

Preparation is Vital

Workplace learning and performance professionals must use statistics to plan for the future.

By Kevin Oakes

IT'S A REAL HONOR to be chair of ASTD. Starting with the 12 fabulous members of the ASTD board, I'm always impressed with the quality of character and depth of knowledge of the people I meet through ASTD.

In fact, the makeup of ASTD's membership is impressive. The members have significant tenure in the industry, with almost half of our membership today having more than 10 years of experience. That's an experience level that is virtually impossible to duplicate anywhere else.

I must confess that I love statistics. They motivate me to think differently, and as a result, change my actions and help me prepare better for a future that good statistics will make just a little more clearer.

But statistics are a tricky thing. It's been said that they can be used to highlight or support a predisposition. In other cases, statistics can be manipulated to reach a predetermined conclusion.

So, when using statistics, it's important to view them with a bit of skepticism.

I've been in the industry for almost 15 years, and as the statistics show, I'm a relative neophyte in the world of workplace learning and performance. In the early 1990s, my involvement in this field began with a discovery of learning technology, which has really been the focus of my career. Some people tell me that I'm the first learning technologist to hold the position of ASTD chair.

But from the moment I first saw an interactive training program delivered

on laser disk, I became fascinated with how technology could help revolutionize the way we learn and make workers more productive. Until the early 1990s, learning had been one of the last areas of our society that had not been significantly influenced by technology. There were small advances, but for the most part, I spent my formative years learning the same way people learned thousands of years ago. But over the last few years, I

Technology

While technology often seems to move at light speed today, our language and our perceptions often struggle to keep up. I was reminded of this recently when Truman, my 6-year-old son, asked me to tape a show for him.

In reality, I wasn't taping a thing for him; I was digitally recording the show using TiVo. While we still have videotapes around, I doubt Truman has ever actually

seen me record something on a videotape. I also doubt that he understands the difference between a videotape and a digital recording. But he must have picked up that phrase—taping a TV show—from me or my wife.

It's the same thing when we say we dialed someone's phone number. Have you actually dialed a phone recently? For some reason, we still use that term—years after dial telephones have all but become extinct.

Yet as the technology advances, our previous language and paradigms linger. Now, like a lot of things in our industry, the idea of using technology to teach is actually not all that new.

A training video, created in the 1920s to show people how to dial a phone, is one of

the first examples I've encountered that uses technology in the learning process. In fact, the genesis of many learning technologies often goes back to far and unusual places. I'd bet most of you have participated in a virtual classroom event, but I'd also bet you'd be surprised to know that as early as the 1950s, children in the Australian outback who lived hundreds of miles from the nearest school learned via shortwave radio



doubt there's a single WLP professional who would dispute the impact technology has had on our industry. In fact, ASTD's own research shows that the use of learning technology is almost four times greater today than it was in 2000. Additionally, the growth projections for common learning technologies, such as learning management, virtual classroom, and learning content management systems, continue to be optimistic.

each day—one of the earliest examples of distance learning. They called it then, and still refer to it today, as the School of the Air. Many of the methods in teaching a virtual class over the web today are the same methods those teachers used to present concepts via shortwave radio more than 50 years ago.

While learning technology has advanced substantially in recent years, all too often our mindset is rooted in tradition. While workplace learning and performance professionals today are using Google to get the answers they need, the concept of a course as the primary vehicle for education continues to prevail in many organizations.

Today, technology has opened up many new ways to disseminate information in very nonlinear, bite-sized pieces that can be used on the job at the moment of need. Forums such as podcasting, virtual worlds, blogs, wikis, social networking, and RSS feeds are all the rage. The needs and desires of workers today have changed, and the challenge for our industry has been to keep pace with that change.

