

RESHAPING THE LEARNING FUNCTION TO BRIDGE TALENT GAP

Training executives share new approaches. / By Josh Bersin

WITH THE CONVERGENCE OF CONTINUED BUSINESS EXPANSION and the multiplicity of talent challenges facing businesses today, a new kind of learning department is evolving—one that focuses on organizational capabilities driven by competencies, not performance.

A panel presentation, *Building a High-Impact Learning Organization*, at the 2007 ASTD International Conference & Exposition in Atlanta, outlined this new learning organization and how learning will change as a result. Participants on the panel included Whitney Shelley of Countrywide Financial, Rob Lauber of Yum! Brands, and Jim Rush of Marsh. They discussed how their learning functions are already moving in this new direction.

New learning organization characteristics

New learning organizations will emphasize on-demand, informal learning, which helps employees reach the level of expert faster and stay engaged over time. On-demand content, job

aids, performance support tools, communities of practice, and coaching programs will be among the primary offerings. Learning and its delivery will be tailored to meet the learning styles and interests of workers from baby boomers to millennials.

The new organization is driven by talent and leadership gaps, critical skills shortages, employee engagement, and corporate culture.

The organization measures success in terms of solving talent challenges such as filling critical skills shortages and assisting in meeting recruiting goals. The new learning organization is centralized at the enterprise or division level and aligned with human resources.

Media makes the message

Good Day, Countrywide is just one of the programs that employees of Countrywide Financial can tune into each week from their desktops and laptops.

Whitney Shelley, executive vice president of HR for Countrywide Financial, is a strong believer in adapting popular media into corporate learning and communication skills. Throughout her 18-year career in HR, she has taken a keen interest in the special needs of dispersed workforces.

"It's a challenge to establish and manage a culture when a substantial number of employees work from automobiles, airplanes, hotels, branch offices, and home," she says. "You have to be creative to get consistent, timely messaging and learning to this type of workforce. Big binders alone aren't the answer."

More than two years ago, Countrywide Financial, a diversified financial services company focused primarily on real estate finance, built a recording studio to create real-time employee communications. According to Shelley, Countrywide TV, located in Plano, Texas, was designed to create programs that simulated what employees see on regular television with news crawls, professional sets, virtual backgrounds, and special lighting.

Good Day, Countrywide is recorded each Friday. Employees host the show with executive guests and subject matter experts covering topics that range from the company's financial performance to new product launches.

The show is broadcast the following Monday and Wednesday, airing several times during each day. Employees can watch the five-minute show from the Countrywide TV website and are able to see other shows such as *Executive Forum* and *Countrywide People*. The company also produces targeted educational programs such as *Managing a Commissioned Workforce* and *How to Sell a New Product*.

To make learning and communications even more accessible, the company takes advantage of other delivery technologies. For instance, the company produces *Drivetime*, a CD series to which managers subscribe. Each CD track focuses on a different topic, which is delivered by a subject matter expert or corporate executive. The company also is testing MP3 files for download to portable devices.

"These unique delivery options add variety and interest to learning and help keep employees engaged," Shelley says. "People like the option of reviewing information at their own pace or going to a specific show or track just when they need the information. Most importantly, these programs provide

a medium for us to leverage and share the expertise of our SMEs and executives."

The power of sharing

When Rob Lauber became vice president of Yum! University and global learning for Yum! Brands last year, he signed up for the biggest challenge of his professional career.

Yum! Brands, based in Louisville, Kentucky, is a restaurant company with more than 34,000 restaurants in more than 100 countries. Its brands—Long John Silver's, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, and A&W Restaurants—employ an estimated 1 million workers between its company-owned and franchise partners. The company has an aggressive growth strategy, which includes building dominant restaurant brands in China, driving profitable international expansion, and improving the brand positions and returns in the United States.

The company firmly believes that building employee capability is the key to long-term success. In fact, the company's "Formula for Success" states, "People capability first ... satisfied customers and profitability follow."

