cultivating VALUABLE LEARNING environments

A talent development ecosystem fosters a culture of learning within an organization.

BY CATHERINE LOMBARDOZZI

Somewhere in a spiffy corporate office building, a talent development professional is spending today setting up a shared networking space for a team working together to advance the company's premier product. The digital space holds reference articles and training videos, links to competitor materials, a discussion board for project team members, and working documents for the group.

Meanwhile, a manager in another company pulls together a list of resources for a new hire that includes digital archives, recommended books, and a list of go-to people from whom the new hire can learn specific tasks.

These professionals are supporting learning in the modern world. They are assisting people in finding the learning resources and activities they need to be successful in current and future roles. The approach they are taking is a big change from a time when they might have insisted on creating a course to instruct people in the knowledge and skills they need. Instead, talent development professionals are creating environments for learning that take advantage of the vast array of learning resources accessible in a connected world.

The talent development landscape

These scenarios are just a few examples of the ways that modern talent development practitioners can approach their work. During the past decade or more, our industry has recognized that training courses often have disadvantages. Training takes considerable time and effort; it can only develop people so far without application in the workplace; and it limits learners to one perspective or one format for learning.

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In enriching our portfolio of development options, talent development professionals have embraced the virtues of e-learning, informal learning, social learning, collaborative learning, and experiential learning as part of a larger process that plays out over time. We recognize that repackaging materials readily available on the Internet and trying to capture everything that one can learn person-to-person is wasted effort. "Ecosystems" is the new buzzword because it describes how all of an organization's resources, processes, and people can be viewed as parts of a massive talent development system.

The vision for a learning ecosystem is exciting, but implementation has been challenging. The varied parts of the system often don't intuitively work well together. The array of choices can cause decision paralysis. Too much time and effort is spent searching for the most useful resources and people. Some thought leaders suggest that in this environment, talent development professionals add value by being coaches, or one-on-one learning consultants, but that model is often not scalable.

So what do you do? Curating a learning environment is one way to address these challenges and deliver valuable learning support. A learning environment strategy provides a useful option between offering a structured course and simply encouraging people to manage their own learning using the tools of the digital age.

Curating a learning environment

The learning environment framework was conceived as a way of thinking about how to best meet emerging learning needs in a fast-paced environment. In this framework, a learning environment is defined as "a deliberately curated collection of materials and activities to support the development of a specific knowledge base or skill." Those learning materials and activities come in many shapes and sizes:

- resources—study and reference materials in a variety of formats, including webpages, manuals, books, videos, and podcasts
- people—active interpersonal connections that support learning, including peers supporting one another
- training and education—formal courses, workshops, and modules that address specific learning objectives
- development practices—company- or manager-defined on-the-job learning activities
- experiential learning practices—learners' own on-the-job action and reflection, and learning-by-doing activities.

Learning environments offer choice and just-in-time learning, and they do that by collating materials and resources that have been carefully selected to be useful for a specific context and group.

Consider an organization that is trying to upskill a large group of people in a particular set of practices and skills (such as Six Sigma management, design thinking, innovation, or a company-specific initiative). Talent development leaders could craft a learning environment that focuses on key concepts and skill-building.

In this case, resources might be accessed through an intranet page or social networking space that acts as a learning portal. The portal could link employees to general and company-specific articles, videos, and case studies. It could be a place to share documentation so all might benefit.

Specific discussion threads might be dedicated to this effort in the company's enterprise social network. Leaders of the initiative might contribute blog posts or other social media feeds to reinforce the message and keep everyone informed about progress. Through the portal, employees could be informed about specific training and education options inside and outside of the organization. Organization leaders could be given resources to lead department-level discussions and projects. This range of resources and activities will keep the initiative front of mind for employees and allow them to access materials to learn in the flow of work.

Alternatively, an organization may want to bring together creative professionals who are working on cutting-edge ideas so they can co-create knowledge together. A group of

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designers, for example, could be offered a collaborative maker space to try out new ideas and share their creations with peers and experts. This creative space would give an opportunity to learn from and with like-minded creators and provide access to needed materials and equipment. Design books and portfolios might spur inspiration and give some guidance. Leaders might organize workshops and talks from experts, show-and-tell activities, or collaborative troubleshooting clinics.

In each of these instances, learning is fully supported without being constrained. The goal and value in assembling a learning environment is to provide a range of relevant resources of different types that are go-to sources for talent development. To deliberately curate resources, you need to have a specific knowledge base or skill in mind and, if possible, a specific context for application. The context and purpose of a learning environment define the parameters for selection of materials and activities. There should be structure for the learners who need it and choice for the learners who are looking for answers to more immediate questions.

