in the strategic process after all the major decisions have been made... in other words, after the horse has bolted.

The importance of having a formal learning and development strategy

The survey figures show that only 56% of organisations have a written learning and development strategy. This means that there's a surprisingly large number of UK organisations in which

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business managers and learning and development teams simply don't have an explicit, clear and consistent reference point to test their own strategies and activities against. It's almost inconceivable to imagine a chief executive who doesn't have a formal explicit business strategy. It should be just as inconceivable for learning and development departments not to have a formal strategy too.

Not too little measurement, not too much

Less than 50% of the organisations surveyed have an established method for evaluating the impact of learning and development. Yet impact is the single factor that allows us to determine whether our learning and development activities are adding value to our organisation and its employees. These survey results suggest that many learning and development

professionals are still focusing their time and energy on measuring learning activity. But learning activity data has very limited value to the business: 'Why don't we just weigh them?' Gloria Gary once famously commented.

There's no doubt that some measurement is vital. It's important for us to understand the impact of learning and development and to communicate that understanding to learning managers, line managers and senior managers alike. However, it's equally important to be certain we're measuring the right things and making the right connections between cause and effect.

What do our CEOs want?

The ground-breaking IBM Global CEO Study, summarised in the article 'The C-level and the value of learning' (O'Driscoll et al 2005) highlighted two important facts that are worth reflecting on while you review the CIPD survey results.

The first finding from that study was that CEOs and their senior managers have faith that learning contributes to organisational outcomes and don't require direct evidence to substantiate their belief. In other words, the relationships that learning and development managers build with their senior business managers will impact not only on their ability to embed learning strategies into business strategies at the outset, but will also allow them to influence their senior managers in developing those strategies.

The second finding was that CEOs and their senior managers expect their learning and development functions to help them build their strategies and capability to address the organisation's future challenges, and not simply focus on the current needs of the business.

So, if you're looking to integrate your learning and development strategy with the wider organisational strategy, you're likely to be pushing at an open door.

Implications for practitioners

- To succeed, learning professionals and their teams need to build strong business partnerships with senior executives and line managers.
- A simple and clear formal learning strategy is essential and this should be communicated to executives and managers at every opportunity.
- The value that learning and development brings to the organisation is determined by linking learning outputs with measurable business outcomes, with a focus on the latter.
- Managers' understanding of their joint responsibility with learning professionals for developing the capability of their teams, and that success depends on their input as much as that of the learning team, needs to be reinforced and supported.
- Senior managers' engagement at every step of the organisational strategy development process is critical to success.

Martyn Sloman is the CIPD Adviser for Learning, Training and Development. From 1997 to 2000, he worked as Director of Management Education and Training for Ernst & Young.

In his roles as author, lecturer and conference speaker, he has contributed to the development of modern HR concepts and practice. His book, *The E-Learning Revolution: From propositions to action* (CIPD 2001), presented 21 separate propositions, while *A Handbook for Training Strategy* (Gower 1994) has been translated into Polish and published in India and China. A second edition appeared in 1999. In October 2003, *Training in the Age of the Learner* was published by the CIPD and considered the implications of the shift from training as an intervention to learning as an activity. He has completed a new book, *The Changing World of the Trainer* (2007), which considers the global aspects of learning, training and development.

Martyn is a visiting professor in HR development at Caledonian Business School, Glasgow Caledonian University, a visiting professor at Kingston Business School, Kingston University, and a teaching fellow in the Department of Management and Organisational Psychology, Birkbeck College, University of London. He has lectured and presented to conferences and colleges in 15 countries across four continents. He has been the keynote speaker at the European Commission Training Day in Brussels and has spoken by invitation to the Central Training Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

Competencies – stop worrying about the theory, just implement

Martyn Sloman

Trainers are often a despondent bunch. They're self-critical; they can all too easily see problems and barriers but often fail to recognise where progress has been made. It's therefore good to report that an examination of the survey results on competencies highlights an area of undoubted success for the profession. We've absorbed, digested and reflected on the value of competencies and (most of us anyway) made them work in our organisations. Well done us!

