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Learning in the knowledge age, where the individual is at the centre of learning strategy and organisational success

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Adult learning practitioners are being challenged to prepare for a revolution in the way workplace learning outcomes will be delivered. Recent thinking on the future of work by a number of leading business authorities from around the world reports that changes in the way students are being educated for work and the demands on workers in the knowledge age will force a major shift towards learner-centred organisational development strategies. These changes will require broad, strategic solutions, including a re-think on the capabilities and qualifications of those involved in developing people and the formulation of new policies and practices that enable and support learners as they re-focus their careers into the new world of work.

There is a quiet revolution taking place in our communities. A transformation that is long over due. Children in our schools are leading this change through being granted the right to learn in their own way. This approach to facilitating school-based learning, which is being embraced by innovative school leaders and teachers all over the world, is based on the notion of recognising individual difference in learning, acknowledging each child has a unique personality, thinking style and preference for taking in and relating new information. Innovative schools are integrating learner-centred models into the curriculum, while at a local level, it may be one maverick teacher who is making small changes to their teaching style, anticipating that others will follow their lead.

Traditional models of academic achievement are being challenged

This revolution in education is being driven by research findings in psychology which are challenging traditional models of teaching based on conventional methods for measuring intelligence and neglecting other ways of learning and academic achievement. Teaching models, influenced by differences in learning, emphasise the role of the individual learner as pivotal to the success of relating new information and the achievement of deep understanding. The teacher helps the children to develop awareness of their talents and the ways in which they learn more effectively, thereby assisting the children with making decisions about the types of learning activities they find engaging and enjoyable. Decisions about program design are made with the learner's individual differences in mind, as well as the objectives, content and learning environment.

This description of learning is likely to be a long way from the command and control type classrooms where our own frameworks for lifelong learning were formed. These mental models have set up how we approach learning in our adult life: as learners, as leaders of learning and even how we involve ourselves in our children's learning.

According to learning expert and paediatrician from the USA, Mel Levine, society has a legacy of adults who continue to struggle under the influence of their school-based learning experience. Levine (2002: 14) writes in his book, *A mind at a time*, that '[t]heir intellectual identity has been shrunk down to a list of examination scores that will determine their destinies, while shedding little light on their true strengths, weaknesses and educational needs'. This legacy can be seen in our prisons, and in issues in relationships or in those being challenged by addictive behaviours. It often appears in the workplace in rebellious attitudes and behaviours, in under-achievement and, surprisingly, with high achievers.

In my own school experience, I was educated under the strict and frequently violent regime of a religious order. An extremely right brained, conceptual thinker, I was continually punished in primary school for not grasping mathematical concepts and remembering facts, while at home, my playtime included drawing house designs to scale and later as a teenager, organising dances and charity activities. These mainly right-brained talents were not recognised in the industrial age, linear education model of the time, which typically measured intelligence on language and logic capabilities (Gardner 1993: 80).

Learning under a learner-centred model, I would have been guided to use my individual personality, thinking preferences and learning style. My prior experience and values would have been considered by the teacher when planning for my learning. Unfortunately, this was not the case, as with many other teenagers who simply resisted the dumbing-down of their talents and the requirement to conform to a left-brained world. I was asked to leave two secondary schools, which left me thinking that I had no academic ability and no prospects for employment. These experiences explain my discomfort with academic learning and one-size-fits-all training in my adult life.

Training and learning in the knowledge age must be learner-focused

Highly respected futurist, Alvin Toffler is reputed to have stated: '[t]he illiterate of the twenty first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn' (Mercer 2003). While Toffler's statement clearly solidifies the need for continuous learning within organisations, it also challenges training and learning to be positioned to prepare a workforce that is self-aware, self-directed and geared for change by placing greater emphasis on the individual's role rather than the trainer's in the learning experience.

Learner-centred models are strongly aligned with Toffler's thinking, as they engage individuals in the learning experience in their own way, by understanding and applying how they best learn through their natural dispositions, talents and frames of reference. They position the educator as facilitator and enabler, rather than controller of what learners need to know and how they will learn.

The proposition for incorporating human diversity theories into adult training and learning methods is nothing new, as leaders in adult education have been advocating for the rights of the individual in learning since Malcolm Knowles' groundbreaking work in the 1950s on andragogy. Australian Institute of Training and Development industry achievement award recipient, Stephanie Burns, based much of her work on 'learning to learn' in the 1990s on enabling more efficient learning outcomes through recognising and working with individual difference. Burns advocated for the rights of learners to participate in the learning experience using their own filtering perceptions, rather than those imposed on the learner by the trainer (Burns 1996: 77).

In recent years, scientific research into the human mind and human development is forging new understanding of how we learn, and this has opened up significant implications for traditional models

of education and work-based learning. Howard Gardner (1993) has reframed the notion of intelligence in education with his influential model of multiple intelligences and concept of individual-centred schools, while Daniel Goleman's (1996) work on emotional intelligence has made its way to the most senior levels of business management by creating greater understanding in the workplace about the nature of emotion and individual performance.

