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Learning and IT: Playing for the Same Team

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To ensure effectiveness of learning initiatives and alignment to business priorities, learning leaders should collaborate with their counterparts in IT to achieve results.

Successful organizations understand that to align their business units with corporate strategy and priorities, barriers between individual divisions must be eliminated in favor of a shared business vision. In short, the objective of all divisions must be to drive business goals versus those of their individual business units.

When business units share a common goal and work in concert to achieve it, the company becomes more competitive, more successful and more profitable. Still, many successful companies find they continue to struggle with bringing business and information technology (IT) into alignment. Consequently, IT and learning are misaligned, as well. This is especially significant today given the increased use of technology in learning and development.

While instructor-led training remains a widely used delivery method in many organizations, technological solutions also play an important role. Increased interest in the efficiencies of technology-based training has caused learning delivery and design to become increasingly intertwined with technology, further reinforcing the need for greater alignment between IT and learning.

This collaboration is increasingly valuable, and it is the joint responsibility of the CLO and chief information officer (CIO) to facilitate actionable training and development solutions that align the needs of the business with IT and learning services to satisfy stakeholder needs. Close examination reveals specific areas where these relationships break down and uncovers opportunities for bringing IT and learning into alignment.

Whose Job Is It Anyway?

Overall responsibility for aligning learning and IT falls

to the CLO and CIO, executive positions presumably created to marshal their respective resources around the corporate strategy to optimize the combined value of technology and training. When this collaboration exists, they work together to foster productive relationships between their two groups. These relationships facilitate the co-development of IT learning solutions driven by the needs of the business.

Not surprisingly, while the CLO and CIO do interact, there are significant differences between the two that often contribute to the gap between the two divisions. CLOs, CIOs and those employees who work with them naturally develop different competencies related to their innate strengths and specific job responsibilities. We've come to expect the CLO to be a better communicator and the CIO a technical expert, but that is no longer acceptable. Changing business needs, customer requirements and technological advances are forcing the two onto common ground, reshaping these roles to be more complex and multidimensional and blurring the line that delineates their skills.

Margaret Driscoll, in her book *Web-Based Training*, identifies three primary areas of difference believed to impact the CLO/CIO relationship and ability to work collaboratively: strategic picture, technical knowledge and people skills.

Strategic Picture

Naturally, the CLO and CIO approach the relationship of IT and learning from their different, individual business perspectives. The CLO is responsible for an organization's overall learning and knowledge, while the CIO provides enterprise-wide directions and busi-

ness strategies for acquiring, using and maintaining information technology initiatives.

This strategic delineation only becomes a problem when one or both individuals fail to consider the strategy, goals and priorities of the other. Lack of inter-departmental collaboration may also be thwarted by organizational and departmental structures that limit communication or coordination between or within business units, departments and teams.

Regardless of the root cause, the resulting silo effect negatively impacts overall performance of both IT and learning and hinders the co-development of optimal technology-based learning solutions necessary to driving desired business objectives. The silo effect can hurt business in the long term.

CLOs, CIOs and those employees that work with them naturally develop different competencies related to their innate strengths and specific job responsibilities.

CLOs, determined to prove the learning function can add measurable impact to the business enterprise, must be able to assess, calculate and communicate ROI for all training modalities. It is the responsibility of the CLO and learning organization to determine the broader mix of solutions needed, beyond traditional training, course and courseware models. To do so requires a deeper understanding of available technology-based learning solutions.

CIOs must be able to communicate the business and learning value of their innovations to the organization and the bottom line. This requires greater leadership and communication skills in addition to technical expertise. To successfully close the gap between the organization's overall strategy, learning strategy and the use of information technology, the CIO must develop an in-depth understanding of learning, training methods and learning styles.

Technical Knowledge

That a CLO and CIO do not share the same level of technical knowledge and expertise should come as no surprise. CLOs typically hail from diverse nontechnical backgrounds such as training, finance and business operations, so their technical aptitude may be limited. As technology continues to permeate learning, howev-

er, CLOs need to become more savvy about learning technology, both as consumers and as evaluators.

CIOs often come up through the ranks of IT, relying heavily on their technical knowledge and acumen. In his book, *CIO Survival Guide*, Karl D. Schubert wrote, "The role of the CIO depends on the application of technical skills in the context of increasingly complex business management skills. Because computer systems are the underpinning of the information technology solution, it is absolutely essential that the CIO understand computer system fundamentals. This will continue to be true for a long time."

People Skills

Effective interpersonal communication is a critical factor for a successful CLO. Strong interpersonal, listening and influencing skills help CLOs build partnerships with senior management, create alliances and champion learning in their organizations.

