



## Self-Service Learning

### INSIDE:

- Recalibrate, simplify, and align learning
- Help learners adapt to today's environment

How do you manage, monitor, and maintain the quality of learning when people are dishing up their own curriculum from a vast menu of offerings?

# Self-Service Learning

How do you manage, monitor, and maintain the quality of learning when people are dishing up their own curriculum from a smorgasbord of offerings?

From the gas station pump to the checkout line, most of us don't even think twice about the self-service options that are now available to us as consumers. Will a wave of self-service learning be next?

At the ISA-The Association of Learning Providers Annual Business Retreat this past spring, this was just one of the provocative questions members discussed as they explored current trends shaking up the world of training, learning, and talent development.

While no industry is immune to disruption, if you're in the business of learning, it can feel like an assault from all sides. With business models and markets changing at lightning speed, it's on the shoulders of learning, HR, and talent management professionals to make sure people have the skills to adapt and succeed in this new world. At the same time, new ways to access learning and a new audience of learners are bringing disruption to the training environment itself.

"There are no easy answers," says Pamela J. Schmidt, executive director of ISA. "That's why our members value the dedicated time they have at the business retreat to tap into their collective knowledge and experiences and share ideas and solutions."

Keynotes from a diverse slate of business and learning thought leaders—including Josh Bersin, Linda Kaplan Thaler, Peter Senge, Liz Wiseman, and leaders from ISA member companies—sparked lively discussion and interest among the members, all of whom are executives at leading training, learning, and performance consulting firms. In his research-packed presentation on industry trends, Josh Bersin of Bersin by Deloitte laid out a 30,000-foot view of the disruptive technologies and human capital shifts today's learning leaders are trying to address. Of the 10 trends he outlined for 2015, members identified these three as most significant in terms of their impact and importance:

- Engagement, retention, culture, and inclusion have become front-burner issues.
- Skills are now currency, which means corporate learning takes on increasing importance.
- It's time to address the overwhelmed employee: How do we redesign and simplify the workplace?

## FACING THE FACTS

An undercurrent in Bersin's presentation was the reality that too many in L&D and HR have been hunkering down to address the immediate tactical issues without paying enough

attention to the broader, seismic changes happening all around them. The workforce changed out from underneath us during the recovery from the recession, he noted, and the ones who didn't recognize what was happening are now at risk of falling further and further behind.

The changing workforce also is facilitating a power shift that has implications for how organizations engage, develop, and retain talent. For a growing employee population of digital natives, the Internet has become not only a megaphone for broadcasting dissatisfaction with an employer but also an efficient screening tool for weeding out undesirable places to work. Along with disappearing hierarchical structures and the different career aspirations and goals of Millennial workers, this adds yet another layer of complexity to the talent management challenge in an increasingly tight talent market.

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## QUICK TIPS

- **Recalibrate:** In today's environment, L&D's job isn't just building skills; it's also creating a culture of learning. You can't fulfill that role if you don't know how, when, where, and what will help your employees learn best.
  - **Simplify:** Evaluate whether your learning programs are adding value or adding to the complexity. Sometimes an outside perspective is needed to better "see" what you have and help you streamline it.
  - **Align:** Every initiative or solution you consider needs to align with the organization's goals and drive business results, not just a training directive. This is essential for building credibility with leaders, as well as the learning population.
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## AND WHAT ABOUT THAT SELF-SERVICE QUESTION?

Today's employees want to grow and develop, and if their organizations don't offer the learning they're looking for, they'll go find it on their own. For any learning professionals holding on to the belief that this phenomenon might be a minor blip, a path that would only appeal to a select group of learners, ISA members believe that LinkedIn's \$1.5 billion purchase of Lynda.com should be a wakeup call for everyone. It's not just here to stay—it's only going to get bigger.

That means the real question is this: How do you manage, monitor, and maintain the quality of learning when people are dishing up their own curriculum from a smorgasbord of on-demand offerings, ranging from YouTube videos to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to online courses, each with varying degrees of value and relevance?

The first step is to realize that the options aren't either to fight it or to surrender to it. For most organizations and their employees, a mix of in-house, external, and online/on-demand offers the best of all worlds. The good news is that people are hungry for learning. The opportunity for learning providers and professionals is in knowing how to develop, implement, and curate the experiences that deliver results, both for the learner and for the business.

