The Learning Imperative

*Why learning should be the heart of your talent strategy*

by Karen Hebert-Maccaro

The pace of change in business and technology is fast, accelerating—and unrelenting. Just as companies must evolve to survive and thrive, employees *must* keep learning to keep up. And they’re up for the task. Today’s employees (especially, but not only, millennials) are motivated more by the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge than by hip perks, informal work environments, and even money. According to the Brookings Institution, millennials will comprise 75% of the workforce by 2020. Add to this the fact that the cost to replace employees is rising and the talent marketplace is getting stiffer, and you have a new strategic mandate I call the learning imperative. To meet this imperative, learning must move beyond its current state, which is too often outdated and irrelevant.

Employers, who spent $360 billion on corporate learning and development efforts in 2016, need to provide the *right kind of learning experience*
to support their people’s lifelong pursuit of upskilling and reskilling. How your business leaders and learning and development (L&D) team respond to this imperative will make or break your ability to recruit, retain, and develop the talent you need to build a successful business.

The Professional Skills Learning Framework (PSLF)

With much at stake, how should your company respond to the learning imperative? To start, let’s take a look at how employees acquire professional skills. Research on adult learning shows that we learn best when we are solving problems, engaging with others, monitoring our own learning, and doing so across contexts (home, work, and recreational settings). All true, but there’s one more critical factor: learning isn’t a one-and-done endeavor. At its very core, it is a progression that’s as unique as each learner. The journey from beginner to expert is anything but one-size-fits-all.

**Figure 1** is a model of how people acquire and develop the professional skills they use on the job (or to get their next job). Learners may begin at any stage, based on their current knowledge and skills. They may move through the stages at a fast or slow pace, depending on their level of commitment and the difficulty of what they’re learning. It’s possible—in fact, it’s rather common—for learners to slip from awareness back into identification as they encounter new material on a topic they must learn to keep up with the pace of change in technology and business. Think of these stages not as discrete points, but rather as “bands” of proficiency that learners progress through at their own rate and in their own way.

Typically, learners start with identification—think of this as the “what is” stage. Have you ever heard a new a term or phrase while in conversation at a party, then made
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a mental note to look it up, once you were back home? If you did, you likely learned enough to place yourself squarely in the identification stage of the proficiency progression. The next time you encounter that new term, you’d be able to hold your own in casual conversation.

To reach the second level of proficiency, awareness, learners must begin to understand the “why.” They deepen their understanding by exploring context, analyzing examples, and relating the topic to their own experiences. In the third stage of proficiency, fluency, learners master the “how.” In this stage, learners apply the information and knowledge they’ve gained to the work they need to do.

On the journey to proficiency, learners reach an important inflection point as they progress from awareness to fluency. They attain a state O’Reilly has defined as “Structural Literacy.” Learners who have structural literacy in a topic or field need a different approach to professional skills development than those at the identification and awareness stages.

Before achieving structural literacy, learners benefit most from higher-structure, lower-content learning environments. In our earlier party example, you simply need to define a phrase, i.e., you are at identification. You don’t need (or want!) to see every article, book, and dissertation published on the topic. Your needs are more general—what you want is a credible, understandable, and easily accessible answer.

Once you pass over the line into structural literacy, however, your learning behavior is likely to change. You know enough to sort and make sense of lots of differing perspectives and ideas around the topic. You’re building on your existing knowledge, filling in the gaps, and developing the fluency you need to succeed in the task at hand. Learners who are structurally literate need—and want—access to a deep and broad corpus of resources and opportunities to apply and refine their knowledge.

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of information. They don’t need a lot of structure, because they have a mental framework that lets them navigate the sea of information and ideas. They have highly specific needs and goals, and don’t want to be forced into a linear learning experience that starts at any point other than what they need to get their problem solved or job done. In fact, they often find step-by-step instruction annoying, and a waste of time!

