

The changing face of Learning & Development

L&D is always evolving to keep up with the business environment, but one thing that never changes is the focus on people.

We sat down with a few of our consultants to discuss how some of the enduring topics of professional development have changed over the years, and also to share some of their experiences at the coal face. With over 100 years' experience in the L&D sector between them, there was plenty of experience to draw on!

How have the skills we need to be successful at work changed over your careers?



“Resilience has evolved”

Jessica Bell, Consultant

The concept of resilience has been on an interesting journey over the past 25 years (not that I've been around for all of that time!). It started out with this idea of mental toughness, of being able to soldier on no matter the obstacles in your way. You could call this the 'stiff upper lip' approach to stress.

It then moved onto the idea of nurturing a work/life balance to avoid burnout, and later became about what an individual can do to thrive under pressure.

Right now, resilience is increasingly incorporating new thinking on wellbeing and mental health - a welcome and exciting development!

I love coaching resilience because it can initiate such positive transformations for people. I remember a man came up to me in the second workshop of a resilience programme and said that part one had saved his marriage. After being encouraged to think about looking after himself and those close to him, he had been able to reassess his relationship and restore some harmony there. That doesn't happen in most jobs!





“In a disruptive world, the way we lead teams has had to change”

Owen Toms, Senior Consultant

As you'd expect, changing technology has had a huge impact on what learners need from a development programme.

With the rise of remote teams, it's become really important for managers to learn about virtual leadership - how can you build rapport and lead a productive team when they don't meet each other? If a leader needs to consider the deliverables across multiple teams in multiple geographic locations, you can't have them worrying about awkward conference calls.

I remember working with a leader who held very strongly onto the belief that remote teams could only ever have transactional relationships, and it took a while to break that belief down. It was about asking the right questions in virtual meetings to build personal relationships; even simple things like 'what are everyone's biggest successes since we last spoke?' can help us recognise that the name at the top of an email belongs to a real person.

One thing that really interests me is the example of online gaming. Here you have genuine friendships and teams forming in an entirely digital space: sometimes gamer friends don't even know each other's real names, but they still manage to build high levels of rapport. By presenting a challenge that can only be overcome by teamwork, success in the game breeds mutual respect and exhilaration - the building blocks of friendship. We could learn a lot from that community!



“Inclusive leadership has shifted into the spotlight”

Dexter Davies, Consultant

D&I has rightly become much more of a focus in recent years. It's important that organisations recognise where there are systemic barriers, hurdles and biases that create an unequal playing field and difference in opportunity.

However, understanding the root causes of difference in opportunity and implementing strategies for how to overcome them isn't straightforward, and it's easy to get lost in a somewhat political area.

For example, I've seen a rise in organisations requesting development of 'inclusive leadership' - a term that I hadn't heard much of until 18 -24 months ago, and on which there has been little academic research or conceptual clarity.

When I hear this, I'm always curious as to what problem they are trying to solve, and whether they have identified the correct root cause. For instance, an organisation may invest heavily in mandatory e-learning modules that focus on diversity, only to lose a lot of their most talented female staff due to poor organisational policies and procedures surrounding maternity leave and returning to work!

This is a tricky area and one that investing in an evidence-based approach up front will enable the right issues to be addressed effectively.



What changes in the way we work have you noticed?



“What it means to be ‘at work’ has changed”

Elaine White, Principal Consultant

Agile working (which 20 years ago you would probably call ‘time management’) is becoming a subject of increasing interest as technology further blurs the line between work and home.

What does it mean to be ‘at work’ when we check our emails on the train and video call our colleagues from the kitchen? Today’s managers want to know how they can get the best out of their people even if they aren’t always in the office.

It comes down to the question of how we choose to measure success in this new, more flexible working world. Managers also have the challenge of ensuring their team don’t overwork: you don’t want to limit someone’s flexibility, but clearly if emails are coming through at 1am every night including weekends, that’s a source of concern.

The flip side of this is ‘presenteeism’ - when employees work long hours but achieve very little in that time. To me, this is one of the biggest issues facing the modern workplace, and one we need to tackle if we’re serious about boosting productivity and morale. There are many causes of presenteeism, but helping leaders to create an engaging work environment where staff feel safe to go home at 5pm, or admit when they’re overwhelmed, is definitely a start on the path to dealing with it.



“Time has become even more precious, and so it must be invested in the best way”

Louise Oliver, Principal Consultant & Paul Jewitt-Harris, Consultant Director



Louise: When it comes to training managers and junior leaders, there is a growing tension between the traditional one-day workshops and the rise of bitesize learning.

Not only do different sectors have different tendencies (for example, the finance sector places an emphasis on rapid, agile learning), but individuals within organisations will also have a preference for the way they like to learn. It’s therefore vital that programme content is adapted to accommodate the immediacy that some technology forms offer. Ultimately, the debate revolves around the issue of what learning is and what we want from a development course. Is it about learning tactical skills and a common language, or is it about undergoing a transformation in the way the learner approaches work? If the latter, that needs more time than five minutes a day.

Paul: It’s not all moving towards bitesize learning either; we worked with one company that used to do a series of workshops over several weeks, but has now shifted to a holistic four-day residential. They find this offers deeper learning and reflection that can change behaviours and mindsets permanently. This is particularly important for this company because it is seeking to embed an identity shift in the attendees, helping them to move from seeing themselves as civil engineers to leaders. The key, just as it always has been, is to manage expectations for the organisation and for the learner. The last thing you want is people feeling that valuable content has been rushed past, or that a programme has failed to achieve its original goals.





“The world has become increasingly globalised, but we must still appreciate our cultural differences”

Owen Toms, Senior Consultant & Andrew Whyatt-Sames, Principal Consultant



Owen: With the rise of global organisations and teams, the question of how best

to navigate cultural differences in programme delivery has come to the fore. You can't just deliver blanket content for every country - there are societal, organisational and sometimes legal variations that must be dealt with sensitively.

Andrew: It's also important to tailor the coaching approach to the audience as well as the content. I've worked extensively with Japanese businesses, and the expectations of a learning and development course differ greatly between there and the UK. I remember a joint British and Japanese cohort that became a challenge because the Japanese delegates were accustomed to a much more hierarchical and didactic style of learning than their UK counterparts.

At the beginning of another session in Japan the delegates were led in a chant of “Our company is great!” For them it was about building a shared sense of identity, but it was a very long way from anything I'd ever done in the UK!

Owen: Ultimately, the important thing is that we constantly interrogate our content and our approach to ensure it is still relevant and effective in different circumstances. Human psychology is much the same, even if the language isn't!

Where do you see things moving in the next few years?



“We'll see more of a premium on soft skills”

Dexter Davies, Consultant & Dominic Mahony, Product and Delivery Director



Dexter: With phrases like the Fourth Industrial Revolution entering common parlance, and the effects of AI and automation already being felt, the workers of the future are going to need very different skillsets. This isn't a

cause for doom and gloom though - learning new skills keeps our brains fit and helps us find new passions.

This is going to make the ability to learn and unlearn hugely important. The leaders of the future won't necessarily be experts in a subject, but they will be the most adaptable and quick learning. I think that the historical idea of learning a skill and then doing that for 40 years is probably dead, if it was ever real at all.

Dominic: We're going to see more of a premium placed on soft skills too; things like empathy and creativity will be useful well into the future because they aren't role-specific and are unlikely to be perfected by a computer anytime soon. Ultimately, AI is going to make us more human by encouraging us to develop the qualities that they haven't worked out algorithms for!

