Turning the Aircraft Carrier

By Thomas Kraack

You might have
speedboat aspirations
for goal execution but
end up trying to steer a
cumbersome aircraft carrier.
Here's how to make your
learning function—and, therefore,
your entire organization—
more strategically nimble.

Suppose that tomorrow, you and your executive team announced a new strategic direction—a new goal, market, product, or service. How long do you think it would take to put in place the kinds of enablement (training, performance support, knowledge management, and so on) that would help your key workers to execute this new strategy?

The lag time between the creation of strategy and its optimal execution must be seen for what it really is: loss of potential revenue that can often amount to millions of dollars. Increasing, speed-to-market, reskilling a workforce more quickly, and decreasing the amount of time it takes for workers to perform optimally are crucial ways a company's learning and training function can have a business impact measurable in terms of shareholder value.

So, what's holding everyone back? Why is it so hard to put in place the right enablement for our people? The answer is because managing the learning function is, in fact, managing a complex and sometimes unwieldy supply chain. There are processes, operations, and an infrastructure in place creating content, storing it, distributing it, and updating it. Call it a paradox of training that this supply chain is one of the greatest sources of

strength during growth periods and one of the greatest weaknesses when a company leaps over to a new product or service and starts up a new maturity curve. In terms of nimbleness and maneuverability in the execution of strategy, you might say that we all have speedboat aspirations but, in effect, we're steering an aircraft carrier. It takes time to change direction—most of the time, too long.

Locking in training and strategy

What companies need is a way to ensure close collaboration between the people responsible for development and delivery of learning content and the company's senior management responsible for establishing the business goals. That's too important to be left to chance or to just keeping management informed. Companies need a more formal organizational structure and system of governance to ensure that strategy and workforce enablement are locked in. At Accenture, we call that structure "Business Interlock"—a business function with services, interactions, metrics, and application capabilities that link learning outcomes to business objectives.

Business Interlock operates on a few critical guiding principles. They are as follows:
● Ensure that senior executives understand learning and performance needs, issues with learning

delivery, and how learning can improve the results of the overall business.
● Facilitate an annual planning process and quarterly demand forecasts around learning demand, capability, and affordability.
● Establish a single point of contact for all learning and performance requests from the business.
● Structure more effective communication channels between the business and the corporate learning organization.
● Ensure participation of the learning organization in the overall governance process.

Business Interlock doesn't just add another step in the learning supply chain of content sourcing, cataloguing, delivery, and administration; it transforms it in the same way that new processes transformed the manufacturing supply chain to enable just-in-time manufacturing. In fact, that's the ultimate goal of Business Interlock: a JIT approach to learning.

Understanding the business. You can't steer a ship from the bow; the rudder has to be back at the stern. In the same way, steering the learning supply chain depends on understanding the business well enough so that learning decision makers can be among those sitting in the pilot's seat, which means earlier in the product development or organizational strategy cycle. For example, at one company I worked with, we

made sure that our trainers were part of the new-product development process. The result was that when the product was ready for market, the training was ready to enable the workforce to sell it. That is learning plan management, to be sure, but not in the traditional sense. Given the constraints on the learning supply-chain flexibility, this approach provides anticipatory management. It runs not only parallel with business planning, but also integrated with it.

Directing the learning impact. Business Interlock gives organizations the kind of demand management structures that provide fact-based decision mechanisms.

Learning outcomes don't have to be fuzzy or feel good. What are the budget numbers? What are the results you're looking for from your workforce and, therefore, from the business? What priorities must be made given the balance of desired results and resource constraints? With Business Interlock, you're avoiding the two most common mistakes organizations make with the workforce enablement aspect of large systems implementations: 1) underestimating the costs and then having to find ways to skimp or 2) cutting out the enablement part completely and, in the end, causing the business not to attain the practical benefits the system was supposed to provide. You have your system, all right, but not much else. One way Business Interlock provides better management is by creating good database metrics and planning tools so one can easily and accurately estimate and then build into the planning cycle an appropriate allocation of resources to assist in strategy execution.

Managing relationships. Part of good relationship management is planning and executing communications with the business users or workforce whose performance is critical to the execution of the strategic mission. The other part is the management of relationships with key decision makers. Again, the learning function has to reside with those sitting in the pilot's chair of the ship. And that can't happen by accident or persuasion and cajoling. It needs to be built

into the governance structures of the company. You institutionalize the mechanisms that foster the kinds of behaviors necessary to ensure that enablement and strategy are developed hand in hand. In the end, structure drives process, not the other way around.

A real-world case

This Business Interlock function can be seen working particularly well in the story of Avaya, a global leader in business communications solutions and services. Avaya went with a learning outsourcing model in order to meet an aggressive schedule of product launches to introduce new IP telephony services and solutions. In less than six months, more than 1800 courses were delivered to more than 50,000 employees, customers, and channel partners in 93 countries.

Through the institutionalization of Accenture's Business Interlock concept, Avaya has directly linked learning content development and delivery to the new-product development process, enabling predictable and timely delivery of learning events to sales, support and service, and to channel partner workforces globally. Curriculum restructuring has reduced time-to-proficiency by as much as 63 percent in certain courses. A product launch readiness scorecard process integrates training with product management and channels.

Senior Avaya leadership has been involved throughout the planning and execution stages of learning development. The company instituted the role of chief learning officer and created a corporate learning council to manage a number of important Business Interlock functions. These include

● interpreting and articulating Avaya's strategic business objectives

● understanding and advocating Avaya's learning strategy to be executed by Avaya University

● establishing Avaya's learning priorities

● rationalizing learning requests and third-party contracts, managing third-party contracts

● reporting to the corporate governance team to as-

sure alignment with business needs.

The corporate governance team provides the senior leadership to support and guide the corporate learning council's actions. This team determines Avaya's learning needs based on its strategic outlook, and assesses the results achieved by Avaya University. Learning satisfaction and content retention as measured against Kirkpatrick Levels 1 and 2 has continuously increased over the 12-month period. AU has delivered significant cost-savings through reduced employee time to competency, increased employee knowledge and retention, and shortened time to deliver complex training content. It has also enabled and supported the corporate business strategy of accelerated new-product introduction. These achievements have allowed Avaya University to support the largest release of new communications products at a cost substantially less than previous rollouts. At Avaya, Business Interlock has linked learning to business requirements and enabled fact-based trade-offs in light of financial objectives.

Business Interlock is a key part of an overall strategy to realize measurable impact from a company's learning investment. It provides value at the strategic and tactical levels. It aligns learning investments with corporate priorities and institutionalizes the organizational structures that lead to learning programs that support general productivity enhancements, new product launches, and organizational agility. Business Interlock addresses the needs of different audiences—employees, customers, and channel partners—and helps an organization execute within the ebb and flow of changing business needs. If it doesn't transform an aircraft carrier into a speedboat, it does provide smoother sailing for organizations as they strive to enable their workforces to execute strategy more efficiently and effectively. **TD**

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Three elements form the heart of the Business Interlock function:

1. understanding the business

2. directing the effects that learning has on business results

3. managing relationships with key decision makers and being included in their agenda from a planning and business management perspective.

The learning function has to reside with those sitting in the pilot's chair of the ship. It needs to be built into the governance structures of the company.