

# E-LEARNING




By Kevin Oakes

In a slight departure from the usual E-Learning column, the subject is Speaking the Language of Executives—one of the biggest skill gaps in the learning profession. As for that seat at the table, technology can help get you there.

## A Seat at the Table

“Pedagogy? He kept talking about pedagogy,” one senior executive recently scoffed to me, describing his dinner with a career learning and development professional. “I mean, I have my MBA from one of the top schools in the country, and I’d never heard the word *pedagogy*. I had no idea what the heck he was talking about the entire evening.”

I could sympathize. To me, the word *pedagogy* sums up everything that’s wrong with the profession. It sometimes appears that training and development professionals work hard to have their own language, seemingly bent on creating “semantic chaos,” as Pat Galagan, ASTD’s managing director of content, reported recently. The goal might be to sound smart when rather they should convey ideas in simple, easy-to-comprehend language.  **“The Future of the Profession Formerly Known as Training,” by Pat Galagan (December 2003 T+D).**

Kevin Kruse, a self-professed “e-learning guru,” recently admonished people for buying a book he wrote a few years ago, recommending that they buy another professional’s new book on the same subject, written in a more straightforward manner. Says Kruse, “I was a young pup when I wrote mine so I did the ‘oh so serious,’ trying-to-sound-smart style and the classic ISD stuff. *Boring!*”

Bored and confused. That’s a pretty good summary of the way most senior executives feel upon immersing themselves in our world. While experts in the profession debate whether their industry should be called training or performance or human process engineering and debate the gap between humanistic versus behaviorist approaches, senior executives are rolling their eyes as

soon as they walk out of the room. What executives want to hear are good ideas to improve the business, simply explained, not someone intentionally speaking over their heads and daring them to keep up.

Speaking the language of executives is one of the biggest skill gaps in the learning profession.

Many t&d 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.

“The whole notion of a seat at the table is strange to me since I believe you have to be invited to the party before you can actually have a seat,” Tamar Elkeles, Qualcomm’s CLO, recently told me. “Most people who complain about not getting invited to the party are frustrated because they aren’t perceived as adding value to the business. If you’re adding value, you’re at the party.”

“The people whom I’ve seen get a place at the top executive table had a couple of distinctive qualities that differentiated them from other HR people,” observes Joe DiStefano, professor of organizational behavior and international business at the International Institute for Management in Lausanne, Switzerland. “First, they were confidants of the senior business leaders who were just below the CEO and his or her direct reports. They knew this set of people very well because they were trusted by those people. They demonstrated an ability to talk straight to them.

“Secondly, they not only had the language to speak in terms of the key

needs of the business, but they also thought that way. While they wore an HR hat and represented that function's interests, they didn't just put those interests in business terms, but always thought in business terms."

DiStefano makes a key distinction here. Many times, this magazine and other publications have written about "alignment" of learning initiatives with business goals. That alignment is typically passive. Most executives I know don't get excited by employees who constantly ask, "What is your vision?" What execs want to hear is, "I have a great idea, and I've done the research to back it up."

"I take exception to the notion that training has to be aligned with the company's business objectives," says Pat Crull, CLO of Toys "R" Us. "We're doing ourselves a disservice by viewing our job as being reactive. We need to be proactive, helping to drive solutions. Every executive I know respects those that take action."

"If you want to make a real change in an organization, you must be heard and understood by the senior stakeholders," says Andy Snider, a performance change consultant. "That requires acting even when there's perceived risk. If one is afraid to take risks, then one is really afraid to effect change."

*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.

Recently, a noted expert in the field suggested in *T+D* that knowledge specialists should be in the room when corporate strategies are being developed. If that happened, she believes there would be fewer failures in strategy implementation.

If that happened, I believe it would

be labeled as a flat-out miracle. It's that kind of thinking that shows most experts in our field have rarely spent any time "at the table." The naivety is sometimes startling.

"Executive teams can't operate with a huge retinue of observers, all of whom would benefit from bearing witness to their discussions," says John Coné, interim CEO of ASTD and former CLO of Dell Computer. "Nor is it effective for them to try to cover all bases at the onset of every key decision. As a CEO, you have to move fast, so you involve the most critical few people. You typically don't think about how inclusive you

$$\Sigma = \frac{R - E}{T}$$

Increasing revenues (R), reducing expenses (E), and reducing cycle time (T) are the three things senior executives worry about and talk about most. In order to gain a seat at the table, learning professionals must be able to connect their work to one or more of those desired outcomes.

