

# Introduction

## Setting the scene

*‘Change happens at the speed of understanding.’*

RICHARD MERRICK

The central theme of this book is learning, technology and change. It examines the changes that occur where new technologies are used to support learning and development (L&D). It explores the extraordinary changes taking place in organizations, the proliferation of personal and social technologies in the workplace, and the new and emerging social and cultural trends but also recognizes the impact of inertia.

Ultimately, this book shines a spotlight on the changing role of L&D and how it requires constant impetus to accommodate the new methods, knowledge, skills, competencies, capabilities and literacies required to keep businesses competitive. It is about how professionals make sense of a world that is in a constant state of disruption. Digital learning – learning through the use of a variety of digital media – is a key trend that cannot be ignored and one that all organizations can harness if they pay attention to its constraints as well as its benefits.

## Inertia and impetus

Let’s stop for a moment and think where it all starts – formal education. Although this book is not about schools, they are nevertheless the incubation zone that shapes every employee who works in an organization. Many of the thinking patterns and behaviours present in an organization have their genesis in compulsory education.

Change in schools is something that is often feared and avoided, because teachers, like everyone else, are naturally anxious about any kind of change. Ironically, change is what schools set out to achieve within each and every student. Ironically, teaching is a conservative profession, and schools often find themselves in a state of inertia. Change can be disturbing, undermining the familiar and comfortable, replacing it with uncertainty and strangeness. Everyone wants to see change, but no-one wants to be changed.

Change can be stressful and challenges 'the way things are done'. Change questions our assumptions about knowledge, skills and learning and confronts our deepest values and beliefs. It takes time to adapt to new ideas. We avoid change if we can, because we become comfortable with what we know, the ways we do things and the manner in which others respond to us in familiar contexts such as working and learning.

In schools, the classroom becomes a comfortable, well-trodden place where teachers feel they have control over events. It is where they can directly manage the behaviour of their students and where uncertainty has largely been banished. Yet there is doubt whether traditional learning environments, and the methods they encourage, are preparing young people for the future. We need to ask similar questions about the training rooms and learning spaces of organizations. Change is clearly seen by some in the world of learning as undesirable and best avoided. This is possibly why some companies are doggedly holding on to their traditional training rooms, when in fact learning occurs everywhere, inside and outside of the organization.

And yet change often creates the impetus that is needed if organizations are to move forward and remain competitive. The role of change agents is central in any firm where change must be implemented, managed and sustained. My argument is that L&D professionals should be central to the change processes in their organizations.

Sometimes, L&D professionals find themselves thrust into this role because of expediency, the opening of new markets, the introduction of a new policy, a change in leadership, or simply because the economic, social or technical climate demands it. Change management is a difficult but necessary task that must be done when it is demanded, and the L&D department is in pole position to assume this important

role on behalf of the entire organization. L&D departments support and encourage learning, and change occurs at the speed of our understanding.

## Exponential change

Some argue that the current changes are unprecedented. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of technology. Computer scientist and futurist Ray Kurzweil believes that we are no longer seeing a linear progression but an exponential acceleration of change in society at every level. He also believes we are heading for a future where technology will dominate our lives and work (Kurzweil, 2005). Physicist Michio Kaku believes that although we cannot accurately predict the future, technology will be central to much of what we do (Kaku, 2011). There are others who argue that our past trajectories dictate our future. We will examine their claims and those of other key theorists and practitioners as the book progresses.

It is abundantly clear that disruption and uncertainty are now common and pervasive occurrences in most organizations. Many of the industries and occupations that dominated the job scene towards the latter part of the last century are now gone, or are in steep decline. New companies and jobs have replaced them, and many of these are technology based. We can expect that many technology dominated professions will in turn be replaced by other jobs yet unconceived, as we solve unexpected problems and meet new challenges, and as newer, more intelligent technologies pervade the workplace.

I have already claimed that L&D sits at the centre of this maelstrom of change. How are businesses responding to the rapid changes in society, and perhaps more importantly for this book, how are L&D professionals responding? The pace of change in many organizational environments is notoriously slow. As a result, new skills and competencies are being demanded by industry but are not always available when required.

This problem has its roots in the traditional education sectors. Schools continue to teach old 'just in case' curricula, where as many subjects as possible are crammed into the weekly timetable, and students are herded from one classroom to the next where they are

bombarded with facts in a compartmentalized manner. At school we learnt about simultaneous and quadratic equations and the differences between igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rocks – just in case we might need them in later life. Apart from referring to them in this book, I haven't needed them once. Are schools teaching the knowledge and skills that industry requires? Are young people ready to hit the ground running when they enter the world of work? Do schools and industry communicate effectively about these issues? Probably not. Such issues can present learning and development professionals with a significant challenge.

