

Re-engineering Learning for Competitive Advantage

by Clark Quinn and Jay Cross, May 2002

It's an open secret that learning has become the ultimate competitive advantage in our dynamic, knowledge-based society.

As the pace of business accelerates, the knowledge worker who is not a quick study drowns in a tide of new information. Processes change so rapidly that the employee who is not learning all the time soon lacks the skills to function on the job. In a world of explosive change, the riches flow to organizations that are fast enough on their feet to turn on a dime; rapid learning is the price of being nimble. Jack Welch exhorts us to add to our organizations' intellectual capital every day.

At the individual level, the ability to learn is the key to personal and professional success.

You got the message: LEARN.

Learn Better, Compete Better

"If you think you can do a thing, or think you can't do a thing, you're right." ■ *Henry Ford*

Successful businesses continually improve their fundamental processes. They streamline the way they do things; they improve the level of service they provide to customers; they strive to become more productive. The winners tweak every function in sight -- sales, service, logistics, production, finance, communications, with one exception -- LEARNING.

Most knowledge workers are learning far below their capacity. They aren't rapid learners. Ineffective schooling has blunted their skills of reasoning, habits of reflection, and understanding of mastery. When any other aspect of the business value chain is seriously broken, we fix it. When learning is sub-par, most organizations do nothing.

If learning is the ultimate competitive weapon, the organization with superior learners wins. The fact of the matter is that learning is a skill, not a hardwired trait. People can beef up their capacity to learn at any age. Researchers have discovered numerous techniques to improve learning.

Why haven't businesses embraced helping their people become better learners?

- Businesses are extremely short-sighted. They are the lumberjack who is too busy chopping down trees to stop and sharpen his axe.
- Decision-makers have assumed that an individual's learning ability is a hard-wired constant. Schooling reinforces the perception that some learners are gifted, some are slow, and that's just the way it is.
- Knowledge jobs have replaced factory jobs but vestiges of the industrial age live on. Frederick Winslow Taylor told the worker, "You're not paid to think."

If Olympic athletes approached running the marathon the way business people approach learning, they would show up for the race without having practiced.

As more and more organizations compete on knowledge and learning, the winners will be those whose people have learned to how to improve their learning. They will benchmark their learning performance. They will reflect and practice. They will become ever-better learners.

We call this 'meta-learning', and we believe it's the key to maintaining competitive advantage in the knowledge age. This is *not* "The Learning Organization" as espoused by Peter Senge and others in *The Fifth Discipline*. It's all too easy for a Learning Organization to laud learning for its own sake. Meta-learning focuses on improving a process used to meet the corporate mission. If it doesn't positively impact the bottom line, it's not a good application of meta-learning.

Thought Process Reengineering

"The best learning happens in real life with real problems and real people and not in classrooms." ■ *Charles Handy*

How do you optimize learning and doing? The same way you optimize other business processes: you review the process, looking for opportunities to improve, and benchmark against best practices. You do the same thing for thought processes, only they're a little harder to document and examine. Fortunately, there's research out there to help us.

In this case, you want to look explicitly at learning and problem-solving processes. And when you do, you find that a lot of what's known is not getting put into practice. Schools are notorious for being resistant to the results of research. More importantly, it's a relatively recent concept to put the teaching of thinking and learning alongside the 3 R's; the call for a 4th 'R', reasoning, has not yet had an effect on your employees.

The not-surprising consequence of not explicitly teaching learning and thinking is that people who never improve the way they learn. Sure, there are those 10% who succeed no matter what you do to them, and they rise to the top. Your top

performers come from this breed. So how do you unleash the rest of the employees to even come close to this ideal?

ROI

It is by teaching that we teach ourselves, by relating that we observe, by affirming that we examine, by showing that we look, by writing that we think, by pumping that we draw water into the well. ■ *Henri-Frédéric Amiel*

Are you prepared to take advantage of meta-learning improvements when they arise?

Imagine you are chief learning officer for a major firm. You have an opportunity to offer a new course, Mavis Beacon Teaches Reading, over your corporate intranet. Research shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that knowledge workers who take the four-hour course improve their reading speed and retention by 20%. The course costs \$19/seat. Would you offer it to the members of your organization? We asked fifty learning professionals at eLearning Forum; not a one was willing to offer the reading course.

Think about that. Your knowledge workers need to read. The average knowledge worker spends 15 hours a week reading email, faxes, memos, documentation, briefings, white papers, and reports. Improve that 20% and free up nearly four weeks a year to devote to other things.

The Examined Life

The unexamined life is not worth living. ■ *Socrates*

We've found that once you've raised people's consciousness, many of them will embark on the self-learning path, where they become aware of their own learning and take responsibility for improving it. They probably need help destroying wrong-headed myths about what they can't change and what they can, but after that, the intrinsic metaphor of enlightened self-interest kicks in.

You could do it yourself, and would if you even had thought about it; the overhead isn't onerous. In our experience it is remarkably rewarding intrinsically, and the outcome tends to be very rewarding extrinsically as well!

The result of improving the focusing on process is summed up in the Chinese aphorism, "Give a man a fish and satisfy his hunger for today. Teach a man to fish and satisfy his hunger forever." Improving the process yields greater benefits still. "Teach the man to be a better fisherman, and his village will not go hungry." Substitute *learning* for *fishing*.

Setting people up to learn how to learn ignites a process of perpetual self-improvement.

What to do

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes. ■ *Marcel Proust*

If you're going to make a go of this, you need a few elements above the standard organizational development approach. First, you need to understand what are the unique elements that contribute to a 'learning to learn' culture, what the models are for learning and the methods to improve learning. Additional opportunities that are available include redesigning information and learning systems to explicitly support learning to learn.

Many people aim to be better than the competition. That leads to a continuous cycle of improvement, with one obstacle. There is no consideration in place to optimize the resource implementing the improvement, your people.

We're recommending that you focus on continually and optimally improving the resource that gives you execution, knowledge, and innovation. The steps necessary are to consider the long-term benefits of optimizing, and then develop and execute a plan to incorporate optimization into your business processes. Only you can choose to do it, but better you than the competition.

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