All the evidence shows that competencies are now an accepted tool in training and development interventions. Most organisations have a competency framework – there's little evidence of problems arising in their application. So it's easy to overlook the impact that competencies had when they arrived in our world

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of training. We had to wrestle with problems of conflict of understanding and sometimes contradictory definitions, and see our way through to implementation. What the survey results show is how this absorption has been achieved, and they also bring out an interesting new challenge.

Why competencies?

As is well known, the focus on competencies achieved momentum with the publication of a 1982 book by the US academic and writer Richard Boyatzis. Lists of skills and traits that were considered to matter in the workplace had, of course, been a feature of the HR landscape long before. However, Boyatzis's book, *The Competent Manager* (1982), captured a desire to seek new ways of driving organisational changes by pointing

individual employees in the 'right direction'. In short, competency frameworks seemed to offer a fresh start to the problem of managing through consensus.

Since then, organisations have been busily designing and implementing competency frameworks in the US, the UK and indeed throughout the world. The CIPD 2007 survey results reveal that 60% of organisations have a competency framework in place for their organisation and, of those that don't, almost half (48%) intend to introduce one. That still leaves around one-fifth of respondents planning to move forward without a competency framework. But 40% of those have 250 or fewer employees and are mainly found in the private sector. So, with the exception of a proportion of small private sector firms, competencies seem to be an accepted feature of a modern organisation.

After some initial confusion over its meaning, the term 'competency framework' is now used to mean a

After some initial confusion over its meaning, the term 'competency framework' is now used to mean a framework that describes the behaviours that an employee must have, or must acquire, to achieve high levels of performance.

framework that describes the behaviours that an employee must have, or must acquire, to achieve high levels of performance. By implication, it's also a framework that describes substandard performance. Used in this sense, a competency framework has become an essential tool, and what the survey tells us is how learning and development managers are using this tool.

Competency frameworks today

The findings from the survey can be grouped under three headings: coverage, design, and application.

Organisations that have a competency framework in place were asked what proportion of employees are covered by it. The results show that, on average, almost four in every five employees (78%) are included, and half of the organisations with a framework in place report that they have a single framework across the organisation. It's therefore common for competencies to extend across the organisation and to be expressed as a single framework.

The information on design is also very clear-cut. The overwhelming proportion of frameworks (85%) are designed in-house, or in-house with consultants. A very small proportion (8%) use frameworks produced and made available by an external organisation (for example, a trade association or government body).

Yet many of the subjects that are included in the framework fall under expected generic headings. The most popular subject included in the list is communication skills (63%), followed by people management (59%), team skills (58%) and customer service skills (54%). A search of both the CIPD Library and the web will uncover countless competency listings containing these categories, but training and learning managers are clearly determined to do the job of formulating a framework themselves.

In terms of application, 'underpins performance reviews and appraisals' is noted as the main use by over half of the respondents with a framework, followed by greater employee effectiveness and greater organisational effectiveness.

The wider picture

The core argument underlying the CIPD's recent stream of work on learning, training and development has been that new competitive models demand a different approach to the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Importantly, the emphasis has shifted from training to learning, and our role has become learner- rather than trainer-centred, which necessitates different relationships with managers and employees across the organisation.

Learners must be encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning. For this approach to work, committed employees must be given a clear indication of what's expected of them. They should

know how they can achieve and demonstrate superior performance, and should understand what substandard performance looks like. At both ends of the scale (and in between), they should receive guidance and feedback from their line manager and from colleagues. This is the basic principle defining performance management and underpins every accepted approach to people management and development.

The implications for the use of competencies are considerable. A competency framework comes in as a bridging concept that translates the overall organisational requirements into terms that are relevant to the individual employee. It's therefore scarcely surprising that training and learning managers wish to develop competency frameworks for their own organisations. 'Communication skills', 'people management' and 'team skills' might be very generic concepts but they must be expressed using the language of the particular organisation. Only in this way will they command support.

Furthermore, the process of developing a competency framework is as important as the product. Discussing what matters in terms of a list of competencies is an excellent way of establishing the necessary dialogue between HR and the business.

