

Forging New Trails: Learning Technology Ecosystems

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At the turn of the century there were many companies in business providing the delivery of ice blocks to people's homes. Then electricity became prevalent, and the refrigerator was invented. Shortly thereafter, these ice block delivery companies went out of business. What they failed to realize was that they were not in the ice block delivery business – they were in the business of delivering personal cooling – for people's chicken, eggs, and soft drinks. Organizations that design, develop, and deliver training are at the same precipice. If we think that we are in the business of only delivering formally developed, instructionally sound, objective-laden, extremely vetted content in extended chunks, then we will also go the way of the ice-block delivery companies. We are in the business of impact – impact for the learner and the business – in terms of behavior, performance, and, ultimately, the bottom line. Any means in which we are able to provide that should be our focus.

It is obvious that bleeding edge technology starts with consumers. The latest and greatest software technologies – mobile apps, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram – gained relevance through consumer adoption and not through corporate enterprise. Organizations have watched the digital world evolve incredibly fast, while their own internal ecosystems have started to wither. With new hires from innovative organizations and recent college graduates joining corporate teams, the gap between technology used daily and learning tools has become too glaring to ignore anymore.

In response to market innovation, learning has started shifting away from five-day, instructor-led training sessions, and we are seeing a rise in learning experiences, defined more appropriately as a continuous learning ecosystem. Organizations need to view the continuous learning ecosystem as a framework for learning. Ingrained within this architecture lies the need for authentic learning, where learners are given the chance to practice and apply, right away, not in several days, weeks or months.

Top Considerations for Staying Relevant to your Learners

Organizations need to realize that embracing new learning technologies does not have to signal the end of the learning role as we know it. In fact moving to new approaches will likely maintain the value and relevance of learning organizations. It is important to take a well-planned, phased approach when experimenting with technologies in your organization.

1. Align properly with IT governance early, making them a partner in the process and, ultimately, sharing in any successes. In many enterprises, the best path forward should include the following:
 - a. A tightly-focused *Proof of Concept*, 10-12 people to validate that the technology works within the infrastructure and provides the experience and functionality intended
 - b. If successful, follow with a small pilot— perhaps 10 to a few hundred people in a business unit, geography, or role
 - c. After demonstrating success, extend the pilot to a larger audience, while keeping IT involved

d. Identify key steps that will ensure IT will support the technology given current security and user support models. You will want to think about ongoing support from the help desk, change management and communications.

2. Get strong executive level sponsorship, someone perhaps willing to take a risk, experiment, and try out the new technology with a pilot group. This will ensure you have the champions you need to continue pushing your initiative forward. You should align this person from the Proof of Concept stage.

Focus on the business impact to be achieved with any new technology-based solution. Do not be afraid to fail, and do not lock yourself into a particular technology or vendor. If your pilot test fails, then your organization may not be ready for implementing new technologies. If it succeeds, well, you are a hero!

It's Just the Beginning

Rather than waiting for further adoption, organizations need to explore these technologies for learning, today:

- Virtual reality instructor-led training (VRILT) with technologies like Oculus Rift and Microsoft HoloLens VR
- Internet of Things (IoT) will find its way into the learning space as we start to embrace the power of personalized tracking and continuous data capture
- Automation and predictive analytics will help instinctively tailor and recommend experiences and learning based on preferences, past behavior and validation of mastery
- We will start to see the erosion of the concept of course as we know it as short-form content and relevance become key priorities

What can we learn from pioneers of days gone by?

Taking risks and forging new territories brought us rich gold mines; taking risks and forging new technologies changed how we shop, and how we share our lives. We need to see that same shift with learning technology. Learning technology needs to act as an infrastructure, enabling learners to be successful, rather than acting as a verification system that ensures a learner has clicked on every page. Organizations should provide a healthy and diverse learning ecosystem, a place where the learner lives, providing what the learner needs to know, when they need it most. Is it time for your organization to meet your learners where they are?

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