Skills needed

Pulling together a high-quality set of resources into a learning environment may sound relatively easy, but it requires several skills. It's not just about conducting a quick search and giving learners a set of Internet links. If you want to assemble learning environments that are truly useful and have long-term impact, you need to use some of the same design skills that an instructional designer might use to craft effective training.

A learning environment designer needs to be able to uncover performance needs and discern the kind of learning and performance support that will most appropriately meet the needs. Learning environment design calls for dogged research skills to find materials that relate to the need and good judgment of quality to curate the options that are most on target and most likely to be immediately useful. A good environment collates a range of resources and activities across all component types (resources, people, training and education, development practices, and experiential learning practices).

Assembling the environment requires familiarity with available tools, a strong sense of how to organize it from the learner's perspective, and a good eye for visual and interface design. People who want to cultivate learning environments also need to have a solid understanding of how to promote social learning: how to build trust, encourage sharing, and facilitate interaction.

A learning environment strategy depends on people being comfortable with self-directed learning. Even though we are decades into the digital revolution, there are still plenty of people of all ages who are used to having their learning structured for them.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FRAMEWORK WAS CONCEIVED AS A WAY OF THINKING ABOUT HOW TO BEST MEET EMERGING LEARNING NEEDS IN A FAST-PACED ENVIRONMENT.

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To take advantage of the resources of a learning environment, learners need to be able to define what they need, pick the right resources, translate their learning into action, and learn from their subsequent experience. A learning environment often contains some structured guidance, such as a recommended flow of activities or a series of badges to designate progress, in addition to any formal courses that might be on the curated list of activities.

An evolving role

The role of a talent development professional in the digital age is clearly changing. While instructional design may be called for in some instances, we can more efficiently and effectively meet learning needs by helping learners to take advantage of materials and activities that already exist. We need to help people to align a wide range of learning activities toward a defined end—knowledge and skill development in a particular area. An effective learning environment provides both a rich range of resources and the kind of scaffolding and guidance that people need to manage their own learning. Designing learning environments is a modern way for talent development professionals to provide valuable support for learning.

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A Process for Creating Learning Environments

Like any design process, creating a learning environment is iterative and emergent. It is described as an overlapping set of processes related to envisioning, finding, curating, assembling, and cultivating.

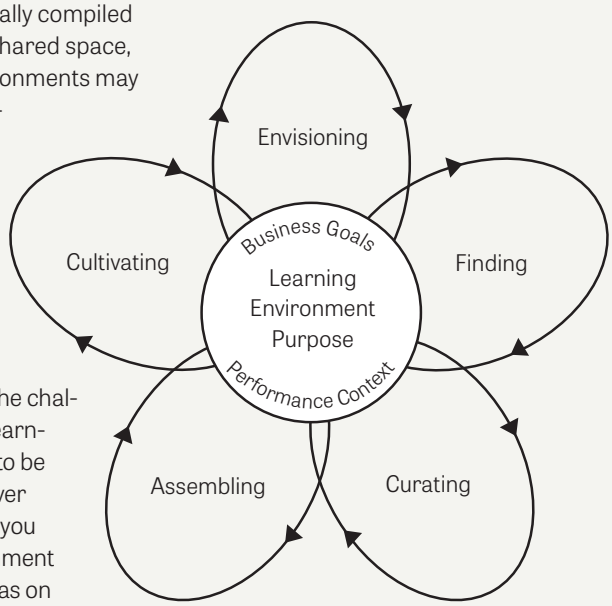
Envisioning encompasses imagining the purpose, context, and components of the learning environment. These processes stem from your needs assessment, and your purposes and components morph as the learning environment takes shape.

Finding involves locating a range of resources that are on topic. You'll need great sleuthing skills to talk to experts, run Internet searches, and chase down potential leads on great material. Finding can be accelerated by encouraging learners themselves to contribute materials that they locate or create.

Curating requires using expert judgment to recommend the most relevant and useful components for the learning environment's specific learners and purpose. Curating is the most value-added activity; it saves people time in trying to search out their own materials and directs them to those most likely to be helpful in their context. It is often helpful to have a small team of subject matter experts to curate the environment.

Assembling entails collating and packaging the selected materials and activities, and making them available to learners. Materials are usually compiled electronically (list of links, shared space, or website), but some environments may be more physical and interpersonal. Assembling often requires good interface design to contextualize components and make it easy for learners to find the right learning materials for their immediate needs.

Cultivating addresses the challenge of ensuring that the learning environment continues to be fresh, enticing, and useful over time. To cultivate effectively, you need to monitor the environment and evaluate the impact it has on talent development so that you can make appropriate adjustments. Some of the most important tasks of cultivating are developing interpersonal networks and nurturing a culture of sharing. Cultivating also involves adding recently published materials and pruning outdated ones.



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