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The emerging challenge

Two questions in the survey were included to highlight an emerging issue. The first asked whether the framework is available to individuals as an electronic version on their PC. Sixty per cent answered 'yes'. When these positive respondents were asked further: 'Are employees required to self-assess or record their performance for any purpose?' 70% answered 'yes'.

These percentages are surprisingly high. We must therefore ask if this approach represents the way of the future and, if so, what are the problems we face? Some elaboration may help...

Many larger organisations, once they've established a competency framework, are placing them on an intranet

portal that employees can access through their PC. What is then possible, and is shown to be happening increasingly, is that employees are encouraged or required to self-assess their personal capability against the competency framework as an input to the performance review or performance development process. Lists can be generated electronically, gaps or deficiencies recognised, and training and development needs identified. These are then discussed with the reviewing manager and appropriate actions taken.

Anyone with any practical knowledge of performance management will know that there are some important preconditions that need to be met to make this approach work. First, the competency framework needs to be comprehensive – it must apply to all staff. Second, all staff must have access to the framework and be reasonably comfortable with this electronic method of working. Third, line managers must buy into this approach and give it their support – if they don't, the process will be seen as an irritating bureaucratic exercise undertaken to keep HR, internal communications and IT happy. Some of the case studies on the CIPD website (see, for example, the Ford Motor Company and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service cases at www.cipd.co.uk/helpingpeoplelearn) show that such problems are recognised and are being tackled effectively in a number of organisations.

With regard to the survey questions mentioned above, what is a surprise is the high number of organisations

that seem to be pursuing this approach. It underlines the pervasiveness of technology in the workplace today. The problems of implementation, however, are not about competencies. They're yet another indication that one of the big areas of challenge for our profession is about managing the human–technology interface.

The future journey

If we were to consider the results of the CIPD 2007 learning and development survey as a whole and offer a single soundbite, it would be the following: 'Excellent stuff, we're poised for the future, but there's a long way to go.'

In this spirit, the results on competency coverage, design and application lead us to the following conclusions. Competency frameworks are an essential vehicle for achieving organisational performance through focusing on and reviewing an individual's

...a competency framework can be a key element in any change management process by setting out new organisational requirements.

capability and potential. Moreover, a competency framework can be a key element in any change management process by setting out new organisational requirements. In using competencies, as in so many other areas, we now know what we need to do. All we have to do now is do it!

Implications for practitioners

- A competency framework is an essential and accepted feature of modern HR management. It's a framework that's seen as a vehicle for focusing on individual performance and as an element in any change management process.
- Increasingly in organisations, competencies are expressed in terms of a single framework for all employees.
- Although most lists contain the same generic headings, they are developed in-house rather than imported using outside lists.
- The process of developing a competency framework is as important as the product.
- There is growing interest in promoting access to frameworks through the individual's PC as part of the performance review process.

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Lies, damned lies and a few home truths

Daniel Wain

'Tomorrow is another day, McKendrick,' says a philosopher in Tom Stoppard's 1970s TV play, *Professional Foul*. To which the cynical, but sage, McKendrick replies, 'Tomorrow, in my experience, is usually the same day.'

McKendrick's cynicism would certainly appear to be vindicated after studying the results of the 2007 CIPD learning and development survey. Comparing them to those of the 2006 survey, there's a palpable sense of *déjà vu*.

Little has changed, despite high expectations in 2006. As Disraeli said: 'What we anticipate seldom occurs, what we least expect generally happens.' Put another way, the future isn't what it used to be. It seems the

...the much-heralded overthrow of old-fashioned, directive training by more learner-led methods hasn't been fully realised yet.

much-heralded overthrow of old-fashioned, directive training by more learner-led methods hasn't been fully realised yet. And far from an overthrow, we may not even have seen an advance.

In 2006, 17% of respondents considered formal training courses the most effective way that people learn. In 2007, this has increased to 21%. In both years, on-the-job training was considered far and away the most effective method of learning: 39% in 2006, rising to 41% in 2007. However, this is still training: the type of learning that is done to people. As far back as 1991, Pedler et al identified training as not conducive to the achievement of a true learning organisation: '[Trainers] can no longer... directly teach another what they need to know.' Yet, 16 years after Pedler et al, 62% of HR

professionals still think the most effective learning and development methods are of the 'done to', trainer-centred variety – up from 56% in 2006.

