The Challenges of Global L&D

A View from The Open University Business School

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1. Introduction:
The current learning landscape

The ascent of globalisation and flexible working have created workforces that are both diverse and dispersed. Although this generates countless business opportunities, there can be drawbacks from a learning perspective. **Creating consistency in learning and development across borders is complex, and it is not unusual for knowledge and learning to stay local.**

We questioned senior L&D decision makers (i.e. Chief Learning Officers, Heads of L&D and HR Directors) from 200 international organisations to find out about their experiences. We found that most believe cross-border learning programmes are the future, but that making learning travel is challenging. Many admit their company is not effectively spreading learning, which is impacting on three key areas: profitability, people and performance.

Based on this research, *The Challenges of Global L&D Report* outlines the current learning landscape for international organisations, the barriers which need to be lifted for businesses to achieve their learning potential, and the risks of not doing so. It concludes with practical recommendations to help support the development of international learning interventions.

We are experiencing a fundamental shift that will affect every L&D department. Tighter margins and the increasing expectations of candidates and employees mean there has never been more pressure to get it right: those that do so stand to make great global gains.

I hope you find this report useful during this pivotal time in learning.

Penny Asher
Director of Executive Education at the Open University Business School

2. Profit, people and performance:
## Why learning has never been so pivotal

Two thirds (66%) of senior L&D decision makers believe organisations with a learning culture will be the most successful over the coming years and a similar proportion (62%) see global / international learning programmes as 'the future'. Currently, however, only a fifth (20%) of businesses deliver very consistent learning programmes across the geographies in which they have offices, leading to significant knowledge gaps. In many organisations (41%), there is no global strategy for learning.

We spoke to senior L&D decision markers and found...
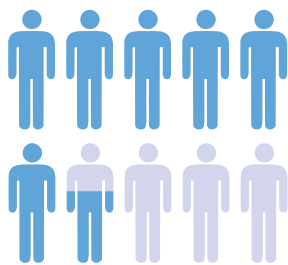
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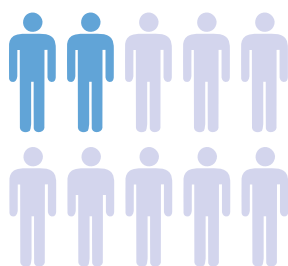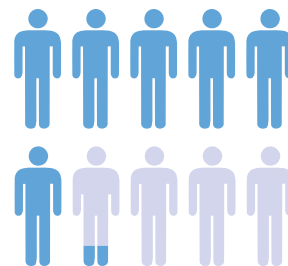
Only **20%** of businesses deliver very consistent learning programmes across the geographies in which they have offices

But the sands are shifting. **With effectiveness and efficiency absolutely critical in an uncertain economic environment, an overwhelming majority (94%) of the L&D decision makers in our research are planning on increasing their investment in international learning programmes over the next year.** There are three key motivations – profit, people and performance.

94% of senior L&D decision makers are planning on increasing their investment in international learning programmes over the next year to impact profit, people and performance:

56% believe there would be a **'significant commercial impact'** if their L&D teams collaborated across the world

58% believe there is an **expectation of continuous learning** in today's workforce
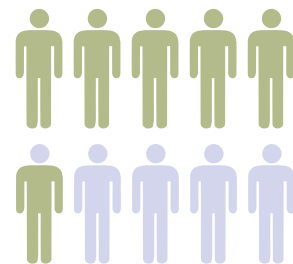
58% believe their company would experience a **performance uplift** if learning was shared more effectively

Profit

For many L&D leaders, a shift towards international programmes is a commercial imperative.

Many (56%) go so far as to say there would be a 'significant commercial impact' if their L&D teams collaborated across the world. A worrying number (41%) are seeing that a lack of focus in this area is already creating problems, with their commercial success being lower in geographies where learning is not shared.

There are cost benefits to such an approach. Many (44%) worry they waste resources by running multiple learning programmes instead of taking a joined-up approach.

People

As well as financial considerations, talent is a significant concern affecting the decision to invest more in international programmes.

A large number (58%) of senior L&D decision makers believe there is an expectation of continuous learning in today's workforce, and a similar number (56%) think that employees increasingly want access to market-leading learning programmes. Almost half (46%) worry they risk losing talent to competitors because their company does not share learning effectively while many (44%) are already losing talented employees because people are not constantly being developed.

