

Learning and Training

By Allan Schweyer



INTRODUCTION

Few engagement tactics are as powerful, motivating and beneficial to both engagement and organizational performance as learning. Year after year, in surveys by leading consulting firms and research groups, learning and career opportunities are rated at or near the top of the most motivating benefits provided by organizations to employees and channel partners. In BlessingWhite's *2013 Employee Engagement Research Update*, for example, the lead reason employees gave for leaving organizations was "... don't have opportunities to grow or advance here." Learning was also the fourth most critical driver of engagement among survey takers in the research.¹

Organizations often overlook the importance of engagement in developing and disseminating their training or learning materials. At the same time, they overlook the impact of training and learning as a tactic when implementing any type of engagement effort for customers, retailers, distributors and vendors.

THE CHALLENGES

Despite all the benefits of learning, many of us avoid typical training because it's often slow-paced, uninspiring and time-consuming - in other words, it fails to engage us. While learning in general is a powerful engagement and performance driver, it's much more effective when the learning activities themselves are engaging. Moreover, as the urgency to convey knowledge quickly, flexibly and inexpensively grows, traditional learning continues to cede more and more territory to e-learning and its subsets (e.g., mobile learning). Yet the challenge to make e-learning compelling and engaging for the learner is perhaps even steeper than for traditional, classroom learning.

Of course, learning that can be termed "formal" - whether in a classroom or online - represents only the tip of the iceberg. Various forms of informal learning continue to grow in importance. In addition to learning by doing, we learn by reading and seeing.

Today, tremendous volumes of "thought leadership" produced by academics, consultants, think tanks and companies are available live at conferences and on webinars, radio and TV. Even more is accessible online in the form of articles, books, essays, presentations, videos and other media. The extent to which any of the above is engaging is the often the largest determinant of whether it gets used and passed on, and whether it makes any sort of impact.

While formal training and informal on-the-job learning might dominate educational efforts for employees and channel partners, thought leadership is the primary vehicle organizations use to "teach" customers, suppliers and the community or larger society about themselves, their ideas and their offerings. White papers, presentations, PR, videos, conferences and the like are used by well over 80% of U.S. organizations² to inform consumers, corporate buyers, the community and other stakeholders by introducing new ideas, educating consumers or buyers about trends and products or services, and shaping public opinion around social, environmental and other issues. Organizations use thought leadership to educate, build reputation and, if done correctly, to tangentially increase market share and revenue.

The challenge is to rise above the information glut to bring attention to ideas. While most learning may be intrinsically engaging at some level, the mountains of material available (combined with greater pressures on most people's time) make it difficult for organizations to find audiences for their thought leadership, and even attentive students for their training. Employee engagement during training and courses cannot be taken for granted, nor can it be assumed that investment in employees' development will necessarily translate into higher levels of engagement and commitment afterward.

While most learning may be intrinsically engaging at some level, the mountains of material available make it difficult for organizations to find audiences for their thought leadership, and even attentive students for their training.

1 - BlessingWhite, *Employee Engagement Research Update*, January 2013, p.10

2 - Laurie Young, *Thought Leadership*, Kogan Page, 2013

New techniques and old, including interactive learning, scenario-based training and so-called “gamification” techniques, to name a few, are being updated, digitized and deployed to capture the attention of learners, keep them coming back and help them retain what they’ve learned. Whatever the technique, it’s critical to gain and hold participants’ interest by tapping into their intrinsic motivators like autonomy, mastery, social interaction, progress and purpose.

Learning should be explored in the context of its usefulness as an engagement tactic and the degree to which it can be made more engaging itself. Learning is a powerful instrument in engagement, but it encompasses a vast range of activities and tools, making it ubiquitous – available constantly and in unlimited supply. Thus learning itself must be engaging in order to stand out and be utilized by intended audiences. And while training and development is a critical component of internal talent management for organizations, it’s also used extensively with other key stakeholders.

LEARNING & TALENT

In its 2013 survey of C-Suite executives from around the world, the Conference Board found that “human capital” remains the number one global challenge among organizations.³ Rounding out the top four are “operational excellence,” “innovation” and “customer relationships.” Few would argue that talent is the key ingredient to overcoming these challenges. The extent to which people are engaged determines whether they innovate, lead effectively, treat customers well and execute in their daily activities.

Organizations must also think beyond employees where engagement is concerned. Engaged customers, partners and even volunteers can make an enormous difference to innovation, operational excellence and most human capital challenges. Fortunately, many of the same engagement tactics that drive employee engagement also propel other stakeholder engagement.