As for those other more learner-centred methods, in 2006, 13% cited coaching/mentoring as the most effective learning method. In 2007, this drops to 10%. There are similar drops for 'experience of work itself', 'informal help from colleagues' and 'self-study', and the e-learning bubble has well and truly burst, with only 2% voting for it.

I can only echo Stewart and Tansley in their CIPD Reflection on the 2006 survey: 'Irrespective of claims to the contrary, formal and traditional approaches remain highly significant in learning and development practice.'

Allowing for differences in sample size and profile of respondents, statistical margins of error and differing questions year on year, we could optimistically say there has been a standstill, a stand-off, possibly a stand-down ... but certainly not a full-blooded, fire-bellied surge against 'done-to' training.

The why

So why? Perhaps a growing acceptance of blended learning? Despite 79% in 2006 saying that learning and development incorporated a much wider variety of activities, the 2007 results hardly represent a dizzying cocktail. Rather, the recipe remains dull, outdated and diluted.

Only 9% frequently use job rotation, secondment and shadowing, or coaching by external practitioners, 12% mentoring and buddying, and 18% internal knowledge-sharing events, compared with 81% who frequently use on-the-job training. As for action learning (described by Bones in his 2006 Reflection as: 'one of the most

powerful development techniques available'), we see non-users increase from 44% in 2006 to 52% in 2007.

So, little change in the actual means of learning delivery as yet, but there are high hopes that all *will* change. Ironically, that optimism hasn't changed either.

In 2006, 80% said they were investing time, resources and effort into achieving a coaching culture. In 2007, only 6% identify the introduction or extension of coaching as their biggest change in learning and development methods.

Unperturbed, 73% see an increase in coaching by line managers in the next few years, and well over half predict an increase in mentoring, buddying, internal knowledge-sharing events, job rotation, secondment and

Current rates of conversion suggest 'talk and chalk' trainers are unlikely to be crushed by a stampede out of the classroom.

shadowing. Pity we didn't ask how big, or small, that increase will be. Current rates of conversion suggest 'talk and chalk' trainers are unlikely to be crushed by a stampede out of the classroom.

So... talk of a sea-change I take with an ocean of salt. Those foreseeing an increase in usage far outweigh those predicting a decrease for *all* learning activities, bar none. Even for formal courses: 22% expect an increase, only 7% a decrease. The picture's rosy – we don't just expect a lot more learner-centred stuff, but more learning of every shape and hue. And seemingly regardless of whether we think it really effective: 67% confidently predict an increase in e-learning, dwarfing the 2% who think it the most effective means of learning.

Perhaps the current stagnation is due to HR still struggling with that 'our voice isn't heard around the board table because we're out in the corridor, shouting through the keyhole, with the fire alarm going off, laryngitis and actually no keyhole' problem.

Yet only 21% say they have no involvement in determining their organisation's learning and

development strategy and, in 81% of organisations, when overall strategy is being developed, the learning and development implications are considered either 'very' or 'quite' important. In addition, funding for learning and development looks fairly stable. So we can't claim that, due to budgetary constraints, the light at the end of the tunnel has been switched off.

Perhaps the *plus ça change* (the more things change, the more they stay the same) is due to that perennially popular HR hurdle: the lack of line manager buy-in. But 74% of respondents say line managers have taken greater responsibility for learning and development in the past two years, while 77% have line managers who take learning and development seriously. Therefore three-quarters of respondents surely have no excuse for not gaining buy-in.

So perhaps the answer lies within us. You don't have to be Hercule Poirot to smell something a little fishy, or schizophrenic, in all this. We say we're more empowered, more involved, more than ever considered when organisational strategy is developed. We say we've got considerable line management support, with managers themselves taking greater learning and development responsibility. We say we've no less budget to spend. And we keep saying things will change. And they don't.