In a recent article, "The New Chief Learning Officer: 2008 and Beyond," analysts from enterprise learning and talent management firm Bersin & Associates wrote, "The most effective CLOs tend to be business people first and then learning experts second. These individuals come to the job with a deep understanding of the talent, process and business challenges which face their organization. Such CLOs have institutional power: they can not only develop and deliver high impact programs, but they can also interact with other business executives to drive alignment. A strong CLO focuses on alignment, communication, and strategic learning and development initiatives."

Inevitably, just as the CLO must develop greater technical skills, the CIO must develop communication. The scope of the CIO's authority typically has been one that is difficult for peers and superiors to comprehend. It is this fundamental disconnect that often places IT executives in the daunting position of making strategic and critical business decisions without input, buy-in or understanding from the CLO, further widening the gap between IT and learning. The ability of the CIO to leverage and articulate technology and information for the benefit of the business is a critical competency.

Bridging the Communications Gap in Pursuit of Common Ground

Both IT and learning are integral for an organization to align business strategies with the proper technologies to execute them. To that end, the CLO and CIO must find ways to interact, but also to communicate and collaborate to achieve success for themselves, their business units and the organization.

Critical business relationships, such as the one between learning and IT, demand practices similar to those of a professional sports team. Team members

must play off one another's strengths to achieve a win; anything less is cause for being sent to the bench.

The development of highly effective technology-based learning solutions requires expertise and input from both learning and IT. To facilitate this cooperative atmosphere, CLOs can employ a variety of tactics to align activities amidst changing company and business-unit expectations and goals, including:

- **Collaborate at the start of any software selection process.** The CLO and CIO must outline the pros and cons of utilizing new software before implementation. Can it be easily taught? Do you have sufficient technical support? Is it flexible for your growth, or will it become easily outdated? Is it redundant to what already is in place? Beyond cost, these questions must be discussed by these executives at the start of the process to make sure it will benefit all business units.
- **Assess employee competencies.** A thorough understanding of employee capabilities across all departments is crucial when developing a plan for technical learning. Comprehensive reports must be developed on current skill sets, needed skill sets and their alignment toward business objectives. This analysis also will give critical insight into the timetable of deliverables based on the amount of new curriculum that must be taught.
- **Develop a company-wide strategic plan for learning initiatives.** The business learning plan should include the mission, scope, technology, marketing, vendor management and budget for the programs. Since learning initiatives are continually evolving based on needs, lay out goals in a concise manner for all department heads to conceptualize what it means for the organization.
- **Forecast and report.** Metrics are necessary to obtain buy-in from other department heads. Straight, forecasted numbers that include potential costs of student training days against the actual reported outcome toward increased productivity will be beneficial for the CEO, CFO and CIO specifically.
- **Develop a leadership group.** Because learning initiatives require continual strategizing and input from others, it is imperative to form a leadership group of senior-level executives who have control of the learning budget, but also the managers operating daily functions. These managers are in tune to what learning applications will make their people more efficient and processes more streamlined. Including a CIO and IT manager in this group will ensure consistent collaboration and a check and balance system that will increase the likelihood of having an effective learning program.
- **Create a learning report.** Similar to an annual financial report, the creation of a learning report will tie

together forecasted information, budget and actual deliverables obtained from the learning program. Details of improvements made because of the program, as well as its effects on the company's competitiveness, will establish the foundation for learning programs and set the stage for continued funding and support.

To successfully align business units with corporate strategy and priorities, organizations need to see that all individual units work together to achieve the same business goals. Misalignment between IT and learning can result in costly and ineffective solutions and weaken the overall strength of the organization.

When aligning with one another and their organization's business goals, learning and IT must capitalize

Learning and IT team members must play off one another's strengths to achieve a win; anything less is cause for being sent to the bench.

on combined capabilities to uncover opportunities and solutions not previously considered. This alignment:

- Facilitates the equitable distribution of work among business units.
- Helps prioritize efforts in terms of their importance to the business.
- Creates more efficient and accurate budgeting and resource allocation.
- Aids in creating a short-term and long-term vision for learning and development and technology-based training.
- Improves the ROI for individual and combined efforts.
- Better serves organizational goals and stakeholder interests.

To align learning and IT, the CLO and CIO must transfer their knowledge and skills to one another and others who need them. There are learning experts and novices, and there are technical experts and novices. Knowledge must be consistently shared in a manner that enables novices to get the knowledge and skills they need to perform like experts. **CLO**

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