



White Paper

Five Fallacies About the Role of Learning Content in Talent Management

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Executive Summary

A number of misconceptions exist about the role of learning content in talent management. Belief in these misconceptions can thwart organizations from realizing the power of learning to transform how they operate.

These misconceptions may be fueled by the accelerated speed of consolidation occurring in the human capital space. Industry consolidations have been big news in recent months with SAP's purchase of SuccessFactors and Oracle's acquisition of Taleo. As larger vendors begin assembling the pieces of an end-to-end human capital management platform, their focus has largely been on the integration of learning management system (LMS) functionality into the overall process. But focusing only on the underlying technologies misses a key point around the business impact of learning content. This is fostering a number of fallacies in organizations, typically outside the L&D organization which has a deep understanding for the role learning content plays in driving true behavioral change. This paper identifies five of the most common fallacies and offers truths about how learning content integrates into a well-developed talent management strategy.

Five Fallacies About the Role of Learning Content in Talent Management

1) Fallacy: As a pillar of talent management, learning exists independently of the other talent management functions within an organization.

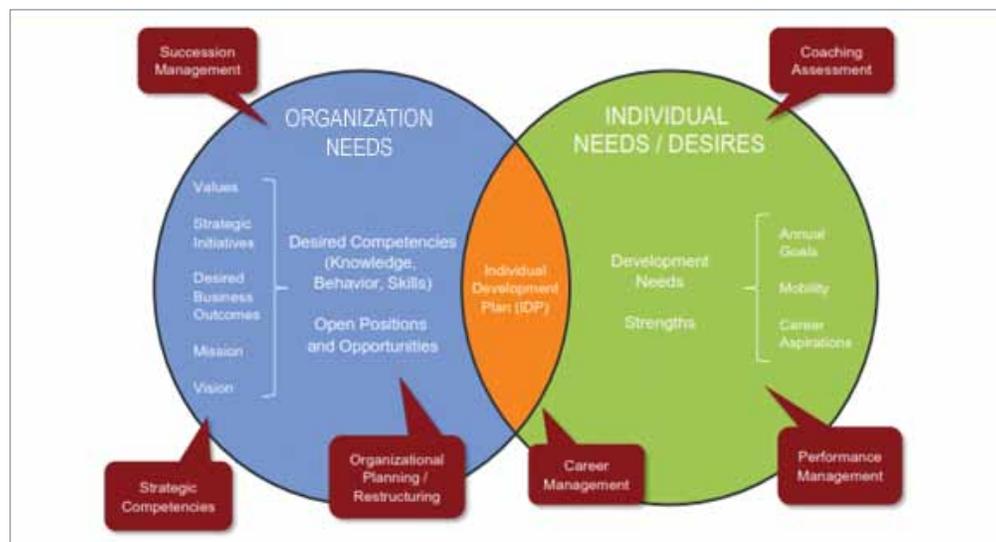
Fact: Learning is more than a pillar of talent management; it is its essential foundation.

Learning is sometimes referred to as one of the “pillars” of talent management, grouped with recruiting/sourcing, performance management, and compensation and benefits.¹ When examined more broadly than just the underlying learning management system, this view is too limiting. Increasingly organizations recognize learning content’s

connection to employee effectiveness, performance management, and organizational success.

Learning content is a ubiquitous enabler within the organization, the proverbial ‘final mile’ that cuts across and can empower all the different pillars of talent management, from onboarding to performance management, career planning, leadership development and succession. Learning serves as a central component at the heart of each pillar, connecting them all horizontally. Learning injected throughout the talent management process creates a stronger platform, reinforcing each pillar.

Managing Talent Mobility
Source: Bersin & Associates, 2011.



In Josh Bersin’s 2012 Predictions for Strategic Human Resources and Talent Management, he identifies how individual needs and organizational needs overlap. The key? Developing individuals. Learning content in the relevant context at that point of overlap ensures both the individual and the organization have what they need to succeed.

¹ *The Four Pillars of Talent Management* by Claire Schooley, Forrester Research, April 26, 2010.

Josh Bersin has identified a number of flaws in the traditional silo approach to HR, including slow response to changing business needs and disconnected decision-making.² When the learning function is not connected to workforce planning, sourcing, performance management, leadership development and succession planning, the organization limits its ability to adapt.

Some organizations have even incorporated learning as part of the pre-hire process in the form of basic assessments and quizzes. Recently, a large staffing organization has used learning as a recruiting tool—the company invested in an open enrollment learning resource site. Visitors to the site entered into the top of the funnel as the company tried to attract more people to its flexible workforce—the site was a key component of the organization's strategy to source new talent that exhibited the desire to self-improve and learn.

Recognizing that learning connects the pillars of a solid talent management strategy also allows organizations to more effectively measure the impact of learning within each of these areas. If you cannot measure, you cannot qualitatively or quantitatively demonstrate impact or improvement. The ability to demonstrate learning's impact and ROI will become an increasingly important consideration as the new Talent Management Development Reporting principles (TDRp)—already embraced by SHRM, ASTD and many industry experts—gain wider adoption.³

2) Fallacy: The platform comes first; we can worry about content later.

Fact: Content is not an afterthought; it is blood, not water.

As businesses become more technology-dependent, the notion that the platform must precede content becomes

more prevalent. In the contemporary talent management model, there is an LMS and that's where learning happens: in that silo. But to have an impact, learning must be democratized across the organization, pumped to the places where work happens. Content needs to be curated, aligned and targeted in a way that creates an engaging learning experience, rather than a learning task.