Are we just eternal optimists continually thwarted by cruel fate, or everyday ephemera? Or stunned by the unexpected empowerment and vast opportunities into temporary (edging dangerously into semi-permanent) inaction? Are we deluded, displaying displacement activity worthy of Hamlet? Or simply incompetent? Or do we just say what we think the CIPD wants to hear, send it off, and then carry on regardless?

If we've got the same budget and increasing support, shouldn't we be leveraging that? Ninety-six per cent say line managers are 'important' or 'very important' in supporting learning and development, but only 40% of organisations train more than a minority to do so. Similarly, while 73% predict an increase in coaching by line managers, only 19% train more than a minority to coach. Well, who's responsible for empowering such training? We are. At present, we might just as well place an ad: 'Telepaths wanted. You know where to apply.'

Or do we suffer from a lack of time? Sixty per cent cite this as the biggest barrier to learning in their organisation. Well, we're obviously not making the business case in a compelling, actionable, understandable and irrefutable way. At present, we seem to be selling hearing aids by phone and wondering why our best prospects don't answer.

At present, we seem to be selling hearing aids by phone and wondering why our best prospects don't answer.

The wherefore

We can't wait for success. We have to go ahead without it. A turtle only makes progress when it sticks its neck out. Either we admit we're happy with the status quo and stop pretending the future ought to be any different, or we make the business case for change. Organisational learning is not only desirable but essential for business survival: it's a jungle out there and the animal that doesn't learn gets eaten.

The key, I believe, is to make the potentially 'fluffy' into something tangible and beneficial, selling the 'so what', not the 'what', using the language of business, not HR jargon (Guest and King 2001). HR has a crucial role to play in the enrichment of individuals and the growth of the organisation. Consequently, it's negligent to jeopardise that through use of the latest HR buzzword that leaves us dead in the water before even surfacing.

Make the connection for your internal client between what you're proposing and what it will deliver – for them. Focus on one or two selected activities – those you consider 'quick wins'. Prove the benefit of each, then move on to the next. The best way to eat an elephant is bite by bite, and we have quite a mammoth to digest. This doesn't mean approaching

Make the connection for your internal client between what you're proposing and what it will deliver – for them.

learning and development piecemeal, but systematically and flexibly. Starting small and proving it works before moving to the next wave will strengthen our chances of long-term success.

Strategies take on value only as committed people infuse them with energy (Selznick 1957). The crucial importance of line managers to successful HR implementation is documented in a weighty and worthy library – from Storey's 'soft HR' (1989) to Purcell et al's unlocked 'black box' (2003). HR is too critical to the core activities of an organisation to be left to HR alone. However, as only 6% of organisations reward managers for developing their people, no wonder it's not top priority for the other 94%. So, to achieve 'profound change' (Senge et al 1999), we need to specify 'what's in it for them' and make sure we then deliver it.

And, finally, could I humbly counsel the learning and development community to manage its own expectations of what is achievable and by when? Incremental organisational change is entirely possible. Miracles take a little longer...

Implications for practitioners

- If you're happy with the learning methods you currently use, and they have the desired organisational impact, fine. Don't be ashamed to stick with the status quo and avoid the latest fads. Likewise, don't shy away from keeping abreast of new developments, assessing their merit and being prepared to incorporate them into your plans where appropriate and beneficial.
- If you're not happy with the status quo, identify which learning methods are most likely to have a real impact, at the organisational as well as the individual level. Be clear what that impact is, and then sell the benefits, not the features, of the recommended method – meaning, sell the 'so what', not the 'what'. Make the connection for your internal client between what you're proposing and what it will deliver.
- Make the potentially 'fluffy' into something tangible and beneficial, using the language of business, not HR jargon. Take 'learnings', for example, which even the Microsoft Word spellchecker, for once quite rightly, rejects. 'Learning' is a verb or a singular noun, not a plural one. What's wrong with saying 'what you'll learn and then be able to do differently' instead of 'the key intended outcomes and transferable learnings'?
- HR is too critical to the core activities of an organisation to be left to HR alone. Make sure line managers have people development as part of their job descriptions and are recognised and rewarded for proactively owning responsibility for it. Keep thinking 'what's in it for them?' They do.

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