Delivering Coherent Learning

How to create coherent learning journeys that will engage employees and deliver your desired business outcomes.
L&D teams used to be able to handpick individual resources to ensure that employees had the right skills to do their jobs effectively. However, in response to the demand to 'do more with less', add value in the organization, optimize the provision of training and provide a greater choice for learners, many L&D teams have introduced comprehensive libraries of content – including online, mobile, blended, gamified and portal approaches from a variety of providers. Unfortunately, and despite best intentions, this ever-expanding range of options can lead to a disordered and disconnected offering that may actually be detrimental to learners.

Content is sometimes introduced in organizations because of personal preference, convenience, past habits or other factors rather than a focus on the needs of the business or what's really in the best interests of employees. When this happens, the learning curriculum inevitably becomes characterized by mismatched, repeated and sometimes even irrelevant content. Trying to create a valuable unified learning experience, from a pack of unrelated parts, is a nigh on impossible challenge, and one that is easily avoided.

Learning is a journey for individuals and a process for organizations. Each step of that journey (and process) should build on, and flow from, what's gone before. Offering a mismatch of learning resources – even if each of them is high quality – can lead to mixed messages, inconsistencies or contradictory theories. Today, more than ever before, L&D teams need to review their curriculum and ensure that their learning provision is not only coherent, engaging and relevant but also that it delivers the desired outcomes.

Coherent learning occurs when learning interventions and assets build sequentially on one another or complement and reinforce each other to create a relevant and cohesive journey. The benefits of coherent learning include higher learner engagement, greater efficiency, shared understanding, improved effectiveness and of course greater value for money.

This paper outlines how L&D teams can achieve and deliver coherent learning.

**Achieving Coherence**
In general, there are two forms of curriculum coherence:

**Vertical coherence**: A vertically-coherent curriculum provides a developmental progression of knowledge and skills. In other words, employees learn something at one level that prepares them for the next. Individuals will have varying learning needs as they progress from contributors, to senior contributors, to first-line managers and higher management roles. Their learning journey should therefore be structured such that relevant learning interventions are made available at the right times and that each level builds sequentially on what's gone before.

Horizontal coherence: When a curriculum is horizontally coherent, the learning from one intervention matches and supports the content of other learning options at that level. In other words, the learning programs and assets at each stage all have consistent messages and each one flows, reinforces and complements the others.

Here are eight steps to help you achieve coherent learning:

1. **Match your curriculum to the needs of the business.**
   The crucial first step in achieving coherence is to review the learning requirements and goals of the business. This can help you to identify any gaps or duplications in your curriculum – and it should result in culling or creating content to establish a definitive curriculum that will help achieve the desired objectives.

   Each resource should be aligned to the imperatives of your business. The challenge is to identify what people need to learn given the organizational requirements, and to source appropriate options in a variety of formats that will suit different learning styles.

2. **Utilize an engaging platform.** Employees need to be able to easily find and use coherent resources that meet their needs, whether that's videos, infographics and animations or e-learning, virtual and classroom delivery options. But even if your resources are magnificent and coherent, people will switch off if your hosting platform doesn't feel fresh and engaging. Home entertainment provides a fantastic example. Netflix and Amazon Video offer an intuitive, immediately familiar and engaging on-demand interface. If we choose our entertainment options because they're visually appealing, why shouldn't we expect that of our learning platforms too?

   Look for an intelligent learning hub that can not only engage learners but is also flexible enough to allow user-generated content and resources from third party providers. The best platforms also allow user-reviews of content, so learners are able to make more informed decisions when choosing their learning options.
3. Choose expert-curated content that meets the changing expectations of learners. Individuals will gravitate toward content that meets their needs and which provides a rewarding learning experience. L&D teams should therefore provide different modes of learning that cater for the various learning preferences of individuals.

Some providers claim to offer curated content but there’s a question about the expertise of ‘who’ has undertaken the curation. There may also be issues around how often their catalogues are refreshed and whether they focus on the core learning challenges that individuals are facing.

Effective intelligent learning hubs, such as Hemsley Fraser’s, offer instant access to expert-curated learning. These hubs will continue to evolve to incorporate aspects such as simulations and greater interactivity with the user - through direct messaging, chat groups, coachbots and gamification - to further improve the learner experience. The important point when choosing learning options now is to ensure that employees are able to instantly access expert advice that is coherently presented, memorable, relevant to them and right for the organization.

4. Ensure that new resources are coherent. Core learning topics, such as leadership, personal effectiveness and project management have always been important in organizations and they’ll continue to be so in the future. However, new topics will be needed in the curricula of tomorrow, such as:

- **Life skills.** The boundaries between the workplace and an individual’s life outside of work have blurred. L&D's challenge therefore is to not only equip people with the skills needed in their roles but also to help them develop the skills they need to live their lives (and perform their best at work). That includes practical skills, such as helping them to manage their health and their finances, as well as developing aspirational skills that will take them to the next level and help them fulfill their career goals. There is greater recognition now that learning should create a deeper engagement that makes life better for individuals and organizations.

