The changing face of Learning & Development

The global pandemic had a huge impact on many industries, but how was this impact felt in L&D? And how should these teams operate, both now and in the future, in relation to understanding organisational change and skills demands?

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Nicole Horsman, Director of Sales and Partnerships at Virtual College, met with Nick Bate, Co-Founder and Director of Blue Eskimo, a leading specialist recruitment company which focuses on servicing the UK learning sector. They met to chat about the role that L&D plays in organisations, how it has developed in the last 18 months, and how L&D teams need to lead on identifying skills gaps of the future.

Here we sum up the key parts of their discussion, but to watch snippets and discover further insights, click on this icon wherever it appears.

What's changed in the last 18 months?

The best place to start this discussion was obviously to chat through **what changes have been seen in the industry as a whole in this last 18 months,** and early on Nick quite rightly pointed out, "It's not just the extent of organisational change, it's the speed as well."

There has been the necessity to innovate, to look at systems and programmes and reinvent how they work. Through this, L&D teams have stepped up and played an even bigger part in digital transformation and organisational change. Companies have had to review their strategies and initiatives and make them relevant for the time and place, and quickly!

Unfortunately, a lot of sectors have experienced inequality in terms of pandemic effects, with some industries feeling it more than others. However, regardless of sector, obviously the dramatic shift to remote working was felt across the board and this is where L&D teams had to respond.

All industries have been forced to change, and for the L&D industry this change has actually brought around a number of benefits. In fact, it gave L&D teams the opportunity to create really good, engaging L&D programmes to make sure that the changes were embedded properly into the organisations.

Organisational change and the role of L&D

Following this, Nicole and Nick debated **"Is the role L&D is playing in organisational change more important now than ever?"** They looked at how organisations change and develop continuously, and how many are responding to this by implementing 'Organisational Development' (OD) teams to foster and champion these changes. Where that facility isn't available, the L&D function have increasingly stepped up and taken on this role too.

As well as this, with the change in working patterns and shift towards a more hybrid approach to work, Nick stated that "L&D teams needed to look at the barriers people are facing when trying to work and learn remotely." This significant change, adopting a more hybrid style approach, has made some businesses realise the importance of L&D teams being involved in business transformation programmes to help facilitate these changes across all teams and departments.

Linked to this, Nick broached the subject of needing to attract and retain staff, and how the younger generation in particular value the opportunity for professional development. It is no longer enough for organisations to provide one-off training; employees need to see the learning journey they are about to take and understand how this will benefit them both professionally and personally. They want to feel valued within their organisation and feel that they can contribute to real change and improvement.

The increasing pressure on L&D to reskill and upskill

Nicole posed the next question, **"How adept are L&D teams in recognising the skills demands within their business?"**

Being quite frank on the topic, Nick stated that many job roles and functions of today won't even exist in ten years' time, so the pressure and demand on L&D teams to re-skill and up-skill is probably higher than it has ever been. Having this ability to plan for the future will enable these organisations to remain competitive.

In fact, the emergence of the **'business partner'** role is helping some organisations ensure they stay ahead of the game. A crucial change is that the L&D business partner has the ability to align themselves with different functions in a business to better understand their challenges. This closer working practice allows L&D teams to really structure the learning they implement to answer the problems these individuals are discovering and fill these skills gaps.

Can L&D teams influence leadership teams?

Discussing the ability to recognise skills gaps also moved the conversation on to **"Whether L&D functions are able to influence leadership teams'.** The answer to this question came in two parts, the **value of the people** and the **value of the training.**

Nick commented that "There is an increasing opportunity for L&D teams to influence leaders, as fairly recently these leaders have recognised that the development of their people has a direct impact on their bottom line." Therefore, investing in people ultimately results in an investment in the business. Recognising this shift has opened up the opportunity for many L&D professionals to evidence the need and requirement for a robust training programme to encourage this development further.

Similarly, for L&D functions to continue working closely with these senior leaders, they need to be able to demonstrate the value that this training programme brings. Collating evidence and stats and linking these to business change is a great way to demonstrate this added value.

As well as influencing leadership teams, there is growing importance in the need for them to engage with other key stakeholders across the business to avoid being kept out of the loop. In fact, remote working has enabled this, as it has taken away the physical barriers once encountered as leaders, like everyone, had to learn how to use and master systems and solutions to enable remote working.

The roles and skills that have been required

Drawing on Nick's experience, Nicole was keen to ask **"From Blue Eskimo's perspective, what roles/skills have been needed in the last 18 months?"**

The impact of COVID has varied according to industry, and unfortunately the L&D sector was hard hit across various roles throughout 2020. What was unclear at first was how the industry would react in 2021. Having been 'paused', it now seems that 2021 was the start of a new beginning.

As we all know, the lockdown meant businesses needed to look to digital to keep going and, with this, there grew a demand for skills in this area. Number one was digital learning design skills, and not just content developers but instructional designers too: roles that needed to look at incorporating blended learning and the journey and experience this could offer learners. Obviously, the increase in digital skills also requires people who have platform skills and can play a role in digital transformation programmes, something a lot of businesses have been going through. Aligned to this are client success managers who play an important role in understanding these transformation programmes and how to make them successful.

The changing landscape of L&D

Bringing the chat to a close, Nicole's last point was **"Organisational change is a big part of L&D, along with leadership & management, behaviour change and digital transformation – making it a huge role,"** with which Nick completely agreed.

The landscape of L&D has changed and will continue to change. Things have been discovered since the pandemic, such as skills gaps and the need for businesses to undertake a competency framework to keep on top of where there are potential shortfalls. If L&D haven't got the skills to identify all this, then the business will suffer.

If you want to listen to the whole conversation, you can do here.