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Learning in the flow of work

Explores what learning at work means in an organisational context, the theories behind it, and the strategic and practical issues involved

Introduction

When undertaken effectively, learning supports organisational strategy, performance and bolsters workplace skills. Theories encouraging employee learning have evolved considerably over the past decade, and employers need to have a working knowledge on emerging insights into how people learn.

This factsheet looks at what 'helping people learn' means in a workplace context, focusing on the economic importance of workplace skills and the tangible ways employers can measure the skills and capabilities of their workforce. It signposts evolving theories on supporting learning, looking at the move away from training to learning. It also considers the strategic and practical issues in helping people learn and concludes by looking at the extent to which learning initiatives are effective in helping people to learn.

The CIPD is at the heart of change happening across L&D, supporting practitioners in providing insights and resources. We are proud to be at the 'epicentre' of this changing world of L&D.

What is learning in the flow of work?

'Learning in the flow of work' is a term first coined in 2018 by Josh Bersin. In Driving performance through learning, Lancaster describes it as 'learning accessible during work in the workplace environment'. He also offers a definition of 'learning in the moment' as learning undertaken without any disruption to the work activity. It requires practitioners to design and facilitate learning close to the workplace which needs new thinking and tactics, as discussed in our learning in the flow of work podcast.

Supporting individuals and groups in learning is an essential part of an organisation's

strategic human resource management. However, traditional models which use appraisal forms to identify learning needs can delay employees from accessing vital learning. Recognising where learners can get learning materials and online resources at the time they're needed is central to learning in the flow. Numerous topics can be accessed online so when the L&D team curate material, they must select carefully. Curating content is one of the skills demanded of L&D practitioners, as found in our Learning and skills at work survey.

For example, take a situation where some employees need to use pivot tables in spreadsheets. In the traditional approach, people would be allocated a place on a course that covers a range of spreadsheet skills, including pivot tables. Within learning in the flow of work, the L&D team could identify relevant online videos or infographics to share with those who need to learn. The videos can be accessed many times 'in the flow' of working with pivot tables, until the employee feels confident.

Not all learning needs can be met through learning in the flow. The task for L&D professionals and the organisation is to decide where this way of learning would best add value and reduce time away from the job.

There are other definitions and nuances with learning in the flow, and not all commentators agree on definitions. We've provided a few different links in the further reading for you to explore. One of the key areas of difference focuses on how much the individual's regular work is disrupted in order to learn, or whether the work itself is considered a learning activity.

Learning and development is an important part of our new Profession Map which features learning in the flow of work within its standards.

Why do we need to discuss learning in the flow of work?

IIn the context of the workplace, learning needs to be specifically designed to support the organisation's strategy. Facilitating and accelerating learning for individuals or groups to achieve organisational goals is critical for success. Our learning cultures research shows that this type of learning can help embed a positive learning environment.

Economic importance of workplace skills

Given that high levels of workforce skills are critical to business productivity and economic prosperity, supporting learning in the flow of work is high on the agenda of policy-makers and employers in many parts of the world. For organisations, the skills of the workforce are vital to meet current and future business demands. For individuals, skill levels help to

determine their employment and earnings potential.

To improve a country's skills profile, it's not enough to simply focus on pre-employment education and training. It's also crucial for employers to continually invest in and develop the skills levels of their employees through methods such as on-the-job training, in-house development and coaching. Read our factsheet on skills development in the UK.

Driving performance and productivity

The focus on organisational performance comes from various sources:

- The nature of work is changing with disruptive approaches undermining previously successful business models and past achievements no longer guarantee future success.
- Globalisation and technology are forcing organisations to embrace new competition and complex challenges.
- The workforce is at its most diverse with the greatest age range of workers than at any time in history resulting in a variety of needs.
- Employees are demanding more flexible working.
- People are moving to different jobs and employers more often, creating a constantly evolving workforce.
- The need for fixed geographic workplaces is challenged by dispersed staff who must be supported to work and interact using virtual and online solutions.

Emerging learning approaches

Our research on L&D practice consistently shows that three themes are crucial in both helping people learn and driving organisational performance:

- social and collaborative learning
- digital learning and training delivery
- coaching and mentoring.

These changes raise the challenge of new skills needed by L&D professionals particularly around digital abilities in delivering virtual classrooms, developing digital content and supporting learners online.

Shift from instruction to interaction

The move from less instruction to greater interaction has been embraced by a number of organisations. This means that interaction with the job, the organisation, colleagues, customers and suppliers is increasingly a feature of learning – enabled by social technology and increased awareness of a broader range of learning sources.

Availability of social collaborative apps can also help employees to learn in the flow of work. Products such as MS Teams, Slack, Trello and Google hangouts can facilitate informal group learning when faced with new challenges.

This changes the skills needed in an L&D professional from 'sage on the stage', creating and presenting learning, to a 'curator-concierge' model in directing learners to excellent existing learning content. This is also a shift in mindset as well as skill set. Our factsheet on evolving learning and development practice has more on these trends.