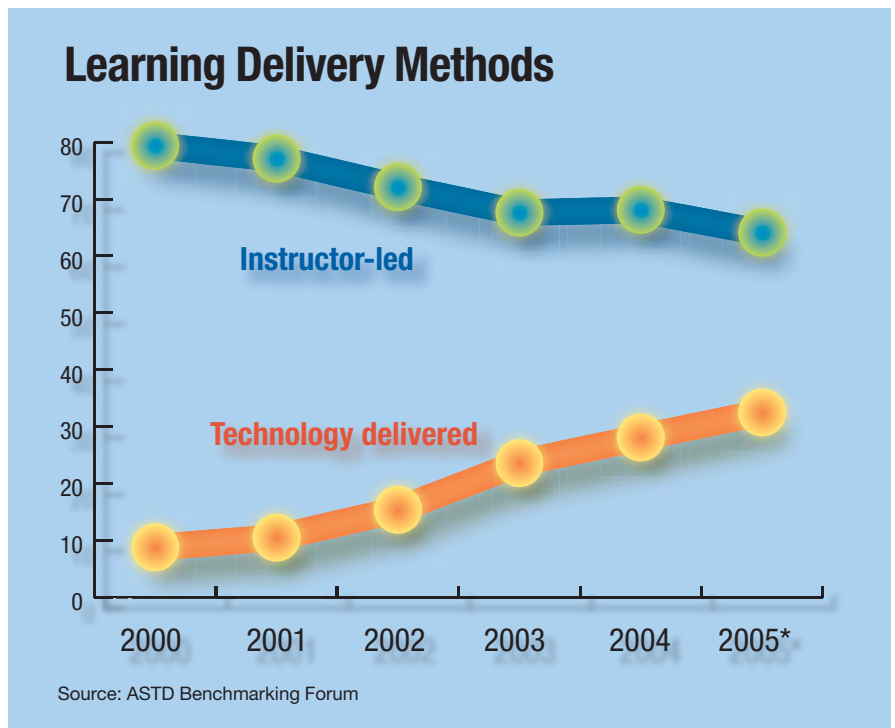
Skills gap

However, the changes are broadening on both a micro and a macro scale, and keeping up with the latest technology is really only a small part of it. A larger part is the looming skills gap. Our workforce is getting older. Workers over age 45 now constitute the largest segment of the industrialized workforce in the world, and the number of workers age 55 or older is predicted to double in the next decade.

What this means for employers in every industry is the loss of qualified, experienced employees via retirement. In my travels to various ASTD chapters this year, I've heard this concern expressed at nearly every chapter meeting I've attended.

And in a recent survey of HR professionals, 70 percent said that the loss of talent is a real problem—actual or potential. More disturbing is the fact that only 11 percent have instituted policies or programs to address it.

While the loss of personnel is an is-



sue, it's also a fact that the pool of skilled workers is decreasing. Research shows that birthrates are declining throughout much of the industrialized world, and universities in the United States, Japan, and Germany aren't producing enough graduates in areas typically thought of as highly skilled. It's been estimated that by 2010, the United States alone will be short at least 10 million qualified workers.

The good news for many organizations is that plenty of baby boomers plan to work past their retirement age, but they are expecting to significantly alter their work schedules. According to a recent survey, 42 percent would like to cycle between work and leisure. In fact, only 6 percent expect to work full time. This change in expectations is something every WLP professional will need to take into account in the future.

Given the expected exodus of qualified workers, it should be no surprise that the top priorities on the minds of workplace human capital professionals are talent acquisition and recruiting. Items that are often handled by the training department, such as leadership development, are still high on the list of priorities.

Talent management

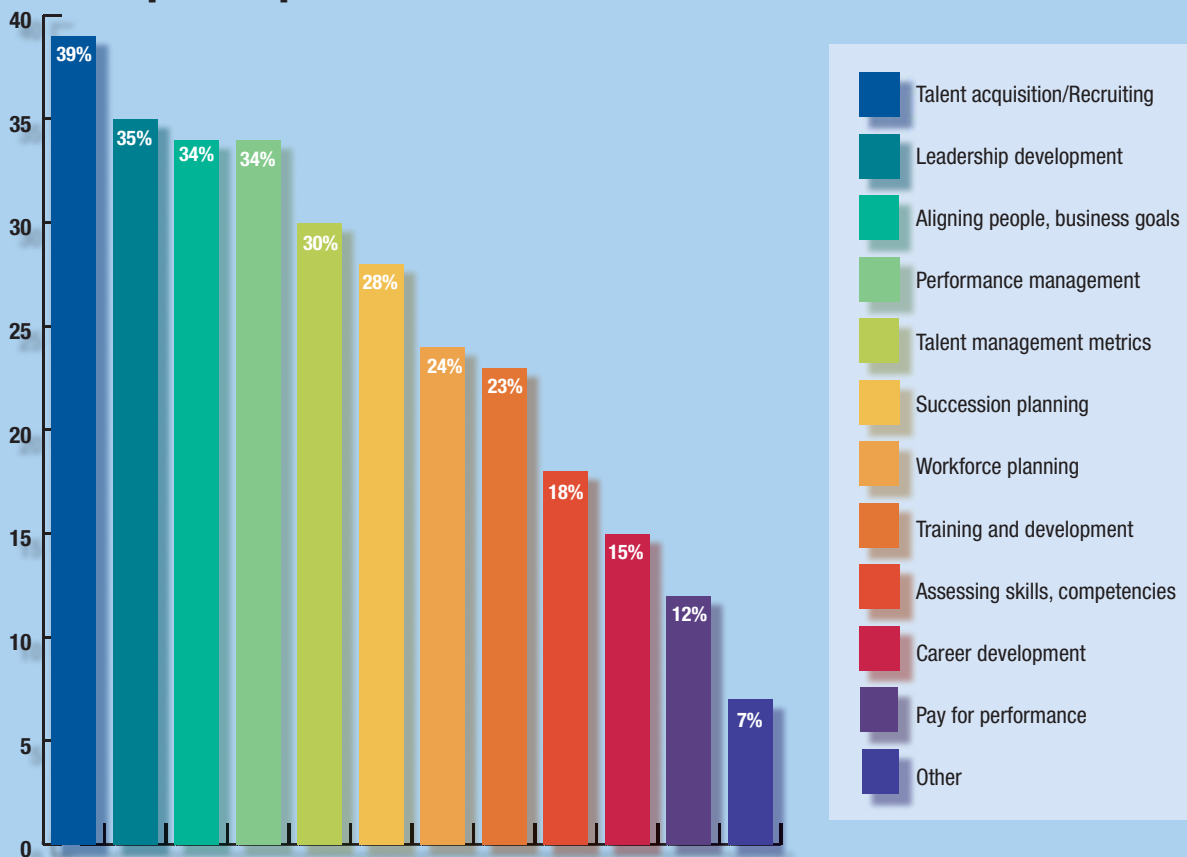
One change that the learning industry needs to be prepared for is the talent continuum outside of learning.