Learning content already lives across the organization. The new hire orientation packet, the annual harassment prevention training, the workshop introducing the sales team to a new selling technique, the user guide IT supplies after a Microsoft Office upgrade, the VP coaching a new manager... this content exists outside of your technology infrastructure.

You don't simply add content to an integrated talent management platform and suddenly realize great results. Successful organizations do not think of learning content as trivial or unimportant. The organization that flows the best content throughout the system is going to win. You must ensure you have the right content reaching the employees who need it: muscles can't move without blood.

As organizations design their talent strategies, it is important to look for an open content solution that can work both within and without a legacy LMS to enable full flexibility in crafting learning experiences that deliver on business results. SkillSoft's open learning services architecture (OLSA), for example, offers a way for companies using a third party LMS or HRIS to take full advantage of its content, making integration easier, deeper, and better for the end user.

² *Strategic Human Resources and Talent Management: Predictions for 2012* by Josh Bersin.

³ <http://www.knowledgeadvisors.com/tdrp>

3) Fallacy: An integrated learning and talent management platform offers the greatest improvement to learning in an organization.

Fact: Talent management and learning automation offers a one-time improvement; learning content can change behavior on an ongoing basis.

When many in the industry talk about learning and talent management, they emphasize the platform. Platform technology is important but it is just the first step on a stairway to improved efficiency. That's because automation—the current phase of platform consolidation and integration—offers clear benefits, but it is only a one-time improvement. Once processes are automated, how do organizations achieve incremental benefits?

Effective learning content, however, can change behavior on ongoing basis. The application of learning is critical and provides sustained incremental value to organizations. For example, a company that prepares employees for Six Sigma certification as part of its manufacturing quality process may see an initial productivity gain by improving the speed and process for employees to find training when learning management and the talent suite are integrated. But the greater business impact to the organization arises from the successful application of the learning content, in this case when those employees apply that knowledge to develop systems to decrease material waste. In this case, ensuring employees have access to relevant learning content helps reduce costs and increase profit margins.

An organization that has a smarter workforce also has a sustainable competitive advantage. The well-developed workforce can be your most importance differentiator in a global marketplace. Companies with programs in place to support employee development and internal mobility reduce

turnover rates, increase employee engagement, and boost productivity.⁴

It's true that an integrated application can ease some administrative tasks. But the notion that simply automating processes or integrating technology platforms should be the endgame is false.

4) Fallacy: Targeted learning content precludes an abundant library.

Fact: Targeting and content abundance are not contradictions, they are complementary.

Organizations need both alignment to competencies identified in the talent management process as well as performance support. While L&D must provide content that supports an organization's current initiatives, it is impossible to predict the needs of every individual. This inability to predict need rises in direct proportion to employee population served.

For years as I spoke about Books24x7®, people would ask, how many books do you really need? My answer has always been, "One. The right one—the one that will solve the problem." The odds of finding that one however increase as the size of the corpus increases. It's not that corporate learners want less content choice, they actually want better content discovery. The ability to pinpoint the most relevant content in a format that appeals to an individual learning style is at the heart of what it means to be an agile organization. And agility is critical in today's global economy as 80% of companies in developed economies are services related, which demands a workforce with the self-service tools and resources to deal with unique business challenges on a daily basis.

Effective performance support can be achieved by looking for multiple outlets for learning beyond the online corporate university. An abundant content library offers organizations

⁴ Profitable Talent Management, Taleo research white paper.

the dual advantage of providing individuals with a comprehensive performance-support resource to those unpredictable development needs while also proving L&D with the ability to respond to business needs by providing targeted programs. Providing self-service tools in addition to formal programs empowers individuals to dip in to the assets they need to sharpen skills and develop the knowledge to tackle evolving challenges.

The combination of targeted programs and abundant content eases the administrative burden on L&D professionals, particularly in large organizations. For the dispersed global organization with myriad challenges, the most effective way to deliver learning is through both push and pull. Organizations must have both the ability to reach into a deep bag and find relevant content and the ability to allow employees to self-discover what they need at the point of need.

Say someone decides the organization only needs 200 courses. Those courses may align with current initiatives, but they don't allow adequate workforce development or just-in-time performance support. Talent management can help create the relationship between targeted needs and targeted content—there's currently a huge disconnect at this stage in the process.

5) Fallacy: All content is created equal.

Fact: Quality matters.

Ultimately, the learning organization is the steward of the content ecosystem available to develop the talent of the entire organization. User-generated content has its place, especially for time-sensitive or proprietary knowledge, but it is not as effective at providing for the needs of general knowledge, industry certification preparation, external thought-leadership, and similar topics. For these topics,

accuracy, currency, appropriateness, production quality, tone, and instructional design matter.

It is not enough just to provide learning content. You must provide current, relevant, authoritative content from respected sources. And that content must be presented in a way that resonates with learners, allowing them to visualize how this new knowledge will impact their work.

Some curriculum developers and e-learning course designers “ignore the fact that the main goal of online instruction is to facilitate learning that will be beneficial for learners. Instead, too often, designers apparently see a project from their own perspective, perhaps focusing on the technological ‘bells and whistles’ and not through the eyes of the users who want to achieve or complete successfully a particular task.”⁵ Everyone has encountered bad training in some form or another. L&D professionals have an explicit responsibility to provide high-quality learning content that rewards the learner for his or her investment of time.

⁵ *Understanding Online Instructional Modeling: Theories and Practices*. Edited by Robert Z. Zheng and Sharmila Pixy Ferris, IGI Global. © 2008. Books24x7.