

Innovation in Learning Drives Workforce Productivity

2011 ESI Learning Trends Report

According to The Economist, if the 1990s was the age of abundance, then the 2010s may well be the age of scarcity. In both the private and public arena, the order of the day is trimming waste, tightening budgets and identifying efficiencies to 'do more with less.' In this lean environment, how do leaders responsible for learning programmes adjust and adapt their human capital initiatives?

To assess the direction of training and performance improvement programmes for 2011 and beyond, ESI International conducted a global learning survey directed at a cross-section of commercial and government leaders.

Overall Learning Trends

Lean Workforce

ESI's findings confirm that three years of global economic stress have pushed organisations to maximise the productivity of their employees and, as budgets tighten, to make strategic decisions on trimming spending in a way that does not compromise future growth.

According to respondents, the recession has forever changed the makeup of their employee base. Commercial and government organisations now operate with a lean workforce, where employees, regardless of level, must have the capability to lead and execute work across cross-functional teams.

Workforce as the Primary Investment

Top performing organisations have identified their workforce as the primary investment that can produce a greater return and higher quality output, even as overall resources and spending are reduced. To invest in their people, companies are focusing their training dollars on programmes that produce measurable results and lead to demonstrated business improvement.

New, Targeted Approaches to Learning

In order to maintain a competitive edge, best-in-class organisations are adopting new approaches to learning. These businesses expect to continue their investments in innovative, multi-modal learning, but will also devote further resources towards the development of leadership skills and business capabilities within communities of technical professionals.

"Amidst the economic uncertainty, one maxim holds true: Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

~John F. Kennedy

Leading organisations are also adapting their learning programmes to capitalise on advances in technology, including just-in-time learning applications that can keep pace with an evolving workforce demographic, which includes tech-savvy younger entrants.

Further, survey respondents reported that targeted and highly-relevant learning programmes are essential to support the achievement of organisational priorities, maximise resources and enhance workforce effectiveness.

Recognising that training and development budgets are under strain and scrutiny, survey results validate that innovation and flexibility in learning content and delivery, coupled with a results-orientated approach, are critical components for effective 2011-2012 learning initiatives.

Looking at the Numbers—Trends in Learning

The Learning Trends survey results confirm the changing requirements of successful performance improvement initiatives, as respondents noted the following priorities for the achievement of positive learning outcomes.

- Overall and overwhelmingly, organisations report that innovative learning solutions (70 percent) are needed to accomplish their business objectives.
- Regarding professional development solutions, the majority of organisations report that their learning programmes must evolve and support a variety of learning modalities (71 percent) and be delivered through blended solutions (57 percent).
- Respondents expect to see tangible results from their training investment. Sixty percent report that the organisational priority to measure the business impact of learning will increase, while over half (52 percent) confirm the requirement to develop effective business cases for learning investments.
- When asked where they expect to see the greatest business impact of their learning investment, the majority of respondents (64 percent) expect that training dollars and outcomes will translate into increased workforce productivity.
- Fifty-three percent of organisations indicate that fostering and encouraging leadership skills in employees is an important area of training investment, coupled with a strong requirement to allocate funds to building business skills/acumen (40 percent) for technical professionals.
- Nearly half of respondents (49 percent) reported that total learning and development budgets are expected to remain the same in 2011, while a smaller segment plans to increase its learning and development budgets (12.5 percent).

Key Strategies for Shaping Tomorrow's Workforce

Based on ESI's experience, client engagements and further validation through survey results, organisations should enact three main strategies to boost workforce productivity, offset strained resources and prepare employees, at all levels, to be effective across the project or programme life cycle.

1. LEARNING PROGRAMMES MUST BE MORE RESULTS-ORIENTED

Organisations require that learning translate into tangible and measurable business impact. The ability to transfer learning in the classroom to changed performance in the workplace is essential in the achievement of enhanced productivity.

Organisations must develop a supportive and complementary on-the-job environment, where management, business processes and supporting tools all permit the learner to apply new knowledge and skills immediately upon return to work.

Case in Point: Measuring Business Impact

A large investment and insurance company wanted to develop a programme that would result in "High Performing Teams." It was essential that any further training would demonstrate a return on investment and tangible evidence of a positive impact back in the workplace.

The client's use of a systematic approach to measure the job impact of learning programmes provided the statistical evidence needed to show the management team that the students who had undertaken learning not only learned new skills, but they could also quantify the exact areas where they expected to see a performance improvement.

