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**Embedding Business Learning**

*The how, where, when, what and why*

*By Vanessa Gavan*



## Embedding Business Learning

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**Sending people on training programs is simple; making sure they apply what they learn to their jobs can be hard. Here's how to get ahead of the competition and make sure your organisation's investment in learning and development (L&D) translates into business results.**

According to some studies, just 10-40% of business training is used on the job<sup>1</sup>. Why? The answer lies with the how, where, when, what and why of business learning.

### How people learn

Whatever their role in your business, being asked to change behaviour or apply new skills can make people anxious. Attending a training course is not enough; to maximise the outcomes, you must support your staff before and after the program, provide them with opportunities to share the learning experience with their peers and monitor how effectively they apply their new skills.

### Where and when they learn

Formally-structured group training events conducted during business hours are time-consuming and can remove individuals from core business activities at busy times. If participants are thinking about the

backlog of work building up, they will not focus on learning. Self-directed learning options utilising new technologies provide more flexibility and create a collaborative community that helps to embed learning.

### What and why they learn

If participants are not clear about the program's value to themselves, their team and your organisation, they will not engage with it. This is especially true of programs teaching skills that are not immediately relevant to their role. By creating a culture where the importance of upskilling and knowledge is communicated, valued, supported and rewarded, you will increase the incentive for people to see continuous learning as a positive choice.

When clients ask how they can address these issues to embed learning in their organisations and minimise time to competence, we advise them to reconsider their learning and development strategy from ten perspectives.

### Ten ways to embed business learning

#### 1. Establish a learning culture

A learning culture sounds like an amorphous, academic concept, but it's grounded in pragmatism. Organisations that survive economic slumps and grow in booms are those that continually develop their people, products and markets. They identify problems and fix them, and they seek out growth opportunities and seize them. This will only happen if there is a learning culture: a working environment where the value of knowledge is understood, learning is rewarded, change is embraced and staff are empowered to challenge the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> Lessons Learned, Dr Harry J. Martin, Wall Street Journal ,14 December 2008

As a manager, this means encouraging your people to continue expanding their knowledge, not just for the job they have now, but for the position to which they aspire. Help them to regard learning as a productive use of time and mistakes as opportunities to learn. Work with them to develop an individual career development plan that aligns with their personal goals and with those of the organisation. Encourage them to ask questions and make suggestions. And make it clear that in your organisation, learning is directly linked to career progression.

## **2. Link knowledge to development**

There are several ways your organisation can demonstrate the connection between acquiring learning and getting ahead. One way is to reward an employee who has embraced new knowledge and skills with a higher role. This sends a clear signal that learning is an important part of the career path. Including learning opportunities and the company's willingness to support them in every discussion about an individual's career, performance and KPIs also provides them with the incentive to learn.

## **3. Offer contextual learning**

In a recent industry survey, more than half of those surveyed believed L&D activities were only somewhat linked to business strategy or not linked at all<sup>2</sup>. Yet the more learning is contextualised and tied to the participant's job and your overall business direction, the more relevant it will be and the more they will be motivated to learn. If your organisation can make these links so that critical learning is available at a person's moment of need, you will

create inherent "*teachable moments*" – learning that will stay embedded. The best way to do this is to start from a business outcome when planning learning and development experiences. Another important element is bringing learning programs to life with real-life experiences from your organisation and your industry by using case studies, observed scenarios and syndicate work on actual business projects.

## **4. Encourage individual planning**

By helping staff to form their own career development plan that includes upskilling, you are helping them to make smart choices about learning that is relevant to them. Realising that they are personally in charge of choices that determine their future is a strong incentive for most people to become proactive. Making it clear that your organisation will support appropriate choices with time off, funding or other support is a further incentive.

## **5. Make it social**

Today's technology makes collaboration and knowledge-sharing easy. Many people – especially younger workers – respond well to workplace wikis, online forums, Facebook pages, tweets, instant messages and collaborative software. Including these interactive networks in your learning strategy will provide a platform for participants to share information and opinions and to work together on group projects. They create supportive communities where there is a feeling of shared learning and taking a journey together. You can increase this sense of connection with face to face interaction through offline groups and forums.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2011 National Learning and Development Index, Australian Human Resources Institute

## **6. Create an institutional memory**

Each employee has unique knowledge about your organisation that you will lose when they leave. Furthermore, the silo nature of many organisations means successful solutions and new information are often not shared beyond the relevant group. Capturing, storing and cataloguing this knowledge as an online repository embeds the knowledge in your organisation instead of the individual, creating an asset that will pay dividends for years. For maximum success, present information in many ways to appeal to the variety of learning preferences, including data, FAQs, websites, white papers, models, video, audio, presentations, e-learning, journey pathways and case studies. You can further embed corporate learning and support your learning culture by featuring advice, information, customer interviews, executive opinions and success stories in your staff communications program.

## **7. Leverage clever technologies**

Emerging technologies are creating new ways to deliver learning and keep it fresh. For example, content management portals and online learning tools support self directed learning and keep content up to date. It is important that your HR department keeps abreast of new technologies and reviews whether they are relevant to your organisation. Support the delivery technology with collaborative networks and follow up strategies so people do not feel isolated or unsupported.

## **8. Provide pre- and post-program support**

Supporting people before and after they attend a learning program can make a big difference to how well they apply what they have learned. They should

start the program with a clear understanding of how the learning topic relates to your organisational goals, how they can use their new skills in their role and how this will support their personal advancement.

Afterwards, create an environment that offers follow-up and support and encourages them to try new ways of doing things. Line manager have an important role to play here; they can not only discuss how best to use the new skills, they can follow up and measure the outcomes so the results are clear to the participant and to your HR department.

## **9. Keep things moving**

Consumer expectations, demographics, technology, economies... everything is changing so rapidly today that organisational learning must constantly evolve if it is to stay relevant. Ensure your L&D team regularly reviews the programs on offer to ensure they remain relevant and surveys participants for feedback on how content and delivery could be improved. If your market is undergoing fundamental change, you may have to change the priorities for learning funding.

## **10. Lead by example**

A learning culture is led by – and can be destroyed by – senior executives and managers. You should not only buy into the idea of a learning culture and encourage your teams to adopt learning behaviour, but should model it yourself. By undertaking development courses and sharing the outcomes with your team, you will be demonstrating that learning is valuable and relevant at all levels of your organisation and every stage of your career.

## About the Author

*For over 15 years, Vanessa has consulted to a range of leading Australian and international organisations to enhance business strategies, improve executive leadership capability, redesign organisation structures and deliver operational performance solutions.*

*As an entrepreneur and business leader, Vanessa has lived through every business lifecycle and has refined her abilities to inspire, deploy and motivate people to achieve great things.*

*Vanessa is wholly and personally committed to ensuring every Maximus solution is insightful, agile and delivers real financial return.*

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