

Evolution of the Trainer

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Over the decades, the pages of T+D have chronicled the evolution of the trainer from instructor to executive business partner. It was not a short or a direct trip.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? Plenty if it's your job title. The profession longest known as training may claim more job titles than any other. If you're an accountant, you're an accountant, but if you're in the training field you could be anything from an instructional designer to a learning evangelist—a title that was popular a few years ago. A look back through the 720 issues the magazine has published since 1946 turned up dozens of appellations, including these: diversity manager, performance consultant, change manager, executive coach, training director, chief knowledge officer, and—the current top of the heap—vice president of talent management.

The evolution of the workplace learning and performance professional has been dynamic. Along with the title, the responsibilities and expectations of a workplace learning and performance professional have changed considerably in the last 60 years. Many have found themselves equal to a top-level executive with the responsibility of linking learning priorities to the strategic direction of the organization.

In an April 2006 *T+D* article, Jeff Oberlin, chief learning officer at the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, exhibited his pride for the WLP professional's evolution.

"Twenty years ago, everyone could predict how technology would change (the development and delivery of) learning. But no one, no one, would have predicted the (emergence and creation of the) CLO title and function. There was no such word, and there was no such concept.

"I am very proud of what we have done in the profession to be in the position to be asked (to play a C-level role)," Oberlin says. "What you get asked there, you had better be sure you can deliver. That is so important."

But the road to that C-level role wasn't always a smooth one.

The early years

The early issues of *T+D* planted the seeds of many recurring themes—the training director's quest for a seat at the boardroom table, the relevance of training, and the need to justify training's return-on-investment.

In the late 1940s, men dominated a profession that Gloria Bentley, director of training and development for Asset Management Advisors, described as a collection of subject matter experts.

As late as 1970, the training and development field was 90 percent men. Between the mid-1970s and the late 1990s, the percentage of women in the industry doubled, while the percentage of men in the industry fell 29 percent.

In a May 1994 *Training and Development* article, a timeline traced the evolution of ASTD and the HRD field.

In the 1940s, large numbers of men over 40 and women enter the U.S. workforce, as men under 40 reported for military service. Teachers from vocational programs in secondary schools were recruited to teach them job-related skills. The Training Within Industry Service of the War Manpower Commission gives training a big boost with its "J" programs offering various kinds of job-related training.

As early as the late 1940s, people were clamoring for training department personnel to report to top-level management.

"It is easy to see that (the training) department should report only to top management," James C. Dunbar wrote in the September-October 1947 issue of The Journal of Industrial Training. "To accomplish this, an organization must be sold on the idea that there is practically no everyday problem that some kind of training won't lick."

In the 1950s, scarcity drives training director salaries as high as \$6,000 a year.

"As training functions produce tangible results, the position of training director will become more essential in the organizational pattern, enabling the training director to maintain his professional status," Richard Geyon wrote in the March-April 1950 issue of The Journal of Industrial Training.

By the 1970s, trainers began debating the nature of a manager's work and leadership.

Imitating business schools, trainers adopt the case method of instruction and begin to teach management by objectives, or MBO. Expectancy theory is introduced as a way to predict employees' behavior.

In the 1980s, women enter the field in large numbers. By 1989, women make up 47 percent of ASTD's membership.

During President Clinton's term in office, Secretary of Labor Robert B. Reich establishes the Office of Work-Based Learning.

Some of the popular training topics of the 1990s included learning organizations, reengineering, reorganization, customer focus, visioning, and balancing work and family.

Learning executive accountability

A February 2003 article outlines a first-generation learning executive's need for accountability. In a five-year period between the late 1990s and the early 21st century, the number of learning executives grew from a handful to hundreds.

Like any modern relationship, the one between CLOs and their companies must prove itself on a day-to-day basis, in good times and bad. With the economy the way it is, it's no longer assumed that having a CLO will be good for the company. Executives want proof that learning will help the bottom line, and they want the proof now. In a nutshell, the honeymoon is over and the real work has begun.