- **Agility.** In today’s fast-paced and competitive business environment, organizations need to be able to adapt and learn rapidly to respond to the changing challenges, opportunities and emerging trends in the market. Employees increasingly need an ‘agile mindset’, which is essentially a desire to learn and a willingness to change.

- **Digital skills.** Employees need to connect, collaborate, network, source information, share resources and persuade others through new channels, in increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) circumstances. The ability to use technology to empower people, break down barriers, collaborate in self-organizing teams and interpret customer needs will inevitably be a key learning need.

The ADDIE framework (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation and Evaluation), which was traditionally used to design learning interventions, has largely been replaced with agile learning design, in which teams collaborate simultaneously to quickly create viable and valuable learning solutions. When building new capabilities in your organization – and when designing new programs – due consideration should be given to the style, tone, appeal and learning messages of complementary resources, to ensure a coherent approach is adopted.

5. Make the learning personal. Intelligent learning hubs can offer personal ‘playlists’ of recommended content. These are combinations of tried-and-tested learning assets that are designed to achieve a specific goal. For example, they could cover a certain topic or help individuals with their transition into a new role.

An ongoing challenge for L&D teams will be to balance the needs of individuals with those of the organization. There will always be broad-brush learning that employers will want to prescribe, for example to cover key skills or competencies in a role or to achieve consistency across regions, in global organizations. This has to be balanced with the increased demand for personalized learning. With a curriculum of coherent content, you can quickly react to the changing needs of the business by building personalized learning journeys for individuals and tailoring generic content to suit their preferences. The dramatically improves the value and longevity of a learning platform.
6. **Utilize analytics for data-driven training.** Data now pervades every aspect of life. Look at the way people are monitoring their fitness levels with smart watches and tracking their dog walks with apps on their phones, obsessing about taking 10,000 steps each day. L&D teams are now analyzing everything learning-related, from skills gaps to ROI, with a similar fervor.

This includes tracking the content people are accessing, the topics and the modality of interaction. This data is used to continually refresh corporate learning platforms. Richer and more meaningful data will inevitably become available on learning preferences and learning pathways. This will provide a greater understanding of how learning is being consumed and the impact it’s having, enabling L&D teams to make more strategic talent decisions and refine their learning interventions in the future.

Supplementing learning data with engagement survey data and performance management data is a new way to create insightful analytics that will highlight personal and organizational learning needs and drive future performance.

7. **Build a blend.** With a curriculum of coherent and engaging learning, effective blended programs can be created by ‘mixing and matching’ your digital assets before, during or after face-to-face/virtual classroom sessions. You can then strategically target cohorts of users with blended programs which will excite and engage them and help them to embed their learning. And these programs can be pushed to specific populations at the touch of a button.

With an intelligent hub of learning options – covering professional, technical, vocational and life-skills areas – organizations can blend all of these different components together, to create unique playlists. So the subjects of learning can also be blended together, not just the learning methods.

Coherently-designed blended learning programs can deliver engaging, holistic, contextualized and organizationally-aligned learning experiences that will meet the needs of the business.

8. **Promote it internally.** L&D teams need to ensure that learners connect with their learning on an emotional level. This involves communicating in advance why the learning matters and how it’s relevant. If someone hasn’t fully bought into the need for development, he or she will never gain maximum benefit. This is a vital success factor and it applies to all methods of learning, whether it’s face-to-face, virtual, digital or blended. L&D teams should utilize coherent and consistent messages from their learning resources when promoting learning internally. This may involve ‘teaser campaigns’ and awareness raising to spark curiosity, as well as communication initiatives to sustain the momentum of learning and success sharing.

**Conclusion**

Coherence is not a final outcome; it’s a continual process of refinement. The principal advantage of striving to achieve a more coherent learning curriculum and learning journeys is that employees will benefit from developmentally-appropriate, relevant and well-defined learning resources and interventions. Instead of a scattergun approach, their learning will build on and consistently reinforce core messages. This is key to improving individual effectiveness and productivity – and it ultimately delivers a more engaging experience for learners.

Delivering coherent and continuous learning that is personalized to the needs of individuals demands the careful choice of expert-curated assets that suit the organization’s values, meet the required competencies and engage employees. To deliver this, L&D teams will increasingly need a broader understanding of supplier offerings, so they can choose and implement the right solutions – and avoid the dubious fads and red herring resources that flood our inboxes.

Success in the future will stem from knowing where true value comes from and how best to create a coherent combination of resources and interventions that will engage employees and positively influence their behavior.
If you’d like further information or advice on how your organization can implement more coherent learning, please contact us.

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