

## IMHO: The Wood and the Trees

Rob Sheffield writes: *This is the first in the IMHO (In My Humble Opinion) series aimed looking at the trends and trajectories of training and development. I can't guarantee it will always be based on solid, concrete and indisputable data, but it will aim to be thought-provoking. Whether you agree or not, I'm keen to hear other views, so please add a response.*

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This is a golden age for those of us in the learning industry. The government has a clear policy of directing our money to 'widen participation' in higher education; for better or worse, the pressure is on to identify and tap our potential. TV programmes have noticed that advice-giving programmes interest us: *Faking It, Supernanny, Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*.

The learning organisation' is a phrase many managers can describe, even "Organisation Development" means something to more and more people as management education converges on a few key themes. Globalisation, deregulation of markets and, as ever, personal ambition drives innovation, learning and change in our work.

### Trends

In our UK marketplace, I believe there is a convergence of:

- more people deciding to become self-employed training consultants, plus
- fewer people managing training and development from within organisations, as outsourcing efficiencies combine with the perceived attractiveness of the independent-consulting lifestyle.

This leaves fewer people in organisations with less time to make sound decisions on whom to select as suppliers, as well as a growing mass of suppliers being unable or unwilling to differentiate themselves with any discernible and meaningful criteria.

If this increasingly murky, mass market is emerging, so what? Is it a problem? Maybe it's simply the early confusion of a growing market. My view is that a consensus will form around effective learning providing competitive success. Organisations will become more insistent that providers 'prove' their effectiveness.

### Change

Evaluation, the embarrassing cousin of the training cycle, will take centre stage. The only sentence to ask learning suppliers will be: "What factors aid sustainable behaviour change, and what's your record in enabling this?" - A simple question, difficult to answer, and, it seems, even harder to ask.

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Buyers of services need to ask that question more often. They don't because it raises awkward questions of their commitment to and resources for evaluation. A tick in the right box too often does the job. If suppliers help them look good, that's sometimes enough.

Suppliers don't raise it because it opens the proverbial can of worms. And why should they mention the unmentionable, if the buyer doesn't?

But, learning provision is shifting from the undifferentiating sheep-dip, to mirroring the pattern of services provided in the rest of society: closer to real problems, for just long-enough, just-in-time, at more convenient places, with those directly accountable for results. Convenience, transparency and directness will combine to transform the market, all driven by the need for clear performance improvement.

### **Science**

Learning provision is also beginning to benefit from the application of science. Daniel Goleman describes how the use of MRI scanners helps us understand more about the brain works with specific tasks. He also points out the implications for effective learning of social and emotional competencies. We know little yet about how learning takes place at cellular-level in the brain, but we will know more over the next 10 years.

Few learning providers use any of these principles and truly apply them in their practice. Many more will, as the learning curriculum changes radically to accommodate principles from neuroscience. Those that do so faster and more clearly will achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. As with most revolutions, most of us are blind to it.

### **Big Brother**

Back to the wood and trees. Imagine a world where you buyers knew a supplier's record in sustaining specific behaviour change over acceptable periods of time. How could this come about? Do we really need the Institute of Behaviour Change? (Could anything be more Orwellian?)

Imagine an Amazon-style rating: "96% customer satisfaction, from 134 ratings, over the last 26 months. Click here for more details..." Each supplier is rated on his/her ability to enable sustained change over the last, say, five years. Imagine the resistance and imagine the benefits! Utopia or dystopia?

Rob Sheffield, November 2006

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