Building the Future

by Steve Mahaley

Three powerful forces are driving changes in faculty roles, changes in learners' roles, and changes in the learning content itself, and we had better pay attention.

•Two new generations of employees—"X" and "Y"—have entered our workforce in recent years, and they differ from Boomers in important ways.

•Advances in technology allow us to do things we couldn't do 10 years ago.

•Globally distributed businesses and the rapid pace of economic, social and political change require new levels of organizational agility.

This convergence—the rise of digital natives, new empowering technologies, and peculiar challenges facing global businesses—requires us to reconsider the design and delivery of educational programs. Learning can happen anywhere.

"how will we ever get our workforce educated and aligned with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors we need to be successful?"

We're not talking about a few fresh-faced kids in the mailroom. Digital natives—people who grew up with computers—have entered our workforce in droves while many of the digital immigrants are readying for retirement. These gamer generation and 'Net generation workers come enabled with a variety of skills and attitudes related to connecting—how they connect to each other and how they connect and use sources of information whenever and wherever they are. These workers will have been exposed to over 20,000 hours of television, over 10,000 hours of gaming, and over 10,000 hours of time on cell phones[1] and instant messaging before they ever graduate college or step into your office. They have MySpace[2] pages, have published videos on YouTube[3], and can reach out to a vast network of contacts at a moment's notice to find out just who wrote that song playing on the radio in your lobby as they await their interview with you.

Computing and communications technologies continue to morph per Moore's Law into smaller and smaller yet more and more powerful devices.[4] These devices allow the user to play music files, tag information for retrieval and sharing, and create and publish multimedia—all from a single, diminutive device that sneaks slyly into the pocket. Open, free, easily accessible tools for creating and sharing information in a range of formats have enabled a quiet revolution in the relationship between people and the world of the Internet: we are no longer mere consumers of information. We are the creators, authors, and editors of the networked world, and our identities are increasingly invested in this way.

As businesses, we struggle with what it means to connect across our offices, with developing a leadership pipeline, and with building capabilities to sustain our enterprises over time and through the storms of market change and the high waters of political, social, regulatory and economic events. The pace often has us on our heels and reacting. Even if we can divine the correct sources of knowledge and the appropriate course to navigate and manage change, how will we ever get our workforce educated and aligned with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors they (and we) will need to be successful?

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New Blueprints for Learning

We have an opportunity, in considering the forces at play, to create new blueprints for how, when and where learning happens. Traditional e-learning has had an underwhelming impact on organizational performance.[5] While it proved a great mechanism for measuring time-on-screen and fact retention for credentialing purposes, the link to organizational capability and behavioral change is murky, at best. Similarly, the leap required from classroom-based learning to integration and application at work is often too great without systematic and recurrent follow-up, and program participants often give up on what feels like a lonely and unsupported struggle to reach new ground. While we have done a better job of incorporating performance support systems and additional learning resources through online environments, new models must do more.

These new models should reflect the work context of our learners—their environments (physical and digital), their issues, their networks, their learning styles and the resources that will help them move from concept foundations, through concept exploration and on to concept application and feedback. Such models should be flexible to allow for modalities of learning that include web and classroom-based experiences, and should incite learning in an engaging, meaningful and supported way.

One example is to rethink what we currently call "blended programs." That particular blueprint typically includes a couple of classroom-based events combined with some elements of on-line learning—the notion being that the "blend" has to do with both face-to-face (necessarily synchronous and co-located) and distance (assumed to be asynchronous, and apart). With today's available technologies, we can instead think of the blend simply as a question of asynchronous and synchronous—what happens when the participants are together (wherever they are) and when they are apart. For example, participants can gather together on-line in a web conference and have a shared dialogue with the program sponsors, key faculty and other subject matter experts. They can have individual interactions on their own time with colleagues through discussion forums or wikis[6], and download podcasts of content to listen to or watch on their own time, in preparation for the next web conference or face-to-face session.

Another Dimension Heard From

Another example is to rethink traditional delivery modes for experiential learning. One opportunity we have now with immersive gaming environments and virtual worlds is to create a teaming challenge that draws participants together from wherever they are in real time to work together solving a problem in a shared, three-dimensional world. The beauty of these spaces is that they provide a visually and aurally stimulating context in which the learners share an experience, and these experiences can be tied to other forums for knowledge gathering and sharing. For example, participants could prepare for a teaming challenge that will happen in Second Life[7] by reading and discussing a related article online in advance, with facilitator feedback along the way. The day (or night) of the teaming challenge, coaches show up in-world to present the challenge and observe behaviors, gathering data for feedback during a debriefing session that happens through web-conferencing. Participants then are given the assignment to write up a reflection piece and publish that to a wiki. Sponsors read the reflection pieces and give feedback to the teams on their ideas.

These types of blueprints or models imply some pretty serious changes. Changes related to:

•People — their roles and capabilities required to be effective through a variety of technologies. Faculty, coaches, program managers will all need to create, exercise and hone their electronic presence, learning the various software and hardware devices and the best practices for using each.

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•Content — format and authorship as implied by the devices used for delivery and the roles of participants as creators of material to be shared. Participants will be able to create their own multimedia files for sharing.

•Process — what the flow of learning events looks like; the timing; and how the themes and core messages connect the various pieces together. Making smart choices about method (design of learning experiences) and modality (where and how the learner participates) remain paramount.

This is an exciting time for learning, in both the worst and best sense. Are you ready?

P.S. If you're not sure, it may already be too late.

1 Marc Prensky, Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants, 2001
2 http://www.myspace.com
3 http://www.youtube.com
4 http://www.intel.com/technology/mooreslaw/index.htm
5 Alexander Romiszowski, How's the E-learning Baby? Factors Leading to Success or Failure of an Educational Technology Innovation, 2004
6 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki
7 http://www.secondlife.com