In driving engagement, there are myriad important factors and tactics, but among them, learning and career-enhancement opportunities are possibly the most powerful. In its *2012 Global Engagement* report, Aon Hewitt reported that “career opportunities” – including learning & development – top the list of engagement drivers for employees around the world, as well as most employee subsets, all generations of workers and most types of employees, including sales, operations, management and technical disciplines.

Employees expect their organizations to invest in them and to provide opportunities for them to further their careers. Likewise, channel partners become more engaged and productive when the organizations they represent invest in their product knowledge. But learning as a driver of engagement isn’t limited to employees or channel partners. Customers and communities frequently engage with organizations and their missions through learning and education as well.

It can be argued that for many business-to-business customers, learning and the career opportunities learning affords are among the most important drivers of engagement. Executives, buyers and others in organizations of all sizes consume white papers, books, articles and other thought leadership materials at an astounding rate, such that corporate spending on thought leadership today roughly equals what is spent on advertising.⁴ According to research by ITSMA (Information Technology Services Marketing Association) in 2013, 88% of U.S. business buyers said thought leadership is important to get onto their shortlists for sales opportunities.⁵

For consumers and communities, learning is also gaining an increasing share of marketing and PR efforts. Consumers are more likely to trust and “engage” with a brand or product if they know more about it (obviously excluding organizations that engage in nefarious practices they wish to hide). Organizations undertake tremendous efforts through websites, commercials, articles – and, increasingly, games and reward-based learning programs – to educate communities about their mission, social responsibility initiatives and their care for such things as the environment, health and human development. Leading professional services organizations and others also use learning to shape the public discourse and engage citizens around ideas or concepts they seek to promote or introduce.

3 - See: http://www.aon.com/human-capital-consulting/thought-leadership/talent_mgmt/2013_Trends_in_Global_Employee_Engagement.jsp

4 - Laurie Young, *Thought Leadership: Prompting Businesses to Think and Learn*, 2013, Kogan Page

5 - ITSMA, 2013: *How Buyers Consume Content, Knowledge, and Wisdom*, see: www.itsma.com

LEARNING & PERFORMANCE

As Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman puts it: *"It is a truth, universally acknowledged, that education is the key to economic success."*⁶ Investments in learning and development pay enormous dividends, whether considering individuals (college graduates earn about 35% more per annum than high school graduates)⁷; nations (there's a near perfect correlation between national standards of living and average per-capita level of education)⁸; and organizations.

For at least the past decade, researchers – Dr. Laurie Bassi foremost among them – have shown that by every measure, organizations that spend more on training perform better.⁹ And while companies should plan their learning budgets carefully, even blind spending on training often results in remarkable gains, driving home the message that investments in learning generate more highly engaged employees and stakeholders. Research conducted by Bassi and Dan McMurrer reveals that firms residing in the 3rd and 4th quartile of spending on training outperform those in the bottom two quartiles significantly and across all standard measures of business success.

Thus learning forms a central pillar in any organization's efforts to engage employees, partners, customers, communities and other stakeholders. But learning is a broad term, encompassing formal and informal methods and including far more information on most topics than any human could wade through in a lifetime of effort.

Today, ubiquitous information threatens organizations' ability to gain even the most fleeting attention of stakeholders, let alone engage and inform them. And so the focus must widen from the use of learning and education to engage to the deployment of educational techniques that capture the attention and the imaginations of learners.

'...of 1,500 classrooms visited, 85% of them had engaged less than 50% of the students. In other words, only 15% of the classrooms had more than half of the class at least paying attention to the lesson.'

~ Dr. Michael Schmoker, Results Now¹⁰

ENGAGING LEARNERS

Organizational efforts at learning and education are rarely confined to employees. Channel partners who represent partner organizations – often their main sales forces – must be educated too.

Once the right channel partners are onboard, you should change your focus to reducing the time it takes them to become productive on your behalf. In the spirit of engagement and building a partner engagement culture, think less about their obligations and more about how you can offer support to get them up and running with minimal effort on their part. A great deal of this will be accomplished through training and other forms of learning.

Similarly, suppliers should understand the end products and overall goals of their customers and, in most non-commodity businesses today, customers themselves should be educated about ideas, markets, products and services. And while superficial customer/consumer education might be possible through traditional advertising, true learning is only accomplished through the creation and dissemination of thought leadership in all its forms.

