30 years in learning

THE JOURNEY FROM CLASSROOMS TO ECOSYSTEMS

September 2016 was an important month for me as it marks 30 years since, together with a dear friend, I started my first company. We provided computer training for end-users of software programs with names like Wordstar, Lotus 123, WordPerfect and operating system DOS, built by companies that have nearly all disappeared as independent software vendors. In the '90s we saw the programs from Bill Gates conquer the world. My company moved into the new era of software upgrades and Windows, with Word and Excel becoming the leading topics covered in our trainings. These were the GREAT days of classroom training where we delivered multiple days of basic, advanced and specialist training, with "refresher" training as the icing on the cake!

In the late '80s I started another company developing digital learning products, starting with the laserdisc, and then moving into CD-ROM and CDI (Interactive CDs). We produced interesting and very expensive learning solutions, but, without any real standards in this pre-Internet world, it was impossible to be profitable in these early days of e-learning. Thankfully, with nine locations and 60 classrooms, the classroom training company printed money until we moved into the new millennium when it all changed and the heyday of classroom training was gone!

In 2001 I started a new company that focused on supporting software users by providing an intelligent help system embedded in the software. Our initial focus was supporting large software implementations, starting with Microsoft Office migrations, and over time moving into SAP, Oracle, PeopleSoft and other large custom software implementations. Without knowing the term, we had entered a new world, now called Performance Support, and we had shifted from a pure focus on training to one focused on improving performance. In those days, however, we were limited to supporting software users.

My early years in this new world were focused on selling a performance support technology with a single purpose: helping software users be more effective. We had a great time, but over time I realized it was approaching learning in a very limited way. I was always selling a tool and eventually felt like I was approaching my customers with a hammer always looking for a nail. During this journey I met Bob Mosher and Conrad Gottfredson and we partnered to develop a much broader vision of supporting learners in all 5 moments of learning need. It was about using agile methodology to meet the needs of employees wherever and whenever they needed it. I started to understand that it is not about buying a

technology (a hammer) but instead defining the right methodology to truly support learners on their journey with a focus on the day-to-day moment where they have to "apply" their knowledge.

Through my own journey, I have learned that methodology comes before technology and that supporting people in their daily work is much broader than simply deploying a software platform. Only by first using the right approach can you select the right technologies. In most cases it is not a single technology but a suite of several relevant ones that form a Learning Ecosystem (a great term that Marc Rosenberg uses in his work). I'm now working with companies and achieving real interesting results by starting with the agile "5 Moments of Need" methodology to identify and address business needs. This is followed by solutions built with a suite of technologies, including Performance Support (supporting BOTH soft skills and technology skills), Adaptive Learning (supporting top-of-mind knowledge) and even cutting-edge Artificial Intelligence (AI) learning products.

In my current work I see many organizations starting to adopt the 70-20-10 model to move learning out of the classroom and into the workplace. But most of these organizations struggle with the 70 component when trying to convert "old" approaches and technologies, such as classroom instruction and e-learning, into "new" formats. It is what we call "old wine in new bottles" – cutting e-learning down to three-minute chunks, developing so-called blended training (and not blended learning) formats, developing micro-learning, social learning or even mobile learning – and is not the real answer to make the 70 work! Organizations need a complete new start, where the design and development of learning is based on addressing all 5 Moments of Need, starting with the "Moment of Apply." This more agile way of developing learning solutions will help your employees perform in a more optimal way.

Doing this right will enable the L&D department within your organization to truly support the "70" component in the 70-20-10 approach and will help you evolve from a traditional training organization to a much broader learning and performance focused organization. It will also align you much more closely with the line of business, as you will change the discussion from training-focused results to key performance indicators (KPIs) related to performance outcomes.

I know it's difficult navigating the current crowded world of learning technology vendors, who will all tell you that their technology is the answer to implementing 70-20-10 and successful workplace learning. I haven't seen one vendor that has built a technology that has it all, although I have seen most of these vendors claim that they do! In particular, large LMS vendors have a habit of claiming they can do it all. In the foreseeable future (the next 12 to 24 months) I don't see any way that they can play a role in supporting our workers at the moment of need with a "just enough/just in time" performance-oriented solution. At a recent conference on the future of learning systems, I really appreciated Elliott Masie's perspective on how the LMS will still be an important compliance-focused learning system, but mostly operating "behind the curtain." More innovative technologies will layer on top of the LMS, functioning as the true learning and performance systems enabling employees to thrive and succeed in a world of permanent change. Your LMS vendors will probably tell you that they have it all in their suite of products, but it is simply not true! Ask them about their integration options with the newest Adaptive Learning and Performance Support systems, preferably based on the upcoming xAPI standard. I hope they will have an integration-based, partner-focused answer for you, but to be honest I doubt it!

My advice to your L&D organization is to talk first to partners that put a strong combined learning and performance oriented strategy at the core of their approach for workplace learning. They should lead with agile design and methodology and prescribe appropriate technology based on the defined

outcomes. I believe that taking the right technology approach (in most cases a suite of technologies) is crucial for the success of your initiatives, but my strong advice is to put analysis and methodology first.

Looking back at my 30 years working in the learning space, I can reflect on three specific phases. The first 15 years building one of the top three training companies in the Netherlands were a lot of fun. The next 13 years building a leading IT-focused first generation Performance Support systems company were a challenging thrill ride. But these last two years, developing a more comprehensive and holistic approach to implementing workplace learning solutions focused on making the "70" or "Moment of Apply" a reality, have been the most rewarding. I truly believe that the fact that I now work based on a methodology first, technology second approach (and not just one technology, but a tool-box of appropriate technologies), helps me service my customers in the right way as they seek to implement successful workplace learning and performance ecosystems!

I want to thank all the learning and performance friends that have guided me over the past 30 years on this amazing journey!

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