

Leaders Leading Learning in the Digital Age

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It's a notion we've heard time and again, but the digital age has truly disrupted almost everything in our personal and professional lives. This has been no different for leaders, who have had to develop and tailor their management styles to adjust to new ways of working brought on by technological advancement and globalization. So much data is now collected that the information available to

us has real power to influence future decisions, meaning that leading and learning have become inherently linked to one another. Consequently, the traits required to lead today are different from those needed five, 10, or 15 years ago – creating a need for leaders to upskill, challenge behaviors and change ways of thinking.

How we learn

First and foremost, the way we learn has been changed by the digital revolution; leaders now have much more choice in how they develop skills and behaviors for themselves and their teams. For many, learning has become increasingly self-directed and there is an expectation that knowledge and capabilities can be acquired instantly, creating a challenge for leaders when it comes to educating others. This can put increased pressure on leaders to ensure that prescriptive interventions are as impactful and relevant as possible to keep pace with what is available from other sources. Learning delivery methods must be chosen carefully to include the necessary and engaging content whilst also meeting the "always available" expectations of learners.

Otherwise, leaders risk employees seeking out uncurated – and untraceable – content which is now so readily available from any smartphone. While the immediate benefits of this Google-based learning are obvious for the individual, it can have considerable consequences for the business, as the opportunity to foster a common language and ensure intact team development is missed. The benefit of – and, indeed, saving grace for – traditional, instructor-led learning is that it brings communities of learners together to share experiences that self-study simply can't achieve. The key is striking the right balance and knowing which elements of learning lend themselves best to each respective modality.

When we learn

Access to technology means that now learning can happen in real-time within the flow of work; it can be so easy to learn a new skill that often people do not realize they have done exactly that. The pace of self-directed learning dictates that organizations, and those that lead them, need better tools to analyse a constantly changing learning environment. Thankfully, new tools provide just that. Digital diagnosis means that identifying specific skills gaps and development needs, both for organizations and individuals, is more effective than ever before. Technical tools can surmise not only what training should be given, but also the best way, and time, to deliver that training, creating individualized learning plans that are more likely to have a lasting impact. There is a benefit of considering all forms of learning under one umbrella, irrespective of the modality or even the

provider: housing various content and delivery options in one place not only provides the opportunity to measure effectiveness but it ensures consistency, and an easier pathway to 'organizational learning direction' without impinging on the learners' freedom of choice.

Learning within the flow of work also provides greater opportunity for employee engagement, which is crucial not just for skill development, but for wider business success. But this, in turn, presents another challenge for leaders, who must guide employees towards learning tools, encourage their use and motivate those around them to embrace the technology. Digital tools alone cannot implement learning strategies, careful thought must be undertaken in order to ensure successful use and application.

Who we learn from

In all of this, however, we need to remember that people are at the heart of each organization and it's still true that in many situations people learn best from other people. Take for example the need to think differently about something or to gain resilience – these skills are often best achieved when people are connected with each other and with experts who can lead and coach them through certain ideas and situations. Face-to-face, immersive and experiential training sessions, which are still very important, add even more impact when combined with digital interactions. Such blended approaches serve to reinforce and sustain the development, creating an experience that can be more easily and nimbly aligned – and re-aligned, as is inevitable – to the goals of the business.

Furthermore, while digital learning facilitates more rapid, even instantaneous, employee development options within the flow of work, digitization also means that leaders too can learn at their own pace, removing any fears of embarrassment in admitting a skill deficit. Instead, leaders are empowered to determine what they need to learn, and the rate at which they need to learn it, without necessarily seeking external support.

Who we learn from has changed, and this needs to be considered by learning leaders too. Digital natives entering the workforce bring with them new skills and behaviors that are not always so embedded in those working above them. Leaders can now learn as much from those working for them, as they can impart wisdom to them.

It's worth noting, of course, that although the younger workforce may be accustomed to modern technologies, that is not to say that they will know how to apply this knowledge to a business setting.

This means that leaders must recognize what junior colleagues can help them learn and allow this transfer of skills to flourish, as well as helping them to apply their own skills to the workplace. It's vital that managers are not threatened by others

displaying leadership tendencies and instead encourage this kind of development; millennials and generation Z increasingly expect – and are expected to – have ideas which can shape the wider business. Utilising these ideas makes for a more creative and diverse environment, which ultimately will be more successful. Managers must understand that leadership is fluid and can come from everywhere in the organization.

Leading and learning

While leaders in the digital age face new challenges, they are also presented with a plethora of opportunities. New technical tools enable leaders to develop skills and behaviors quickly and efficiently, learning from, encouraging and engaging those around them. The challenge is striking the balance and providing an environment for learning that drives both individual and organizational success. Creating context and personalization for development through enhanced communications and linkage to business strategy – which is also

facilitated by digital – will only boost the value. In addition to a highly motivated and skilled workforce, the reward is vast amounts of data afforded by this digital transformation, information which we can use to predict and influence future behaviors and business performance.

In today's world of work, leading means leading digitally; fortunately, leading and learning are now so intertwined that with one, comes the other.

hemsleyfraser

USA

+1 888 559 0074
hemsleyfraser.com
ustraining@hemsleyfraser.com

UK

+44 345 071 2801
hemsleyfraser.co.uk
enquiries@hemsleyfraser.co.uk

GERMANY

+49 69 9203 7568 0
hemsleyfraser.de
info@hemsleyfraser.de

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