There is an ongoing dialogue about combining the functions of recruiting, performance management, succession planning, retention and compensation, and other HR functions with learning. The term that's most often being used to describe this convergence is talent management. Many organizations are looking at these functions holistically, rather than as separate areas (see Oakes's *The Enterprise* article in the April 2006 issue of *T+D*).

A big catalyst for this is technology's ability to weave together these different functions. Technology has played a significant role so far by illuminating how these functions can share information to improve overall workforce productivity. However, a bigger catalyst is the receptivity in the workplace to combine these functions—which today are usually segmented into very distinct silos in larger organizations—and leverage the commonalities.

Think about it in your own organization. I would bet your company goes to a lot of work, and spends a lot of money, to identify good job candidates to deter-

Human Capital Top Priorities for 2006



Source: IHRIM, Knowledge Infusion

mine their competencies and to identify potential skills gaps during the hiring process. But how often is that information passed along and used in the learning process? Elliott Masie calls this phenomenon “institutional amnesia” since we seem to forget everything on an individual’s résumé the moment they are hired and to pigeonhole our perceptions into the position they have been hired into, which creates learning programs for the position rather than the person.

The same is true for performance management in many organizations. We spend a lot of time documenting employees’ strengths and weaknesses, but typically very little time identifying and linking to learning opportunities and programs to help fill in those skills gaps. How all of this connects with other human capital functions, like compensation, also seems rather logical.

A Yankee Group report predicts that the worldwide talent management market will surpass \$2.3 billion in 2006 and \$4 billion by 2009, with many leading vendors of talent management solutions experiencing growth rates of 50 percent to 100 percent over this time.

Another survey reports that 77 percent of workplace learning and performance professionals are expecting to see dramatic increases in talent management initiatives within their organization over the next three years.

And as a result, 78 percent predict the collaboration between the HR and training functions will increase over the next two years, with a significant percentage reporting that, today, there is little to no creation of joint human capital management initiatives between the HR and training departments.

The working relationship between

training and HR is going to be an interesting dynamic over the next few years as talent management plays out.

While all of this might sound new to some of you, this talent management convergence is not at all a new idea. In fact it was a major topic of discussion in the investment community several years ago.

But an organization’s awareness of it and its willingness to put it into practice is just beginning to blossom. If talent management convergence isn’t blossoming in your workplace, pay attention to this possibility going forward because I think it will have a strong and lasting impact on the workplace learning professional long term. The WLP professionals who are recognizing this convergence are likely to become more strategic within their organizations.

WLP professionals who do not recognize this convergence may risk being out-

sourced. We read about it every day, and new companies are jumping into the outsourcing arena every month. Whether it's outsourcing the entire HR function or outsourcing just training, the statistics are a little startling. Worldwide expenditures of multi-process HR outsourcing are predicted to reach \$4.3 billion this year, growing to \$7.4 billion in 3 years.

Preparation

Preparing for all future possibilities could save a life. Take the story of Dorothy O'Donnell, a 93-year-old woman in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who lives alone and, despite her advanced age, remains supremely independent.

In mid-April, shortly before midnight on a Sunday night, Dorothy, or Dot as her friends like to call her, awoke to a blaring smoke alarm. Her small two-bedroom house was filled with smoke. Quickly putting on her robe, Dot was able to make it outside into the cold night. After ringing a couple of doorbells, she was finally able to awaken a neighbor, who called the fire department. Firefighters were able to put out the fire, and upon further inspection, discovered that the cause was an electrical fire that started in the circuit box and cut power to Dot's house. According to firefighters, this would have rendered most smoke detectors useless, but Dot had the foresight to make sure a battery-backup was installed and functioning in her smoke detector. The fire chief credits this simple step for saving Dot's life.

While the moral of this story is obvious, I am retelling it because it hits home for me personally. Dot is my grandmother.

As you move forward in your careers, I encourage you to use the knowledge and statistics gained through ASTD and other sources to prepare yourself, your department, and your company for the future. It could be a life saver, or at the very least, a career saver.

Kevin Oakes is the 2006 chair of ASTD, executive chair of eContinuum, and a frequent speaker and author on workplace learning and performance issues.