These first-generation CLOs are working to prove themselves, while writing their own job descriptions. They have to convince people that learning isn't just about training. They are competing for limited resources in a function that many people still don't understand, and they're doing it in a complex global environment with short product cycles, a great deal of uncertainty, and ruthless ongoing change. If the job wasn't easy before, it has become that much harder because of the market downturn. With business results tough to come by, CLOs everywhere are having to make hard choices—and fast.

As the article pointed out, having the knowledge of a trainer—adult learning styles, best practices, and leadership development—is not enough anymore. Learning executives are expected to understand strategic goals and how learning contributes to those goals, and speak the “language of business.”

In learning how to communicate with internal clients, CLO Steve Kerr uses the metaphor of a car manual. The front of the manual talks about such things as gear ratios, drive trains, and transfer cases—terminology that most people don't understand. What people do understand is the troubleshooting guide at the back of the manual that describes what might be wrong when the car won't start. Kerr says, “CLOs are the troubleshooters of an organization. Like the auto manual, we have to troubleshoot in terms that people can understand.”

Seat at the table

In a February 2004 article, Kevin Oakes proclaimed that

“speaking the language of executives is one of the biggest skills gaps in the learning profession.”

Many training and development professionals lament that they don't have a “seat at the table.” Personally, I dislike that phrase because it's so misused and misunderstood—mainly because it's used to describe what some people feel is an entitlement rather than something that's earned through demonstrable ability.

Corporate learning is a dichotic phrase, because too many people on the learning side would rather engage in academic discussions instead of what it will take to improve the business. These folks have ceased to realize why they exist to begin with: to increase revenue, cut expenses, or reduce cycle time to competency.

Gaining a seat at the table clearly requires the ability to demonstrate business thought and business results.

In an April 2006 article, Glenn E. Phillips, general manager of global workforce development for Chevron Corporation, says getting a seat at the table and holding onto that seat are two different things.

“One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to go to the table without an understanding of the business,” Phillips says. “The biggest mistake you can make it to not be able to compete and contribute intellectually on the broader business issues. You had better know the business.”

New breed of learning executives

In the February 2006 article, “Profiling a New Breed of Learning Executive,” ASTD Senior Director of Research Brenda Sugrue and Vice Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania Doug Lynch wrote that the role of the CLO has changed in scope, but not in purpose. The article profiled the current positions, career histories, and educational background of the heads of learning.

Survey results showed that CLOs reported spending most of their time on strategy development and planning, communication with corporate executives and lines of business, and management of the learning staff. However, these same CLOs indicated that they would like to spend less time managing the learning staff and more time on performance improvement. They would also like to spend more time on knowledge management.

The average number of years the CLOs spent in their current organization was 10. The job areas in which the largest number of CLOs had worked prior to their current positions were corporate learning, human resources, organizational development, and business management.

The X-factor that distinguishes great CLOs from good CLOs may be the ability to gain the trust of their organization's executive team and business unit leaders.

It's clear that the evolution of the workplace learning and performance professional has changed dramatically since the late 1940s, and T+D magazine has changed along with it—to support the new role and responsibilities of learning executives. **TD**

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Greetings and heart-felt congratulations to T + D Magazine on its 60th anniversary and in advocating the advancement of training and development to workplace learning and performance.

T + D has effectively communicated the emerging trends and proven best practices in the field of workplace training and development, promoting the art and science of enhancing individuals and organizations professionally and the systems in which they work to produce results.

T + D has been the voice of the workplace learning and performance profession for sixty years, and I have every confidence that legacy will successfully continue.

Again, my sincere congratulations on sixty years of distinguished publication, and thank you for all that T + D does to address critical training and employee development needs so that organizations can remain competitive in today's global economy.

Yours very truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Silvestre Reyes', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Silvestre Reyes
16th Congressional District of Texas