In the Future:
Learning Will Reshape Our World
at Work, at Home, and at School

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PREPARING TODAY FOR SUCCESS TOMORROW

Earning and learning go hand-in-hand. In a business environment that is constantly growing and changing due to new innovations, advanced technology and market conditions, organizations must find new ways to enable rapid responses to the needs of their customers and the marketplace. This means having an adequately-educated workforce that will not only respond to evolving issues, but even foresee upcoming trends and proactively pursue these arising challenges.

Businesses that understand how learning can enhance productivity, enable development of employee potential, and empower employees and teams to innovate will be the businesses that profit well into the future.

FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

Companies committed to transforming into a learning organization must evaluate change in five dimensions: governance and management, design and delivery, technology, organizational alignment, and culture.

The first stage of change, governance and management, requires dedication from everyone in the company. An organization must develop an enterprise-wide view of learning and align learning investments with organizational priorities. Like most business plans, learning needs to start from the top and trickle-down.

Once a company is committed to learning on all levels, the other changes can follow.

The second change that must be implemented is the design and delivery of learning. Learning has been steadily evolving to meet the requirements of an on-demand world. Once an instructor-led, classroom-based environment, learning is now growing into a dynamic student-centric and highly interactive experience that can be customized to each individual.

While traditional teaching venues (classrooms, lectures, and manuals) continue to provide value for the individual, the team and the organizational learning, the marketplace now demands other means of learning. Learning is most effective when a combination of learning methods is blended together. This blended-
learning approach integrates traditional-learning methods with e-learning so they can be embedded into everyday activities. Most workers report they learned the most from on-the-job experience. Understanding the need to learn while working, many companies are using technology to embed learning into everyday workflow.

Technology is the third dimension of change and an increasingly important component of a successful learning program. Thousands of companies already use intranets, instant messenger programs, e-mail and PDAs, but many of the companies are not aware that these are perfect channels for training.

For those employees, who are frequently traveling, using PDAs and other mobile devices to learn, could create valuable training time that might otherwise have been wasted sitting in an airport. Lately, companies have adopted an on-demand approach to business, and thus, learning methods have to adjust to fit these fast-paced lifestyles and always be “on”.

Learners were once confined to meeting in a classroom, but by embedding learning into the daily workflow, an employee can log onto the company’s intranet to take an online course, post messages on a message board and even chat with colleagues thousands of miles away as they discuss a recent business challenge, but more importantly, collaborate on a solution. There are many different tools available to use for learning, but equally important, there is no specific schedule when to use them.

Just as a person can flip on a 24-hour news channel or click onto a Web site any hour of the day to get the latest news, learners will expect to do the same with their education. Learning will no longer exclusively be an appointment in a person’s date book but will rather increasingly become an ongoing process that is available throughout the day.

Businesses can set up portals designed to give users a single consistent interface – tailored by a job role — to access content, applications, business process and people at any hour of the day.

Using all of these technologies gives employees new ways to interact, even if they are on opposite sides of the globe. This leads into the fourth change that needs to be implemented into a successful learning program — organizational alignment.

Organizational learning enables geographically-dispersed teams to form around specific projects or priorities and disband when objectives are completed. Organizational learning means making the knowledge that is available in parts of the organization, consistently available for the organization as a whole.

The focus of learning needs to extend beyond the individual and instead unify teams and an entire organization, especially as companies are globalizing and thus need to reach a diverse group. On a larger level, organizational learning can help large corporations with multiple offices quickly align employees with changing organizational priorities and strategies, regardless of how often they change.

When learning is made directly relevant to an employee and his role in the company, and he understands how his performance is directly impacting the com-
pany, the employee becomes more engaged and dedicated to the company’s overall business objectives. Now the employee has his own learning objectives and goals, and also finds they are the same as his entire team, and organization.

The fifth change that needs to be made in a learning program is its culture. What is the company’s attitude and strategy to learning? If the company is committed to learning, so will its employees. An employee must feel empowered to shape his own learning experience. Empowerment not only means taking charge of one’s learning but also supporting the learning of others. The concept of “sharing knowledge” has always been a widely-used phrase in the context of organizational learning; however, this cannot be achieved without a major change in attitudes and priorities. It is one of the areas that companies must stress in order to make active sharing a company priority.

Evaluating these five dimensions of change prepare a company for the future of learning.

In the future, learning will not only be a tool to empower employees, but it will also be extended to suppliers and partners. Organizations committed to learning will understand that the speed of the supply chain will not go faster than the speed of their suppliers. Learning opportunities can help suppliers better understand an organization and address its needs more effectively. Similarly, learning can help build trust between partners as they can better understand and appreciate each other’s unique capabilities.

When discussing the future of learning, it makes sense to consider the future in general. Learning methods need to reflect the rest of the advancements being made in society, especially since younger generations will be the future learners in an organization. A new technology-savvy generation is entering the workforce. Everything from the Internet, an MP3 and TiVo has changed the way the youth conduct research, listen to music, watch television and learn. As organizations begin to adopt new ways to deliver learning throughout their workforce, they will become more prepared for the unexpected.

According to the father of modern management, thought leader Peter Drucker said, “The chief economic priority for developed countries is to raise the productivity of knowledge ... the country that does this first will dominate the twenty-first century economically.” This also applies to the micro-level of an enterprise as well. Employees who understand the priorities of their businesses as well as the necessary skills, knowledge and motivation to meet these goals will be able to help their companies succeed well into the future. Learning is not an option for those companies who want to see their profits soar but a must. A commitment to learning is an investment for the future.
Since the beginning of 2002, Dr. Richard Straub has the role of director of the IBM Learning Solutions Europe, Middle-East and Africa (EMEA). The mission of this role is to leverage the breadth of the IBM portfolio and partner offerings to provide leading edge learning solutions to this emerging marketplace. Before taking this role, Dr. Straub had the global responsibility for developing and implementing a learning strategy for one of the major global IBM units with 60,000 worldwide employees. As a learning officer, his responsibilities included the management and optimization of the organization’s investment in skills and learning. In addition, he oversaw management development programs for the organization. Dr. Straub is chairman of the European e-Learning Industry Group and the founding chairman of the Career Space Consortium. The e-Learning Industry Group is a newly formed body of leading e-learning industry players. Its objective is to accelerate the adoption of e-learning in Europe in cooperation with the European Commission and the national governments. Dr. Straub frequently presents lectures on international management, knowledge management, and organizational learning as well as speaking at numerous international conferences and to executive MBA programs.