Where companies go wrong with learning and development

Companies need to make sure their employees are learning the right things at the right time for the right reasons — and that they retain what they learn.

By Steve Glaveski – Harvard Business Review

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Organizations spent $359 billion globally on training in 2016, but was it worth it? Not when you consider the following:

- Seventy-five percent of 1,500 managers surveyed among 50 organizations were dissatisfied with their company’s learning and development (L&D) function.
Seventy percent of employees report that they don’t have mastery of the skills needed to do their jobs.

Only 12% of employees apply new skills learned in L&D programs to their jobs.

Only 25% of respondents to a recent McKinsey survey believe that training measurably improved performance.

Not only is the majority of training in today’s companies ineffective, but the purpose, timing and content of training is flawed.

Bryan Caplan, a professor of economics at George Mason University, says in his book “The Case Against Education” that education often isn’t so much about learning useful job skills, but about people showing off, or “signaling.”

Today’s employees often signal through continuous professional education (CPE) credits so that they can make a case for a promotion. L&D staff also signal their worth by meeting flawed key performance indicators, such as the total CPE credits employees earn, rather than focusing on the business impact created. The former is easier to measure, but flawed incentives beget flawed outcomes, such as the following:

**WE’RE LEARNING AT THE WRONG TIME:** People learn best when they have to learn. Applying what’s learned to real-world situations strengthens one’s focus and determination to learn. Today’s employees often learn uniform topics, on L&D’s schedule, and at a time when it bears little immediate relevance to their role — and their learning suffers as a result.

**WE’RE LEARNING THE WRONG THINGS:** Want to see eyes glaze over quicker than you can finish this sentence? Mandate that busy employees attend a training session on “business writing skills,” or “conflict resolution,” or some other such course with little connection to their needs.

**WE QUICKLY FORGET WHAT WE’VE LEARNED:** Like first-year college students who forget 60% of what they learn in high school, studying merely to get the CPE credit suggests that employees, too, will quickly forget what they learn. In the 19th century, the German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus found that if new information isn’t applied, we’ll forget about 75% of it after just six days.

Incorporating new learning into your work is one way to retain knowledge. Another is spaced repetition. Originally proposed by the psychologist Cecil
Alec Mace in 1932, it refers to spreading learning out over time (material should be reviewed in gradually increasing intervals of roughly one day, two days, four days, eight days, and so on). This approach takes advantage of the psychological **spacing effect**, which demonstrates a strong link between the periodic exposure to information and retention. Studies show that by using spaced repetition, we can remember about 80% of what we learn after 60 days — a significant improvement.

Today’s fast-moving business landscape calls for organizations and their people to adapt to changing circumstances rapidly, and to always be learning. Lean learning, which pays homage to Toyota’s lean manufacturing system, stresses using effort only when it’s needed, improving results and cutting waste. It’s quick and affordable, and provides employees and organizations with an immediate capability update.

Lean learning is about: learning the core of what you need to learn; applying it to real-world situations immediately; receiving immediate feedback and refining your understanding; and repeating the cycle. Like lean manufacturing and the lean startup before it, lean learning supports the adaptability that gives organizations a competitive advantage in today’s market.

Here’s how to apply lean learning:

**THINK 80/20:** Tim Ferriss, the author of the “4-Hour” book series, is an advocate of a lean learning method he calls DiSSSCaFE. He suggests identifying the minimum learnable unit and applying the Pareto Principle. If you want to learn Japanese, focus on the 20% of words and phrases that show up 80% of the time. Then apply what you learn in actual conversations with Japanese speakers as frequently as needed.

**APPLY LEARNING TO REAL-WORLD SITUATIONS:** At Collective Campus, we don’t just teach executives a specific innovation methodology. We first ensure that they can actually apply the methodology internally, and we request that they bring real-world projects to workshops so that we can apply what’s learned in real time, shorten the feedback loop, deliver results and encourage “aha” moments.

**LEVERAGE GUIDED LEARNING:** Rather than provide training at specific intervals, guided learning embeds continuous learning into a live application. Think screen pop-ups that support rapid, context-sensitive, personalized learning. This is especially applicable for functional leads,
employee onboarding, cross-functional teams, information technology and end-user training.

**PERSONALIZE CONTENT:** Using today’s technologies, you can personalize training so that it adapts lessons based on employee performance, tailoring content to every employee’s needs, learning style and delivery method.

**PROVIDE ONGOING SUPPORT:** Providing employees with further support after a learning session via a combination of instant messaging, voice messaging and chatbots ensures that they can apply learning to specific challenges.

**ACTIVATE PEER LEARNING:** When your employees want to learn a new skill, they typically don’t Google it or refer to your learning management system first; *55% of them ask a colleague*. When you account for the fact that humans tend to learn as they teach, peer learning offers a way to support rapid, just-in-time learning, while strengthening the existing understanding your employees have about concepts. It could be as simple as establishing an online marketplace, or periodic peer-learning workshops, to connect employees who are willing to teach specific skills with colleagues who want to acquire such skills. Encouraging peer learning by incorporating it into performance reviews can ensure that employees continue to invest time in the program.

**OFFER MICRO COURSES:** Give employees bite-size learning opportunities, which can take the form of digestible, hourlong courses on topics of immediate relevance.

To begin practicing lean learning, organizations need to move from measuring CPEs earned to measuring business results created. Lean learning ensures not only that employees learn the right thing at the right time for the right reasons, but also that they retain what they learn.

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