Plugging the skills gap — areas of capability

Following on from Plugging the skills gap, this article looks at the steps organisations can take in four key areas of capability in order to plug skills gaps. If skills gaps are not plugged organisations will cease being successful, so it is vital that any useful advice is taken on board. Here, Judith Christian-Carter takes a look at what can be done in this regard.

Organisations that have "high performing learning cultures" also demonstrate an ability to overcome the challenges brought about by increasingly diverse, complex and challenging skills gaps, because they are already taking steps to stay ahead in four key areas of capability: transforming impact, driving learning agility, learning experience that matters and future focused people professionals. So, what are the steps organisations and learning and development (L&D) functions can take in each of these four areas in order to plug skills gaps?

Transforming impact

It is noticeable that organisations with high performing learning cultures (HPLCs) are twice as likely to be responding faster to changing organisational conditions than others. In turn they retain business, grow in today's corporate climate and increase their competitive advantage. A common feature of these organisations is that are developing an agile learning culture that guides self-determined learning. In particular, they are: 38% more likely than other organisations to report that self-determined learning is commonplace in their organisation and 43% more likely than other organisations to report that their people engage in self-development without any prompting.

It is the encouragement of self-determined learning behaviour, which is showing to be pivotal in these HPLC organisations with regard to skills acquisition and it is not hard to see why. Allowing and encouraging people to learn voluntarily using various means at

their disposal really does facilitate new ways of working and, in the process, acquiring new skills across the organisation.

However, self-determined learning is not a simple behaviour to encourage, particularly in those organisations which are reluctant to innovate and invest in creative learning programmes and solutions. This is where the L&D professional comes in by ensuring that learners are placed at the centre of the learning strategy, and by promoting diverse opportunities and access to learning.

Driving learning agility

Learning agility has been defined as an individual's ability to continuously "give up skills, perspectives, and ideas that are no longer relevant, and learn new ones that are" (*Mitchinson & Morris*, 2014). The emphasis is placed on a person's ability to adapt how they learn in accordance with a changing environment. If people hold on to redundant skills and expect their organisation to thrive then they will be disappointed.

However, by allowing individuals to engage with self-determined learning without being prompted, both they and their organisations are seeing benefits. Apart from organisations having a deeper understanding of their people, the major benefits are to the individuals themselves. People are happier in the workplace because they are feeling increasingly empowered and they feel motivated to learn.

These organisations also encourage self-determined learning by facilitating learning autonomy, where L&D professionals become enablers instead of facilitators and individuals take control of their own learning. They do this by:

• giving individuals the choice to access learning provision at any time

• giving individuals the choice to learn in places convenient to them

• using available support systems to promote self-reliance

• having people who know how to find the right information they need for their job

• giving people access to clear information on learning opportunities available to them.

Learning experience that matters

Here the focus is solely on the L&D function and its L&D professionals. In order to take onboard transforming impact and driving learning agility, L&D professionals have to ensure that all people are placed at the heart of the learning experience, otherwise self-determined/self-directed learning will not happen. Yet evidence suggests that in many organisations such an experience is not common.

It is more likely than not that some "disconnect" is currently in operation, where the perceptions of L&D professionals are at odds with those of learners. Such as:

- 48% of L&D professionals report that there is a reluctance by people to learn and work with new digital technology, yet **78%** of individuals say they are excited about using new digital technologies for learning

- 60% of L&D professionals report that there is a lack of skills among people to manage their own learning, yet **76%** of individuals say they are always pushing themselves to learn new things

- while many organisations believe that only formal learning and learning through doing are the most effective methods for learning, **91%** of individuals report that learning in collaboration with peers is essential for them!

So, not only is the use of technology important to learners, it is also a matter of L&D professionals working towards encouraging engagement with learning and self-sufficiency that is going to ensure individuals experience learning that matters.

Future focused learning professionals

The fourth and last area of capability in skills acquisition is focused solely on L&D professionals and the need to recognise that they may not be equipped with the skills (and knowledge) they need now in order to be successful in their role. Given the role L&D professionals perform in organisations, this is equivalent to the adage "physician, heal thyself"!

Essentially, L&D professionals will not be able to deal with any emerging skills gaps in their own organisations unless they first address the skills gaps within their own teams. Being able to facilitate self-determined or self-directed learning in an organisation does not require fewer skills, it actually requires new skills to be applied in different ways.

The skills L&D professionals require today are those which are concerned with the support of ongoing workplace performance, data analytics, implementing blended learning and learning strategy.

Some of the known critical skills gaps for L&D professionals are concerned with understanding learning and behavioural science, and modern learning approaches such as heutagogy (ie self-directed or self-determined learning). These gaps mean that many L&D professionals are stuck with traditional views of learning — such as focusing on classroom-based courses — and are unable to encourage self-directed or self-determined learning in others. L&D professionals "are lacking the skills and knowledge to encourage heutagogy and learning agility at scale and often fail to establish an engaging learning experience." (Towards Maturity, 2019*).

By addressing their own skills gaps first before trying to assist others in the organisation, L&D professionals will also be able to embrace and demonstrate "their role as evidence-based experts and guides" whereby they "can lead organisational learning and assist in overcoming the skills impasse from behind simply through facilitating and enabling a balanced approach." (Towards Maturity, 2019*).

Fit for the future

To conclude, it is clear that what worked in the past will not be sufficient for the future. There is a real "... need to put the human experience at the heart of whatever we do. Whether we need to move skills or people need to move their skills themselves, we need to create a dynamic ecosystem that can cope with our strategic needs, our alternative workforce (both inside and outside the organisation) and our diverse blends of learning." (Towards Maturity, 2019*).

* *Who Moved My Skills?* Towards Maturity, CIC Ltd, 2019