



# Developing a corporate learning strategy

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**Could your organisation derive more benefit from training and development? Do they contribute to key business objectives such as winning new business? If all existing courses were closed down would customers notice or care?**

Now is a good time to ask such questions. Training and development are at a watershed. Many existing courses and facilities have come to the end of their useful lives. There are new approaches to learning and knowledge management to consider, emerging technologies to evaluate, and collaborative opportunities to assess.

Those responsible for corporate learning face tough choices and multiple challenges. Should an e-corporate university be set up? How might a corporate intranet best be used? Could business development and the processes of value and knowledge creation be better supported?

Certain options go to the heart of current operations. Should training and development be made a revenue centre or a distinct business? Could particular activities, or the whole function, be outsourced? What would be lost if 'central training' were closed down?

A two year investigation of corporate learning plans and priorities has examined these and other questions. It involved corporate visits and 69 structured interviews with

those responsible for the training and development of some 460,000 people. The results, summarised in the report *'Developing a Corporate Learning Strategy'*\*, are sobering and demand urgent attention.

Many courses have passed their 'sell by' date, but at the same time, essential requirements and critical corporate priorities are being largely ignored. Too little effort is devoted to business development, relationship building, knowledge creation, ebusiness and entrepreneurship.

Overwhelmingly, the emphasis is upon squeezing costs, rather than the generation of incremental income streams. Only one of the organisations surveyed was equipping its people to be more successful at bidding for business, even though the top 20 bidding skills and critical success factors for winning bids have been identified and tried and tested bid management tools are available (*Winning New Business*, Bedford, Policy Publications, 2003).

Human resource teams are working hard, but many of them do not appear to be connecting with the

world around them. Millions have been spent on grandiose initiatives, fashionable concepts such as empowerment, and general 'quality', 'teamwork' and 'leadership' training, while particular requirements of critical importance are overlooked.

Critically, training inputs are not leading to new know-how and intellectual capital outputs. Existing understanding is being shared, but the new knowledge needed to compete and win and secure market leadership is not being created. Presentations on 'knowledge management' abound, but specific initiatives to develop knowledge entrepreneurs or equip people to use ebusiness are few and far between.

The organisations examined focused overwhelmingly upon the internal development of employed staff. Customers, contractors, suppliers, associates and business partners can all have development needs which could, and should, be addressed by shared learning.

Education, learning, training and updating are rapidly becoming global markets in their own rights. They are among the most exciting of contemporary business opportunities. However, in general, training and development are not perceived as a source of incremental revenues. Nor are they used as a means of building relationships with key decision makers in strategic customers, suppliers and business partners.

Most trainers appear to 'follow fashion'. Many buy 'off the shelf'



rather than think about what would be most appropriate in specific situations. They provide standard programmes regardless of individual interests and needs. They expose people working on very different activities, to common experiences that have little relevance to their particular requirements and priorities.

Opportunities for training collaboration are being missed. Many companies face similar development problems and challenges. Maybe the cost of new resources and facilities could be split between several users.

The aspirations of individuals are also being overlooked. Trainers focus unashamedly upon corporate pre-occupations. Yet many people seek greater control and more balance in their lives. Switching the emphasis to innovation, entrepreneurship, and business building can enhance both corporate performance and personal fulfilment.

Not surprisingly, education, training and development expenditures are

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still sometimes viewed as a cost, rather than as strategic activities. They are not always considered vital investments in the creation of knowledge, intellectual capital and value for customers.

The current state of affairs cannot continue. So what needs to be done? Winners tend to be pioneers and innovators, rather than observers and imitators. They facilitate, enable and support development. They champion and reward learning and enterprise. Learning should be built into work processes and peoples roles. It should embrace customers, suppliers and business partners.

Winners allow individuals to manage their own learning. They encourage their people to join shared learning networks and achieve breakthroughs in understanding. They establish corporate universities, foster learning partnerships, and keep their learning strategies current, relevant and vital. Standard offerings are abandoned in favour of specific and tailored interventions.

Training teams with the potential should be tasked with becoming profitable businesses in their own right. Training activities should contribute to enterprise, business and knowledge development. Providing individuals with personal learning accounts could create 'customers'.

Demonstrable outcomes should replace input indicators such as 'bums on seats'. For example, by how much has the 'win rate' in competitive bidding situations increased? What proportion of turnover do new products and services account for? What value is ascribed to new intellectual capital? Whenever a direct causal link to additional know-



how, greater customer value or extra business cannot be demonstrated, activities should be discontinued.

Human resource professionals must work much more closely with their colleagues. Companies need to become incubators of entrepreneurial activity. Working environments should inspire and enable learning, innovation and creativity.

Many corporate learning strategies and practices need urgent review. Training teams are missing an historic opportunity to make a more strategic contribution to knowledge and value creation and the achievement of corporate objectives.

#### Further Information

\* 'Developing a Corporate Learning Strategy' by Colin Coulson-Thomas and a 'Winning New Business' resource pack are available from Policy Publications:  
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Fax. +44 (0)1234 357231; E-mail: [policypubs@kbnet.co.uk](mailto:policypubs@kbnet.co.uk) or online from [www.ntwfirm.com/bookshop](http://www.ntwfirm.com/bookshop)



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