"The food service business has a unique learning environment," explains Lauber. "Our restaurants are geographically dispersed, spanning more than 100 countries and territories around the globe—the vast majority of which are owned by our franchise partners. This makes high-impact learning even more critical. While we've dramatically reduced our team member turnover since spin-off in 1997 and currently have the lowest rate in the industry, we're focused on driving what we call 'customer mania' throughout the organization and providing a consistent level of great service with high product quality as well as speed.

"My mission at Yum! Brands has been to create a service-oriented organization that can effectively and efficiently support learning within each of the company's five global brands," says Lauber. "My role is to lead and influence the business conversation about learning and help raise awareness for the positive impact learning can provide—not just to the bottom line, but to individual skill development."

Lauber and his team focused on three primary initiatives during his first year on the job. The highest priority was to



The New Learning Organization

	Traditional organization	High-impact organization
FOCUS	Training as corporate education	Training as a business tool
TECHNOLOGY	Used to reduce costs	Used to facilitate and bring efficiencies and scale
PROCESSES	Program-centric processes	Highly consultative, service-centric processes
TOOLS	Selected for richness of features	Selected for supportability and scalability
MEASUREMENT	A project or a work in process	Central to everything and highly actionable
LEADERSHIP	A function within HR	CLO driven and accountable; aligned with HR but independent

SOURCE: BERSIN & ASSOCIATES

enhance the technology infrastructure for learning. Lauber envisions the team rolling out a learning management system and a learning content management system later this year.

“Everything we do should be with an eye toward maximizing training access and taking advantage of scale. As a growth-driven business, our learning infrastructure must enable us to take advantage of what is done and quickly share knowledge and learning resources around the globe,” he says. “To realize this fully, we need to give business units the ability to leverage the Internet to its fullest potential at the restaurant level.”

His second priority is to begin benchmarking learning with peers inside and outside of the restaurant business. “Best practice sharing is part of Yum!’s DNA,” Lauber says.

With his knowledge of learning costs, organizational structures, and programs offered across the enterprise, Lauber can advise executives on how the company compares with its competitors and identify areas where further investment or change can offer advantage.

Lauber’s third priority is to identify and establish measurements that can help assess the business impact of various training initiatives and programs. “The goal here is to continually raise the bar,” he explains.

“Yum! Brands business goals require efficient training at all levels—from food servers and preparers to supervisors to business leaders,” Lauber explains. “My team and I must enable and facilitate others to provide what works best for their businesses, not mandate. It’s a privilege to have a role like this, and one that’s even more challenging and exciting than I could have ever imagined. Building people capability is important to leaders at all levels of the organization.”

Learning as an agent of transformation

According to Jim Rush, chief learning officer of Marsh, a global risk consulting group, his company views learning as one critical component required for corporate transformation.

“Our CEO believes that there are three essential drivers of corporate change: marketing, technology, and learning,” he says.

Within the last year, Rush and his team have been focusing on supporting the company’s transformation from a business based on transactions to one based primarily on risk-related advisory services. As part of the effort, the learning group has been focused on two areas: leadership and risk advice.

“Our leadership programs are really not training courses. They are designed to help senior executives obtain an in-depth understanding of the corporate strategy and their role in



(Left to right) Whitney Shelley of Countrywide Financial, Rob Lauber of Yum! Brands, and Jim Rush of Marsh

its execution, as well as to help them communicate it through their own organizations,” Rush says, noting that approximately 275 executives completed the programs to date.

“Our risk advisory programs detail the company’s vision of an advisory-based business and the role that various employee groups play in achieving it. The programs also provide basic tools and knowledge to help employees begin the transformation to become risk advisors.”

About 600 employees who have face-to-face contact with customers have gone through the training. In the months to come, the training will expand its reach. “There’s much more skill development work to be done,” says Rush.

To gauge effectiveness, Rush’s team uses short questionnaires and self-evaluations in which participants briefly describe how the programs affect their job performance. The team also meets with business groups to discuss how the programs are working, the areas of greatest success, and any obstacles or issues observed.

“Ultimately, success will be measured through input from colleagues and clients, and by actual customer purchasing patterns,” Rush says.

Research shows that learning and development can definitely influence business results. The challenge ahead will be to strategically align workplace learning with current and future talent needs in organizations. **T+D**

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