To support learning transfer, training programmes should be comprised of action learning events, or 'learning by doing.' Action learning closes the gap between the experience an individual has in a learning environment and their ability to transfer the learning to their work environment.

Learning modalities (instructor-led, e-training, virtual, peer-to-peer, mentoring, social media, etc.) will be required to support business outcomes and develop the skills and behaviours needed on the job across a diverse workforce demographic. In this manner, the learning event will transition from theory to experiential learning, with employees working on real deliverables in the classroom.

Further, organisations are demanding quantitative measurement tools to track business impact, and support the business case for continued learning investments, especially with budgets under scrutiny.

2. LEARNING METHODS MUST BE MORE FLEXIBLE AND CONTENT MORE RELEVANT

In today's economy, survey respondents are increasingly focused on maximising their training investments and seeking options that minimise down time, acknowledge different learning styles, and can be customised to meet specific business needs without sacrificing quality.

To achieve flexible and relevant content, respondents are deploying blended learning solutions that mix assets, expand beyond the classroom and deliver content when and where needed to compensate for limited training funds and the need to maximise a learner's time on the job.

Blended learning is a customised approach to addressing individual organisational priorities, combining a range of delivery modalities at all stages of the learning programme. Just-in-time tools, learning-on-demand and self-paced online learning are just some methods that organisations are utilising to ensure learning events are relevant and providing the right information at the point of need to enable an employee to perform effectively.

For best-in-class organisations, the blending of learning solutions is not simply offering a choice of modalities, but also takes into account content, learning styles, teaching techniques and learning environments, and aligns to specific learning objectives.

Therefore, a multi-touch, blended learning programme must:

- Support the learner's ability to recall and repeatedly apply the content in their work environment.
- Reflect and be tailored to support organisational methodologies, culture and technical readiness in order to assure an engaged and productive workforce.

Case in Point: Blended Learning

A U.S. Government agency developed an integrated approach to contracting training using a combination of web-based training, classroom instruction and practical exercises. In order to engage students across offices, generations and work groups, the agency developed a blended learning solution, with 35% of the programme deployed through web-based learning and 65% through instructor-led classroom sessions.

The modularised approach provided a rich, self-paced learning experience through interactive, engaging training events geared towards an individual's needs. Hosting a facilitated session after the self-paced learning was complete, allowed the content to be further reinforced through practice and application.

3. AN EMPHASIS ON LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT MUST INCREASE

To support global workforce productivity and agility, organisations report the increasing need to develop leadership capabilities in their employees and cite a growing priority to improve skills in stakeholder management, interactive communication and effectiveness in a cross-functional team environment.

Leadership is the human factor that binds a group together and motivates others in the achievement of objectives, but in a programme environment, high-performing teams are distinguished by their ability to influence, persuade, challenge and communicate difficult issues.

Organisations must:

- Equip the workforce with skills in critical thinking and business acumen to identify organisational priorities and design the appropriate responses within a business context.
- Support a culture of individual accountability to speed decision-making, ensure successful project outcomes and ultimately, to assure organisational effectiveness.
- Rapidly develop the capabilities of less tenured employees so they may manage and lead successfully to ensure continuity and productivity.
- Achieve a new level of team dynamics to create more integration and cohesion on projects and programmes, resulting in greater workforce productivity.

Case in Point: Leadership Skills

A large and growing insurance company needs to plan ahead, as leadership expects 50 percent of the workforce to retire within the next ten years. To attract and build new organisational talent, the company designed a new future leaders programme for high potential college graduates.

These new employees, as a part of their on-boarding, participated in a five-course, Business Analysis certification programme. This programme develops both the technical and nontechnical skills necessary to lead teams to successful project completion. As a result of this programme, the client achieved a high, entry-level employee retention rate and an impressive record in project success.

Conclusion

The ESI Learning Trends survey shows that while training budgets will largely be maintained, organisations are expecting more productivity from their workforce and both qualitative and quantitative measurement of the business impact from learning investments.

As such, training programmes must evolve and adapt accordingly; they need to be targeted, relevant, measurable, and engage the learner in nontraditional ways, and at the same time instil learners with a set of critical thinking and leadership skills necessary to move the entire organisation forward.

High-performing organisations will make smarter investments in their workforce by utilising innovative, nontraditional learning approaches to maximise workforce productivity and adapt to today's global economic realities.



To find out how ESI International can help your organisation implement innovative, results-oriented and measurable learning programmes, please contact ESI at enquiries@esi-intl.com or +44(0) 20 7017 7100.