"Learning professionals who have the ear of senior management come to the table to talk about business results, not

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could be, but about how you can get the decision made quickly and who you trust to carry it out effectively. Precious few people in our profession have earned the trust to be one of those critical people, because they usually haven't demonstrated the business acumen and results."

"Executives shouldn't have to put up with a trainer's academic mindset," Crull says. "Being an expert in our field is a necessary but insufficient reason for corporations to employ learning professionals. You need to be an expert in the business of the organization and have the business acumen to apply your expertise to improve business performance."

Senior executives love mathematical and financial formulas. If you were to create a formula representing the "sum total" ( $\Sigma$ ) of organizational performance improvement, it would likely look like this:

learning pedagogy," adds Coné. "They understand the drivers of the business, how the executives think, and the metrics that mean the most to them. They talk about business outcomes, not learning enablers. And they talk about their business using real business language and real data. They talk about revenue, expense, productivity, customer satisfaction, and other quantifiable stuff that businesspeople care about. They've learned that every conversation had better include information about money or time saved, revenue or new business generated, or customer problems solved."

Crull relays a telling story of a presentation she gave at an industry conference that highlights the "disconnect" between learning professionals and senior executives.

"During my presentation, I stated that as a CLO, I see myself as an officer

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of the corporation. I worry about improving shareowner value. If it doesn't make a difference to the bottom line, then my work has little or no value." At that point, a woman in the audience got up from her seat and left the room.

"Later, during the Q&A section of our presentation," Crull continues, "someone who was sitting next to the woman who had left stood up and said, 'Do you know what she said right before she exited? That she didn't get into the training and development field to worry about the bottom line.' I was stunned. To me, that summed up the biggest problem in our profession today."

Gaining a seat at the table clearly requires the ability to demonstrate business

share best practices in real time. Even the most aggressive of our traditional learning interventions can look glacial in comparison to the speed of many needs. However, in many circles, the pace of change of technology has outpaced the change of philosophy of educators. The profession has all of the capabilities to do this, but often doesn't have the predilection."

"Technology's power is its ability to get more data more quickly and to turn that data into valuable information for making business decisions. It can also be a problem since many learning and HR people are afraid of it," cautions Elkeles. "I can't stand people in learning who say that they're not technical. That's a huge career staller. It's important that if you're "not"

learning technology purchases has already elevated learning programs to senior levels in many companies. While that short-term phenomenon may be true, long-term success will be defined by the ability to effect real change quickly, and analyze and report the results like other mission-critical systems do.

"In my career as a learning professional, I've twice had a seat at the table in large corporations," says Dennis Gay, an independent consultant. "In both cases, technology was central to my journey. It not only allowed me to get there; it allowed me to stay there. It was the tool that enabled and demonstrated tremendous cost-savings, increased learning as measured through online evaluations and assessments, and allowed accountability to be heightened tremendously through accurate records."

"Using technology effectively enables you to deliver on the change commitment that you have made *at scale*," says Snider. "If you aren't trying to make a difference, then technology is just an expensive toy. But if it's focused on the achievement of a clear objective, it can have awesome effects."

The clear objectives in most organizations are to increase the R, decrease the E, and speed up the T. Technology is an enabler to achieving those goals faster and more efficiently, but it can be enabled only when learning professionals recognize what the end result is and measure against it. If learning professionals focus on those outcomes and leave the pedagogy discussion outside of the executive office, that seat at the table can be attained and sustained.

**Kevin Oakes** is chairman and CEO of Click2learn (NASDAQ: CLKS), producer of the Aspen Enterprise Learning Platform, which allows organizations to capture, manage, and disseminate corporate knowledge to improve productivity and business performance.

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thought and business results. But are the preconceptions of the profession by senior executives too high to overcome even for those who have those business skills?

"Technology has tremendous potential to be a helping factor here," says Coné, "though much of the potential is largely unrealized. Technology enables us to run learning as a business. Through technology, we can track and manage expenses, see investments, and chart returns in ways we couldn't before. Technology gives us the ability to be in sync with immediate business problems and distribute learning almost instantly across geographies. It allows us to scale learning without scaling costs, change direction on a dime, connect all employees instantly, and immediately

something that you learn it, not avoid it. I believe that HR and learning people need to use technology to enhance and accelerate their ability to contribute. Technology can be used to enhance delivery, information, efficiency, and productivity. Technology will continue to evolve, and people who want to be 'at the party' need to figure out how to use it effectively."

Some people in this industry have suggested that just the sheer size of

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