But there's no getting around the fact that this is a huge change—and one that can feel very threatening. Another keynoter at the retreat, Linda Kaplan Thaler, the creative mind behind the Aflac duck, the Toys "R" Us theme song, and many other memorable and award-winning ad campaigns, challenged members to let go of the safety net and do the hard work necessary to move forward.

Just as Bersin pointed out the risks of failing to pay attention, Kaplan Thaler highlighted the dangers of getting too comfortable—and the potential huge rewards of staying hungry, motivated, and self-determined.

It's a lesson for our learners, too. At every organizational level, the nature of work is changing with the increased complexity and speed of business. In what feels like a very risky environment, we're looking for safety nets. That's only logical. But not only are the comfort zones few and far between, they potentially could hold people back. Kaplan Thaler cited her own experience and that of many other successful people—some well known, some not—who got ahead not because they could coast by on their "natural gifts" or connections but because they learned to find their passion, stay flexible, and dig down and do the work it takes to succeed, even in the face of challenge and risk.

The question for training professionals to consider is whether or not your learning programs are preparing people to walk the tightrope without a safety net. Kaplan Thaler's message is that the "grit factor" is more important than the "it factor," and the good news is that anyone can possess it. But for most, it's something that has to be developed, with clear steps that make it tangible and achievable. From high-potential development to

employee engagement, this is a real-world problem that training should be taking the lead on. Many ISA members talked about how they have been focusing on these issues in their own work in response to the business environment, as well as the business and learning challenges their clients say they're dealing with.

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## GRIT VS. IT FACTORS

Take a page from Linda Kaplan Thaler's "grit" over "it" factor, and help learners adapt to today's environment:

- **Lose the safety net:** Learners need to realize that success starts with stepping outside their comfort zones. Leaders need to realize that people *will* trip up, and they need to create a culture where it's OK to take risks.
- **Small steps can lead to big change:** Programs designed to put people in "stretch" mode can be effective in helping people grow—or they can shut down confidence and motivation. Help people get more comfortable with discomfort by starting with smaller challenges and celebrating the incremental successes along the way.
- **Focus on adaptability:** Kaplan Thaler calls it "bending like bamboo," this ability to flex and remain resilient even when people or circumstances try to knock you down. Every idea isn't going to be a winner. The most successful people have learned how to adapt, grow, and keep going.

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## YOU DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING—AND THAT'S A GOOD THING

While those who fail to keep up with the realities of today's business, technology, and learning needs quickly could be working themselves out of a job, that doesn't mean you can—or even should—know everything.

Liz Wiseman, author of three best-selling books and a former Oracle University vice president, delivered a rousing closing keynote that had ISA members on their feet. Everyone could relate to having held at least one job in which they felt under-qualified or in over their heads. Wiseman encouraged people to see the value in that naiveté and view it as an asset in a world where constant change means nothing is more important than learning.

With disruption upending all sides of the industry, it's not easy to know what will stick and what will be another passing fad. But, Wiseman reminds us, there's a gift in being clueless, if you're willing to accept it. When you're clueless, you're curious, so you don't hesitate to seek out expert advice, ideas, and resources wherever you can find them.

You're not afraid to improvise and push the boundaries—in part because you don't know where the boundaries are. Particularly in light of the big strategic questions Bersin had posed the day before, it was a good reminder that learning professionals need to be eating their own cooking and remaining lifelong learners themselves.

"When Liz Wiseman talked about the need to stay curious and maintain that hunger for learning, it really connected with our

## Learning professionals need to be eating their own cooking and remaining lifelong learners themselves.

members. After all, that's why they're involved with ISA," says ISA's Schmidt. "Working with these firms, I see that dedication every day. They're the providers who keep learning to stay ahead of the trends so they can be best prepared to help their clients."

Of course, even with the significance of the larger, long-term concerns, it doesn't mean the immediate, tactical issues are any less challenging or less important. The juggling act continues, and that's one of the reasons internal training and learning leaders are looking to a variety of external partners for a needed perspective that goes beyond the walls of the company. For ISA members, this focused time with leading thinkers in the industry, including their peers across the training, learning, and performance consulting spectrum, is a valuable way to exponentially widen that view.

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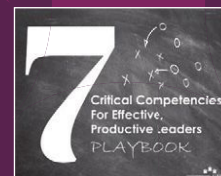
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