There is increasing disillusionment with the ladder of achievement

The knowledge age is driving the need for continuous improvement within organisations and no business or individual can risk standing still. Professor of Entrepreneurship at Australia's RMIT University, Peter Sheldrake (2003: 1), is blatant about the consequences for organisations that are not tuned-in to the demands of the new economy: 'In the current environment, change and innovation are critical. Companies that stay still die'.

The labour market is also being redefined by the knowledge age and organisations struggle to retain their top talent, who are increasingly becoming disillusioned with the ladder of achievement and their lifetime of conforming to others' expectations. Knowledge workers in particular are no longer driven by the fear of job insecurity, with many opting for the work-life of the freelancer in search of opportunities that are more meaningful, and have greater challenge, autonomy or satisfaction.

Helen Trinca and Catherine Fox, journalists for Australian Leadership and Management Magazine, AFR BOSS, have discovered a whole generation looking for more meaningful engagement in worklife, in their research towards their book *Better than sex*, which examines the new world of work. Trinca and Fox (2004: 186) write: 'There is a new wave of "meaning seeking", where many people are asking, "If it's only about making money, why is it dominating my whole life?"'. Increasingly, these shifts in the knowledge age are seeing workers

coming to accept that they are responsible for managing their own careers and keeping their skills current, even recognising that they can no longer depend on their employers for work identity (Florida 2003: 109).

These developments in the relationship between employers and their workforce and the transformation occurring in education highlight critical implications for workplace learning:

- Challenge #1: How does training and learning remain a viable and valuable asset, positioned to meet the demands of the fast-paced, information era of business?
- Challenge #2: How does training and learning keep up with the needs of the modern era of the worker who is self-aware, self-directed in their learning and geared for change, while still facilitating organisational learning outcomes?

Richard Florida (2003: 115), author of *The rise of the creative class* and Professor of Regional Economic Development at Carnegie Mellon University in the USA, states that companies are concerned with 'investing significantly in developing their people's skills and capabilities, when people frequently leave for better opportunities and greater challenge'. While companies are cautious about investing in their human capital, workers are also expressing concern about formal learning keeping pace with the demands of their jobs. Florida (2003: 114) quotes one study which reports that individuals are now taking ongoing responsibility for their own learning 'because the interactive nature of computer tools allows new media workers to learn new skills at their own pace and within their own learning styles and because formal learning programs have not kept pace with skill needs in this fast-changing industry'. In another example of workers' concern about learning and development keeping pace, Florida draws on an employee satisfaction study of network professionals at Lucent

Technologies, which reported that only 30% of those surveyed felt their company's formal training programs met their needs (Florida 2003: 115).

Training and learning must be seen as a sustainable business asset

The message from business leaders is clear. Individuals and organisations must be continually innovating and learning to remain relevant and viable in this highly competitive global marketplace (Sheldrake 2003). However, genuine achievement of sustainable business growth will only occur where management strategies engage individuals through relating organisational goals into their workers' frames of view.

Professor of Management at Sloan University in the USA, Thomas Malone (2004: 165), states in his book *The future of work*: 'We're living in a world in which lots of people throughout an organisation need to be continually inventing new ways of doing things. Your ability to continually invent can be critical to your cultivation of people'. Malone takes his message further by suggesting that valuing and enabling individual difference is the key to business success, 'taking advantage of people's true intelligence and creativity will become one of the most critical capabilities of successful businesses'.

Martyn Sloman is a leading researcher on training and learning with the UK-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and former Head of Learning at Ernst and Young in Europe. He writes in his recent report, *From training to learning*: "Extensive CIPD research has demonstrated that, in our rapidly changing and increasingly knowledge-based economy, competitive advantage is built where individuals actively seek to acquire the knowledge and skills that promote the organisation's objectives. It is built where employees "learn to learn" and possess the capabilities that enable them to do so' (Sloman 2004: 1).

Revolutionise or risk becoming redundant

There is no quick fix. These challenges require broad, strategic solutions including a re-think on the capabilities and qualifications of those involved in developing people and the formulation of new policies and practices that enable and support the learner. Training and learning must take the leadership role in re-framing learning into the knowledge age and advocate for the individual learner in the organisational development equation. The research findings that are inspiring new ways of delivering professional practice, workplace and individual learning, such as those used in learner-centred models, will bring greater meaningful learning experiences for workers and facilitate more individualised, need-it-now knowledge acquisition that will assist their organisation's success into the future.

Like the revolution taking place in education, it is crucial for training and learning to re-position its business framework to demonstrate real value as enablers of learning, rather than deliverers of knowledge, equipped to develop a workforce that will thrive in the agile and innovative business cultures of the future. The knowledge economy demands a workforce where an individual's true intelligence, creativity and intrinsic motivation are valued as the key to business innovation and success.

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Carmel Kostos has a reputation for being at the forefront in training and learning trends and innovations. She first established a niche recruitment consulting business for training and HRD, and then was sought after for media comment and speaking engagements on trends in learning, and presented on the state of training in Australia at local and overseas forums in her former role as Chief Executive of the Australian Institute of Training and Development. Carmel's passion for analysing and interpreting future business trends and their impact on training and learning has lead to her current consulting work as Managing Director of Zest for Learning Pty. Ltd., working with training and learning teams to ensure they are positioned to meet the demands on business and the workforce of the future.

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