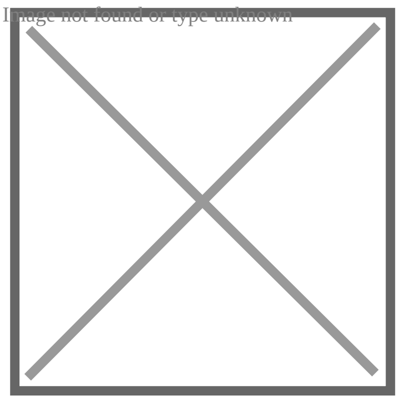

Can We Do a Better Job of Assessing Training Needs?

Description

“Oh, that’s something our people could really use, Sarah. I will see if I can identify enough people to make running a workshop worthwhile and let you know.”

When I first heard this sort of response from a client in L&D, it puzzled me. Surely, if this is an area that people need some development in, then there must be enough people to run a workshop?

But I soon learned to be sympathetic to my friends in L&D departments who are often subject to requests for training from a variety of sources:

- A specific team or unit wants to develop a particular capability
- A recent event in the sector or industry has made a topic the talk of business
- There’s been an internal conversation in L&D where an obvious gap has been identified in their offer
- A senior leader read an interesting article in HBR on a flight recently

That last one is true, in case you were wondering. In this environment, it’s practically impossible to prioritize or plan ahead. L&D is put in a difficult position: if they adopt a long-term, more strategic approach, they are accused of failing to be agile and responding to the business’ short-term needs. If they respond to every request, they run the risk of losing sight of the bigger picture.

This lack of alignment is frustrating for everyone.

Connecting Learning to the Business Model

As a learning consultant, I begin my engagements with clients in L&D roles by exploring their business model. Apparently this is an unusual approach. “Our learning providers usually talk about learning, not our business,” I have been told. But the most depressing response I have heard was, “Do you want to speak to someone in the business?” I thought I was. Their response spoke volumes about the disconnect I want to address.

Perhaps it's my training as an accountant, but shouldn't your business model be driving your L&D agenda? The logic of aligning business processes, outcomes, and objectives with the people development program seems undeniable to me. This would, surely, lead to far better-informed training and development investment choices?

Putting the Horse in Front of the Cart

So, how can a company better connect its people development to how it does business?

The first step is to ensure that your learning team understands your business. They need operational-level insight into how the business creates and captures value for its clients, its core processes, its supply chain and partnership arrangements, its plans for the medium-term, its risk exposure, and so on. L&D is a key part of a business; it needs to operate fully informed and be able to identify where it can contribute to the best effect. My colleague Matt Flynn's recent piece on commercial decision making is a great example.

Using Context-Relevant Data

The next step is to get data to find out where the training gaps are, where you need to prioritize training, and who you need to focus on, as Andrew Perkins' blog recently explored. Many businesses run a range of assessments as a matter of course. However, how many of these are tailored to the organization's operating model and context?

The need is to be able to get the training that is right for your business to the right people at the right time. These are very specific and context-relevant needs—your business is very different from other businesses, even those in the same sector. Generic assessments simply do not produce the results we need. We need assessments that can report on alignment at an organizational, team, and individual level.

Are context-relevant assessment tools available? In short, yes. One of the most commonly used tools are the 180/360 degree surveys. These are often used as part of the dreaded annual appraisal process, but they can be used in a far more accessible way. Imagine a 180-degree assessment focused around a particular set of skills and behavior or role, such as business partnering. They are simple to administer: individuals and managers respond to a question set that highlights the key skills we need to focus on.

Situational Judgement Assessments take context relevance to another level. Designed using your specific business model, they present realistic scenarios and assess both the respondents' judgments and their level of confidence. My colleagues Dr. Ian Stewart and Dr. Tim Smaby have written on the insight these assessments offer in more detail. The data these assessments produce allows the business to target and tailor learning while aligning with the commercial strategy and objectives of the business.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if all learning programs started with assessments that allowed the L&D budget to be focused where it is needed most? Furthermore, we were able to connect these assessments to the learning and track the learner’s progress—and the cost incurred?

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