Every successful company relies on skilled, proactive and agile staff. Skills that were previously taught quickly become obsolete while new skills are always in great demand and short supply. Many new employees arrive in roles without the prerequisite skills for optimal performance, partly because of the content heavy 'just in case' curriculum taught in schools. And yet learning 'just enough' and 'just in time' is realistically the only way workers can adapt in a world of constant change. Our best survival strategy is to promote constant, relevant and authentic learning, within a personalized 'just for me' agenda. I dedicate an entire chapter to the exploration of personalized learning later in this book.

## Counting the cost?

But first, let's set the scene for organizational learning and development. Organizations need to decide whether they view learning and development as a cost or an investment. For many managers, the bottom line is whether L&D provides a 'return on investment'. But what does this mean, and how is it played out in reality?

Two senior managers were once overheard conversing in a boardroom. One bemoaned the cost of training, and asked 'What if we spend all this money on them, and then they leave?' The other manager looked at him and said, 'What if we don't, and they stay?'

While at college, I took a summer job working in a fruit canning factory on the outskirts of the market town of Hereford. Herefordshire is in the heart of England's fruit growing country, so the factory was ideally

located. With no training whatsoever, I was allocated to a production line, a moving conveyor belt where I was required to check the quality of the jars and cans of fruit as they slowly passed. This was easy, boring work requiring very little skill. During my second week at the factory, I was asked to do a different job, which involved making marmalade. It was made from pulped Seville oranges, which arrived in large metal cans, directly from Spain. I welcomed the change in scenery.

My new job, which was demonstrated to me by the foreman, was to grab a can of orange pulp, position it on a platform, open it with the blade on a large can opening machine and then dump the entire contents into a vat. When the vat was full, it was wheeled away to be turned into marmalade; a new vat arrived, and the process began again. ‘Mind your fingers!’ the foreman warned me, and then he was gone.

My ‘training’ complete, I launched into my career as a marmalade maker. Paddington Bear would have been green with envy. In a short while I became quite proficient at grabbing a can, opening it on the machine and then pouring it into the vat. This went well, and my confidence grew. Then I encountered a can that was considerably lighter than the others. It also seemed to vibrate as I picked it up, and I thought I could hear a faint buzzing sound. Thinking this to be a little strange, I shrugged and began to open it anyway. To my horror, as the top came off, thousands of fruit flies swarmed out and buzzed around the factory in a huge, angry black cloud, landing on just about everything. I could see grown men and women screaming as they fled for the exits. I quickly followed them as the entire factory floor was officially evacuated and production ground to a halt.

I’m not sure how much money the factory lost that day, but it cost them an entire day of downtime while the factory was fumigated and sanitized. It was a disaster that I wasn’t liable for because I had not been adequately trained. But that oversight in failing to inform me of all the possible problems of the job I had been allocated, cost the company dearly. It was a poor return on investment.

The point of the story is this: learning in organizations can be expensive, but lack of training, out of date skills and incomplete knowledge can be much more costly. Or, if you wish, ‘if you think education is expensive, try ignorance’. Lack of adequate training can cause loss

of motivation among workers, damage an organization's reputation, or completely ruin a brand. Good, effective learning is essential if the company aspires to move forward, remain competitive and become a market leader. Cutting the training budget is therefore a false economy. Promoting learning that can be applied immediately and authentically to the workplace will benefit everyone within the organization. It invests in the most important asset any business owns – human intellectual capital.

## Reading this book

This book presents case studies around specific themes and features interviews from around the globe. I conducted the interviews by email with some of the leading practitioners of workplace learning and educational technology. Each has a great deal of experience, and each has unique and personal views on the best approaches to creating learning organizations. I'm grateful for the time each committed to responding to my questions. Some of the interviews are presented verbatim, while others are paraphrased. Some feature both, in keeping with the format of the discussion.

I will also present and discuss some of my own research and analysis of learning and development, particularly around new approaches and the role technology can play. I will feature some new models of change, technology adoption and digital capabilities. Along with a narrative that connects all of these elements together, I hope to provide you with some ideas to ponder, theories and challenges to consider, and questions to reflect upon that you might decide to apply to your own professional practice.

Throughout the book I have tried as much as possible to avoid use of the term 'learners' to refer to recipients of learning and development. In most cases, I have used a variety of alternative descriptors such as 'colleagues', 'participants', or 'employees', which hopefully connotes a more appropriate level of collegiality and equitability.

If you read this book actively and continue to ask the questions it will inevitably raise, then I hope you'll gain some further insight into learning and technology in organizations that you can apply to

transform your workplace into a better, sustainable, more profitable and effective environment than it was before.

As you read through this book, it may help if you keep these four questions in mind:

- What can I learn that will never go out of date?
- How do I share that knowledge with my colleagues?
- How can I help to prepare my organization for a future that cannot be clearly predicted?
- How can technology help me to make that job easier?

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