The Professional Skills Development Framework (PSLF) (Figure 2) lays out how learners’ needs change as they gain proficiency and pass the point of structural literacy. As the PSLF illuminates, adult learners’ need for degree of structure and amount of content varies, depending on where they are in the proficiency progression—and their needs change significantly at the point of structural literacy.

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**Figure 2: Professional Skills Development Learning Framework**

PROFICIENT/HIGH PERFORMERS

- Use self-directed discovery for problem-solving, and linear instruction to acquire new skills.
- Require high-quality, relevant content with depth and breadth.

NEED THE FUNDAMENTALS

- Learn basics through comprehensive, sequential instruction.
- Require structured, highly curated content.
Applying the tenets of adult learning, such as ensuring that the learning is highly relevant to the learner’s needs and providing for self-assessment opportunities, is a must—regardless of whether the learner is in the high-structure, low-content stages of proficiency (identification and awareness) or the low-structure, high-content stage (fluency). However, learning strategies for these stages clearly should be different.

When dealing with learners in the identification stage, learning modalities such as short and focused workshops, text, or videos are likely to be effective. Visual mechanisms that clarify definitions, such as infographics or simple charts, are also helpful for these learners. Once learners transition into the awareness stage of proficiency, they benefit from learning modalities such as in-depth but highly structured introductory/intermediate text, in-person or online synchronous training sessions that allow for high engagement with an instructor/expert, and/or a series of structured, sequential videos. The learning strategy perhaps best suited for those in the fluency stage is performance support, which is any learning modality that is available instantly at the point of learner need. Performance support is often embedded in a workflow or immediately adjacent to it so that learners can move fluidly through their work with the appropriate learning support integrated and/or close at hand.

What This Means for L&D

As organizations and individuals strive for relevance and competitiveness in today’s fast-changing environment, learning (and therefore L&D) is a key asset. Employees must improve and reinvent as their jobs change in response to the company’s
strategic imperatives, and learning makes that possible. To ensure that employees can succeed at what their employer needs now (and tomorrow), line leaders, HR and L&D professionals must design learning experiences—and entire learning ecosystems—that are informed by the realities of how learners learn.

This includes recognizing that:

- **Learning environments need to be designed for multiple proficiency levels.** A corporate learning strategy that fails to understand the proficiency progression will fail to deliver the most relevant experiences for their learners in the most contextually appropriate ways. For example, delivering highly structured experiences aimed at developing fluency is likely to be unsuccessful. Delivering experiences aimed at an identification level of proficiency with too much content or not enough structure will also be problematic for learners.

- **There is a difference between how learners learn before and after achieving structural literacy.** When learners are in the identification and awareness stages of proficiency progression, they benefit from performance development efforts that are more structured (don’t confuse “more structured” to mean “must only be in traditional modalities like classroom training”—for example, video courses can provide the kind of structured sequence these learners need). When learners are in the fluency stage, they’re more likely to need performance support. They need less-structured experiences and access to content that’s both deep and broad. They often prefer content in modular form (i.e., that provides quick answers through easy search), as close to the workflow as possible, and in modalities that facilitate a non-linear learning experience.
Corporate learning strategies must contend with the realities of learning today and L&D teams must free themselves from the notion that formal learning (in-person or online) is their only purview. In fact, in most cases, formal learning won’t suffice for learners above the line of structural literacy. By embracing performance support or performance-adjacent learning tools, L&D can expand its relevance and influence inside companies.

Learning is not a static or linear act. More and more, it doesn’t start at a particular predetermined time and it doesn’t end on a schedule. It’s happening every day, all day, and is often embedded in the process of work, rather than being a “special occasion” away from the job. It’s customizable to the needs of the learner—ideally, the process is learner-driven. L&D leaders creating learning experiences and learning ecosystems need to not only recognize these realities, but embrace them.

The learning imperative is very real. The way a company or organization responds to this imperative may end up being one of the most critical contributors to its very success.

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