



The Rise of the CLO

The move to executive training officer was a steady progression.

By Paula Ketter

YEARS BEFORE former GE CEO Jack Welch coined the phrase, “Chief Learning Officer,” the topic of executive trainers was being examined in T+D magazine.

In the early 1990s, chief training officer was the trendy new title being bantered around. Then insiders started using chief knowledge officer before finally settling on chief learning officer. There may have been some confusion about the title, but the position’s responsibilities were clear. This evolution of the workplace trainer became equivalent to a top-level executive with a responsibility of linking learning priorities to the strategic direction of the company.

March 1993

In a *Training and Development Journal* article titled, “A Place at the Top for Trainers,” George F. Kimmering wrote that although the rosters of executives at many organizations don’t include a chief training officer, many workplace trainers are performing CTO-like functions within companies.

CTOs possess traditional HRD skills, including knowledge of instructional design, evaluation methods, cost-effective delivery systems, and course development techniques. In addition, they know how to create and manage change, both in the training function and in major areas of business.

Training professionals can take advantage of the opportunities that will come with the strong, new interest in learning in organizations. But they must be ready to build and to demonstrate their skills as chief training officer candidates.

February 2000

In “Enter the Chief Knowledge Officer,” Dede Bonner wrote that chief knowledge or learning officer is a new and still evolving strategic role for HRD people with a salary between \$80,000 and \$700,000.

Chief knowledge officers or learning officers are the leaders of their organizations’ knowledge management and organizational learning initiatives. In many large organizations and a few small ones, CEOs are creating these new senior-level positions as their strategic partners in order to initiate, drive, and integrate their firms’ organizational learning and knowledge management efforts.

Most chief knowledge officers and chief learning officers are first-generation incumbents. They typically started their jobs less than three years ago and did so without clearly defined roles, responsibilities, and daily activities. The nature of the position is a work in progress.

Aspiring chief learning officers can seize the moment as a unique opportunity to take training and education once and for all into the boardroom.

May 2002

In a T+D article titled, “Meet the New Chief Learning Officers,” Dede Bonner and Stacy Wagner proclaimed, “The new learning leaders have arrived, and they will not be denied.”

CLO positions are predicted to grow in number and stature in the near future. A March 2000 report by the Conference Board found that although only 6 percent of the companies surveyed had integrated learning functions, 60 percent planned to extend those programs companywide within five years. In an ASTD Learning Link online survey, 22 percent of respondents said their organization has someone who functions as the chief learning officer.

In defining the role of the CLO, Bonner and Wagner wrote:

- *These incumbents are designing their own jobs as they go along.*
- *They see the big picture and can articulate the importance of learning.*
- *They work closely with their organization’s top executive teams and are tuned in to the company’s bottom line.*
- *They work across multiple disciplines and possess diverse skills.*

The role of the CLO requires business savvy and a visionary mindset balanced by a technical understanding of the learning function.

February 2006

According to the T+D article titled, “Profiling a New Breed of Learning Executive” by Brenda Sugrue, the roles and responsibilities of the CLO title has become more popular.

It looks as if—regardless of the operating title—the role and responsibilities of the most senior learning executive in the organization have broadened in scope, though not in purpose since Jack Welch first coined the phrase with its implied emphasis on strategy.

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

Paula Ketter is managing editor of T+D; pketter@astd.org.