

# Learning the corporate ropes

Corporate learning programs are becoming more sophisticated, with leadership development, executive coaching, performance management and team development increasingly interlinked. *HR Leader* speaks with a number of experts about the latest trends in corporate learning

**C**orporates are getting savvier when it comes to learning and development. Gone are the days when finance would provide big L&D budgets without a requirement for measurable return on investment. Post GFC, learning programs have become more streamlined and are increasingly hardwired into business strategy, resulting in a more integrated approach and stronger links between former standalone HR processes and programs.

## Performance management

A good example of this increased linkage can be found in performance management, in that many companies are moving on from old appraisal systems to corporate performance management systems that align people with strategy, according to Lyle Potgieter, president of the Performance Management Institute of Australia.

“What we’re seeing is that quite a lot of organisations have had standalone learning management systems, and standalone performance management systems,” he explains. “Those companies are now upgrading to an integrated offering, so the performance

management system identifies the gaps and the learning management system helps fill the gaps. There’s a coming together of performance, learning and technology as there’s never been before.”

When the performance management process is closely aligned with business strategy, then as performance management is cascaded down through an organisation, this allows for the identification of skills and capability gaps. “This is very important,” Potgieter says, “as you can then decide how you want to fix those gaps; whether it be through hiring or learning and development.”

Most organisations are in the early stages of this journey. “Some are doing it well, but most are doing an ordinary job. A lot of government organisations still have what we still call an appraisal system. As a consequence, performance management, and therefore the gap assessment, is not tied to strategy – it’s just a loose learning and development program,” he says.

## Leadership development

When it comes to leadership development, organisations are also interested in informing such programs with an assessment of current skill gaps against critical business drivers, according to Bruce Watt, managing director of DDI in Australia.

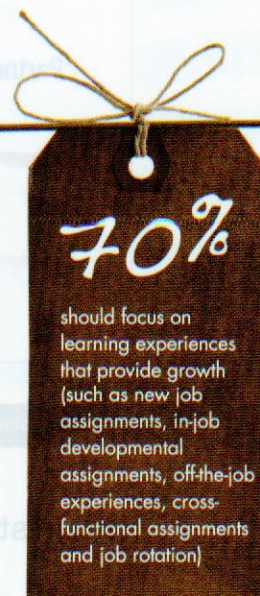
“Without this business driver assessment, leadership programs tend towards the generic sheep dip,” he says.

“For example, if one of the key business drivers for an organisation is to improve the level of employee engagement, then an assessment needs to be undertaken to understand the current level of leadership capability in areas such as leading teams, coaching, empowerment/delegation and managing derailment tendencies such as micromanagement. The skill acquisition phase of leadership development can then be appropriately focused on addressing these individual and group gaps.”

## THE 70/20/10 RULE

**There is a shift in the design and delivery of many organisations’ learning and development programs to the 70/20/10 guidelines**

Source: Bruce Watt, managing director of DDI in Australia



**“Coaching helps executives bridge the ‘knowing/doing’ gap – they may know people are important to their success although what they do doesn’t necessarily demonstrate that”**

Leadership development can only reliably contribute to improvements in performance and productivity if the right leadership skills are developed at the right level relevant to the business outcomes, according to Watt.

“For example, if a key business driver is to increase revenue production then the leadership development needs to focus on enabling capabilities such as entrepreneurship, customer focus, business savvy and financial acumen. Most importantly the application of these skills needs to be supported on-the-job and measured,” he says.

#### Executive coaching

Closely related to leadership development is executive coaching. More organisations are using coaching to transfer learning from the classroom into the day-to-day business, according to Chip McFarlane, director of the Institute of Executive Coaching.

Executives and managers often attend offsite residential leadership development programs, however McFarlane says the main problem with these is that the learning can be

lost once attendees get caught up in the day-to-day running of a business.

“What executive coaches do is take their learning, their experience and understanding of what was possible, and help them to embed that down through action. So it’s about translating the thoughts and what they know, into what they do,” he explains.

“Coaching helps executives bridge the ‘knowing/doing’ gap – they may know people are important to their success although what they do doesn’t necessarily demonstrate that.”

Coaching has been one area of development that has been notoriously hard to measure, however, McFarlane has seen many companies enlist panels of coaches from a variety of backgrounds to assist with quality control.

More recently, he has seen companies reducing the size of such panels but a higher quality of coach. “Rather than taking a cookie cutter approach to coaching, this provides more consistency so that the panel can tell whether a coaching intervention is working in their given situation,” he says.

#### Team development

Similarly, high-performing teams need to undergo continuous development to retain their high performance – a process which is usually initiated by the team leader, according to Dick McCann, managing director of Team Management Systems (TMS) Australia.

“High performance takes time to establish, and that’s why teams need a coach (who may also be the leader) to develop the team and instigate the process of linking as a state-of-mind in all team members,” he says.

Transfer of learning is undoubtedly the major issue facing team development programs, according to McCann, who notes that learning is a process and not a one-off event, so the effectiveness of learning resides with the designer of the intervention.

“The problem is that most organisations are time constrained and therefore time away from work is limited,” he says.

“Often the two-day team development workshop is all the time that’s available for staff. These workshops can be a lot of fun – but there is a high danger of nothing changing when they return to the workplace. That’s why learning design is so important.”

In the 1990s, McCann says action learning was an attempt to deal with this issue by running team development events over a period of at least three months – but the difference was that the new skills had to be immediately applied to a current major project of concern to the organisation.

“An iterative approach of learning, doing and reviewing throughout the life of the project embedded skills and processes in the mind of participants,” says McCann, who adds that these ideas are resurfacing and that workplace impact projects form the basis of new attempts to come grips with the transfer of learning problem.

## TOP 10 CORPORATE LEARNING TRENDS

1. Whilst overall training time is increasing, “face-to-face” training is decreasing as virtual training, with video, telephone and related meeting conferencing technology, is used.
2. Training programs are becoming shorter, with longer programs being broken up into smaller, more digestible chunks. Programs have more “before the training” preparation and “after the training” follow-up.
3. Blended training is increasing, particularly as more devices come online. Mobile phones are now being incorporated. A wider variety of delivery options can occur for each program.
4. Training delivery is being impacted by multitasking. It is common for virtual participants to be doing other activities when they should be paying attention to the learning content.
5. Training delivery is being outsourced, which can affect training quality if the training benefits from internal knowledge of specific company policies and procedures.
6. Informal learning continues to be a major part of the training process. Performance support tools which provide specific instruction to complete tasks at the time the task is being undertaken are very helpful and effective.
7. Soft skills and generic job-related competencies such as communication and interpersonal skills continue to be important, as do aptitudes towards self learning and self development and the ability to use different software and IT tools.
8. Leadership development programs, from self leadership through to senior executive programs, continue to reap important benefits for organisations.
9. Brain research is providing more information about the way people learn. Visualisation, accelerated learning and active learning techniques are helping to improve program effectiveness.
10. LMS (Learning Management Systems) are being reviewed to ensure that they are meeting the content management and coordination needs of organisations.

**Source: Derek Stockley, director of a training and management company based in Melbourne.**  
For more information call (03) 8601 1186 or visit [www.derekstockley.com.au](http://www.derekstockley.com.au)