As well as retention, there is attraction to consider. Over half (58%) of L&D leaders feel that their business will attract the best talent by offering world-class learning programmes and a similar percentage (52%) believe that in-depth, global learning programmes attract talent from across the world.

Perhaps most concerning of all is that, currently, on average less than half (40%) of the workforce has access to L&D. In close to half (49%) of businesses, only top talent is trained regularly and in many companies (40%), L&D programmes prioritise senior managers. Many (42%) admit their business is not doing enough to enable all employees to learn.

Performance

Highly effective, consistent and joined-up global programmes are becoming a focus due to their potential for achieving effective knowledge sharing, as well as cost efficiencies.

The majority (58%) of L&D professionals believe their company would experience a performance uplift if learning was shared more effectively. They state that highly effective learning programmes are 'critical' to organisational success (60%), helping companies adapt quickly to market needs (59%) and effectively to disruption and uncertainty (58%).

In half (50%) of companies, skills and knowledge are distributed inconsistently, and in many (46%) knowledge is lost because it is not shared effectively. The majority (58%) want to focus on creating global learning programmes as they create much-needed consistency.

With so many not realising the true potential of their global workforce due to their current learning programmes, there is a strong sense from the L&D community that **change is necessary, and now**. With this in mind, it's unsurprising that over half (58%) of companies expect to have a Chief Learning Officer (CLO) within the next five years.

41% of senior L&D decision makers worry their organisation is 'too complex' to allow them to achieve their goals

42% are concerned the leadership team does not value learning

43% face local resistance

46% do not have the capabilities in their team to develop global learning programmes

48% do not make the most of the technology available to deliver learning

"Tighter margins and the increasing expectations of candidates and employees mean there has never been more pressure to get it right: those that do so stand to make great global gains."

Penny Asher, Director of Executive Education at The Open University Business School

3. Jump start:
Five barriers to overcome

Senior L&D decision makers may be championing a move to a more international approach to business learning, but it's not always a straightforward task. With many businesses (48%) 'often' creating learning programmes which could be used globally but are not, there are clearly a number of significant barriers to implementing international learning programmes.

Lack of leadership support

A key issue is a lack of leadership support with learning still not regarded as a strategic issue. A large proportion (42%) of senior L&D decision makers voiced concerns that they lack direction from the top and that the leadership team does not value learning. Half (50%) think learning is not seen as important across the business.

Without support, it is almost impossible to make the real and lasting change that is needed in order to successfully implement complex programmes of learning, or indeed of any type.

Flaws in learning strategy

L&D may be looking to the future in trying to adopt an international approach to learning but, in many departments, the basics are not even in place. Experience is a concern, with almost half (46%) admitting they do not have the capabilities in their team to develop global learning programmes.

A third (34%) do not have an overarching learning architecture (i.e. a framework of agreed upon learning needs, development activities and interventions for all its training) and nearly half of decision makers (46%) admit that the learning architecture in their business is *decades* out of date.

Over a third (38%) claim they can effectively measure L&D programmes while a similar number (41%) admit they cannot coordinate and track learning progress because they have so many staff.

L&D needs to demonstrate how a culture of learning contributes to performance

Outdated technology

At the moment, face-to-face learning narrowly beats tech-enabled training as the most popular type of learning used in businesses (54% vs. 46%). But online learning is predicted to be the number one learning area that will be invested in over the coming years, and at every level of the organisation.

It is worrying to see then that in two fifths (42%) of companies the L&D team believe they do not have the technology to coordinate learning globally, and nearly half (48%) do not make the most of the technology available to deliver learning. A similar number (44%) struggle to make the most of emerging technologies as they are focused on the short-term.

Structural complexity

There are a number of other practical reasons why implementing learning across broad geographies is difficult, and a large proportion (49%) find it tough to scale-up learning programmes for a global audience. Many (44%) have no structures or processes in place to coordinate global learning and a similar number (41%) of senior L&D decision makers worry their organisation is simply 'too complex' to allow them to achieve their goals.

Closing gaps in learning should be an imperative to any modern global organisation looking to retain their talent and competitive advantage.

There are significant barriers then to delivering learning at a global scale but there are a number of key ways to really pass on learning, bridge the gaps and embrace the benefits.

Local resistance

In nearly half (46%) of international businesses there are inconsistencies in the global learning and development approach. Often (42%) local L&D teams have their own approaches and as many as a third (38%) have 'very poor' standardisation of global talent management.