6 - See: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/07/opinion/07krugman.html?_r=0

7 - See: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/the-rising-cost-of-not-going-to-college/sdt-higher-education-02-11-2014-0-01/>

8 - See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi>

9 - See: <http://home.uchicago.edu/~ludwigj/papers/BassiEtal-Singapore-2002.pdf>

10 - See: <http://www.amazon.com/Results-Now-Unprecedented-Improvements-Teaching/dp/1416603581>

The point, again, is that learning and education are powerful drivers of stakeholder engagement. For some, learning opens new career opportunities. For others, it helps them understand a product or idea and how it might further their professional and/or business interests. But the flood of articles and white papers, magazines, journals from consulting firms, videos and slide presentations – not to mention the tens of thousands of business, technology, science and other professional books published each year – make it difficult to capture audience attention for the period of time necessary to actually educate or inform them. The volume of information today makes it necessary for educators to seek ways to engage audiences, both through superior content and valuable information, and by using techniques that connect with learners at an emotional level.

Accurate and valuable content is a must, and many, if not most, organizations are capable of producing good content in their areas of expertise or practice. Creating an emotional connection with the learner is normally far more difficult and often completely overlooked. Yet lessons and best practices can be learned from other industries – perhaps most directly, the entertainment industry,

THE LURE OF STORYTELLING

Despite information overload, American adults spend about 4 hours or more watching TV programming every day^{11 12}. They may be watching TV instead of taking online courses or reading white papers and business books because they engage with TV's stories and characters at an emotional level, whether movies, sports, sitcoms or game shows.

The lure of storytelling allows even mediocre movies and TV programs to dwarf the attention paid to the most important business books and research papers. Organizations must strive to make their content creative and captivating, and usually with nowhere near the budget of even the least expensive television productions.

Storytelling is an important and credible tactic used in even the most rigorous academic work where general audiences are sought. Case studies featuring real challenges – especially those that employ the proven components of antagonists and protagonists overcoming conflict – work well.

Based on research for his 2012 bestseller *Drive*, author Dan Pink recommends a simple formula he calls the “Pixar Pitch” for storytelling. Entertainment giant Pixar uses this approach consistently to engage and “move” audiences:

“Once upon a time there was a widowed fish named Marlin who was extremely protective of his only son, Nemo. *Every day* Marlin warned Nemo of the ocean’s dangers and implored him not to swim far away. *One day*, in an act of defiance, Nemo ignores his father’s warning and swims into the open water. *Because of that*, he is captured by a diver and ends up as a pet in a fish tank of a dentist in Sydney. *Because of that*, Marlin sets off on a journey to recover Nemo, enlisting the help of other sea creatures along the way. *Until finally* Marlin and Nemo find each other, reunite and learn that love depends on trust.”¹³

In communicating their ideas through thought leadership or formal courses, authors might engage their audiences using these same techniques. Obviously, they’ll drop “once upon a time” from their narratives, but consider variations of the passage below and how it might be used to introduce a technical paper about advances in chemical compounds:

“Once upon a time a junior researcher named Pat discovered that by adding a chemical to jet fuel, most commercial aircraft could travel 25% further. *Every day* Pat tried to convince her leaders and customers that her process should be adopted. *One day*, without telling her bosses, Pat applied to present at a national aviation conference. *Because of that*, she was able to share her findings and convince a large portion of the audience of the merits of her discovery. *Because of that*, her company began to receive enquiries and requests for the product. *Until finally* Pat’s bosses realized the importance of her breakthrough and turned it into a blockbuster product.”

11 - <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm>

12 - http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/01/tv-digital-devices_n_3691196.html

13 - Dan Pink, *To Sell is Human*, Riverhead Books, 2012, p.171

Other tactics include the use of scenarios and games to capture and hold learners' attention. The next chapter offers an examination of "gamification" tactics in engagement that are highly relevant to the design of training and learning.

SUMMARY

Few would argue that learning is a critical component of engagement at all levels and for all stakeholders. It's possibly the most important element in employee engagement, and it's becoming essential in customer engagement wherever sophisticated products or services are offered. Learning can generate interest in organizations' latest ideas and/or offerings and can be used to shape corporate reputations at the community, national and international levels. But learning is broad and learning opportunities surround everyone during every waking hour.

To compete, you must make your learning and information content compelling. Not only must it be good in the traditional sense - accurate, valuable, expert - it must engage learners emotionally. Unfortunately, even the most brilliant ideas and concepts can be lost if they fail to engage. Use techniques perfected by storytellers, gamers and other creative disciplines to powerfully tap the emotions of your target audiences and engage them in your material.