Applying latest research in learning

Research is continually advancing our knowledge of how the brain works and what that means for L&D practice. Our learning theories factsheet looks at the changes in thinking around the psychology of learning including recent criticism of key models for being, amongst other things, too simplistic and not resulting in consistent learning gains. It also examines some key models which apply neuroscience to learning.

Strategic and practical issues in helping people learn

A range of strategic and practical issues need to be considered when implementing an organisational strategy or introducing techniques to support learning in pursuit of business objectives. Our podcast Aligning L&D with business objectives and emerging practices explored this in detail.

Learning and development strategy

Given that an effective learning and development strategy is important to business success, it's essential to regularly review and assess L&D programmes to find out how well they support that strategy. The success of any L&D strategy also usually depends on how closely it's aligned to an overall business strategy and how much senior stakeholder support there is, plus the agility to move quickly in line with business needs.

Identifying performance gaps

An important initial step when implementing development activities is to clearly identify learning needs and performance gaps. The response from L&D professionals to these should be a major focus of the L&D strategy. The challenge now facing L&D is having the ability to respond to the needs quickly enough. This is no longer an occasional activity but a 'live' and active part of supporting agile learning within changing workplace scenarios.

Barriers to supporting learning

An issue identified by our Helping People Learn research programme in the early 2000s is that many key problems associated with L&D appear at the operational level and may therefore be difficult to solve through policy statements. Subsequent research, including our work on learning cultures, has helped show how this can be tackled through methods including performance management and involving line managers in supporting learning culture.

Performance management

Performance management involves establishing a culture in which individuals and groups take responsibility for the continuous improvement of business processes and of their own skills, behaviour and contributions. Providing a supportive environment to help people learn is therefore an essential part of any performance management programme. Tied into the performance gaps mentioned above and the need for agility, reviewing frequency of performance management can be increasingly important.

Role of line managers

As with implementing any HR or L&D policy, the role of line managers is critical in helping people learn and the influence of this group is frequently highlighted in our research. Managers are typically involved in determining L&D needs and may crucially influence organisational culture in respect of supporting learning. Increasingly their role, via coaching and permission to learn, can impact on the success of learning and become more involved in people development.

Updated thinking on learning styles

In the early 1980s, psychologists Peter Honey and Alan Mumford developed a learning styles classification based on the work of David Kolb. Through a Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) they suggested that individuals have 'preferred ways of learning' and they identified four 'styles'. They suggest that a learner aware of their preferred style can identify learning approaches that will be most effective for them, and L&D practitioners can design and deliver learning that can best accommodate learner needs. Honey and Mumford's learning style theory has been widely used by L&D practitioners and educationalists.

However, in their 2004 publication Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning: a systematic and critical review, Coffield and colleagues found insufficient empirical evidence to support the theory.

The concept of assigning personal preferred learning styles is now widely accepted as too

simplistic and therefore unhelpful, although the general approach of enhancing learning engagement through a range of methods remains useful.

Building ownership in learning

In our research on performance and learning, we asked our Leaders in Learning community to share their insights on how to build ownership – see their top tips infographic. Their top three were:

- Link goals to the needs of the role and performance discussions.
- Goal setting and monitoring should be an integral part of one-to-one meetings
- Make goals objective not subjective.

How effective is learning in the flow?

When reviewing the impact, transfer and engagement of learning in the flow, it's important to connect with performance goals and targets within the employee's workplace. Learning in the flow, by nature of being accessed at the time of need, can be extremely effective. However, it can't be measured in the same way a course is measured.

Approaches to learning and development evaluation involve the formal or informal assessment of the impact and effectiveness of any training and learning provision. In most organisations there's a focus on the reaction to the event (the input, for example the quality of course content and presentation). It is harder to monitor learning in the flow of work in the same way. A better approach maybe to use data and insights through a case study method (for example identifying improved skills/knowledge or enhanced productivity/profitability).

Effective learning demands a range of approaches with learner needs and preference placed at the top of the choice of a design and delivery method. For more on the wide range of ways of learning, go to our learning methods factsheet.

Further reading

Books and reports

BEEVERS, K., REA, A. and HAYDEN, D. (2019) *Learning and development practice in the workplace*. 4th ed. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

ILLERIS, K (2010) *The fundamentals of workplace learning: understanding how people learn in working life*. London: Routledge.

LANCASTER, A (2019) *Driving performance through learning*. London: Kogan Page

PAGE-TICKELL, R. (2018) *Learning and development: a practical introduction*. 2nd ed. HR Fundamentals. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

Visit the CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

DAM, N. (2013) Inside the learning brain. *T+D*. Vol 67, No 4, April. pp30-35.

FINCH, S. (2019) Should your employees be learning as they go?*People Management* (online). 12 December.

JENSEN, M. (2012) Engaging the learner. *T+D*. Vol 66, No 1, January. pp41-44.

MANUTI, A., PASTORE, S. and SCARDIGNO, A.F. (2015) Formal and informal learning in the workplace: a research review. *International Journal of Training and Development*. Vol 19, No 1, March. pp1-17.

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Podcasts

GOTTFREDSON, C. Workflow learning: The Learning and Development Podcast 33. Looop.

WISE, G. Point of work: The Learning and Development Podcast 36. Looop.

This factsheet was last updated by David Hayden.