Creating a consistent approach across borders is never easy to achieve, and there can be concerns locally about adopting a more international approach. Local resistance is an issue affecting close to half (43%) of organisations.

4. Setting the wheels in motion:
How to take practical action

There are steps that L&D professionals can take to start to make real change within their organisation and overcome the barriers outlined in this report. In doing so, it will impact profit, people and performance.

Place learning on the strategic agenda

Learning needs to be viewed as a core business value across the organisation. For this to happen, L&D needs to demonstrate how a culture of learning contributes to performance. This means generating data to show how developing the knowledge and skill base consistently across the organisation supports continuous improvement and innovation, as well as serving as a valuable engagement and retention tool. Measuring the right things in the right way around impact and engagement levels, which can easily be monitored using digital tools, online questioning and informal feedback mechanisms can help build a compelling business case to gain support from the C-suite.

Businesses also need passionate L&D champions at every level from successful, high profile business and emerging leaders to employees further down the chain who are enthusiastic to learn. Harness and reward their involvement and curiosity. This will encourage others and help to create a learning culture from the middle and bottom up.

Employ creative methods such as online competitions and standout events to generate interest in learning and encourage participation across all levels of the organisation to place learning and its impact in the spotlight.

This, matched with an intelligent use of technology, can further break down structural challenges.

Create a digital learning strategy and use technology dynamically

Technology-enabled learning will soon overtake face-to-face delivery as the preferred method of learning within organisations. A well-crafted digital learning strategy as part of an overall L&D strategy can offer many advantages. The reach and scalability of online learning solutions and the dynamic use of the right technology, can help achieve cost efficiencies in the long run and enable learning to be deployed far more consistently across geographic borders.

Although there are trade-offs to be made between generic off-the-shelf and bespoke online learning solutions, a customised solution can offer a more attractive proposition in that it can be easily tailored to fit your organisation's culture and learners' preferences and to specific learning and business requirements with job-centric, topical content. The key is to adopt an experimental, explorative approach that allows you to work out what works for your organisation, from access to free MOOCs from credible providers, the use of generic or bespoke online courses to asynchronous computer mediated conferencing, gaming, augmented reality, and so on.

Better use of social media as a learning tool can also help establish learning as a core value in the organisation. Providing access to relevant, bite-sized, just in time learning from channels, such as, YouTube, iTunes U and TED talks, for example, can easily be shared on mobile devices and distributed via social channels like Facebook or Twitter, thereby facilitating personalised and collaborative learning.

Engage local teams in the international approach

With a focus on international learning now so important, every successful L&D learning architecture must be flexible enough to work anywhere. A one size fits all approach will not fulfil the needs of a diverse international workforce. The learning strategy needs to be adapted and operationalised at local level to fit individual country set ups and cultural requirements.

Collaborate across the world, engaging all the L&D teams fully in developing a learning strategy and architecture that you all really believe will drive the learning you need to achieve your business objectives. Identify which aspects are required to meet global requirements and which need to be localised. Discuss how to carefully balance online and face to face learning to create the right impact.

In this way, you can make sure your approach is internationally relevant, adaptable to local context and create consistency where it is needed while also developing the capability in the L&D team to work globally. A participative approach to L&D strategy development and execution will ensure it is relevant, compelling and drives performance around business needs.

Employ creative methods such as online competitions and standout events to generate interest

The research

The Challenges of Global L&D Report is based on detailed interviews with 200 learning and development senior decision makers (Chief Learning Officers, Heads of L&D and HR Directors) in organisations that work across a number of geographies.

'International learning programmes' refer to learning programmes delivered across geographies in order to develop employees in global organisations. These learning programmes fit in with the universal values/ethos of the central organisation, ensure that learning is consistent, accessible and shareable across borders but can be localised depending on needs. Throughout this report, 'international learning programmes', 'global learning programmes' and 'international programmes' are used interchangeably.

Penny Asher, Director, Executive Education, The Open University

Penny is Director, Executive Education for The Open University. She brings to this role a wealth of learning development and business experience. Previously, at Duke Corporate Education she managed large private and public sector client accounts, predominantly in Europe, Middle East and Africa. As well as responsibility for the overall client relationship and commercials, her focus was on designing, developing and delivering global customised learning solutions. Penny also has general management, operations and project management expertise gained from experience in the Financial Services and Consulting sectors.

In her current position, Penny has responsibility for the Executive Education and Management Development business of The Open University.

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