

# CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER®

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

## DISRUPTION:

### *The Key to Meet Today's Customer Needs*

BY BRIAN LAMBERT

Today's customers know exactly what they want. To meet these demands, organizations will have to shake up development strategies and collaborate across business silos.

**C**hange and complexity are creating a variety of productivity problems in today's workforce. Buyer expectations are higher across almost every industry segment. Consumers want more choices, and they want faster service and better-trained associates to speak with. Further, business buyers demand more complex solutions and services that more easily align to solve increasingly complicated business problems in new and innovative ways.

In response to these elevated buyer expectations, many businesses are shifting their strategies, their operational focus and improving their product portfolios to stay ahead of the competition and add greater value for customers.

To learning leaders, this should not be considered business as usual. These aren't small incremental shifts businesses are making. Quite the contrary, these are often tectonic shifts, driven by customer demands and expectations that require new ways of working.



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In response to the evolution of buyers, business executives from the CEO down to business unit leadership teams are working harder and smarter in the hopes of delivering more sophisticated products and services to customers.

### Companies No Longer Define Value

In the not-too-distant past, companies could market and sell products and services to customers who didn't have a lot of information at their fingertips and who didn't need a variety of different perspectives to solve their problems. In short, companies had the luxury of defining value for customers.

Today it's quite the opposite. Thanks to the Internet, customers can do their homework and make more informed decisions than ever before. Business customers are also thinking about their roles in more cross-functional ways, often requiring that a variety of different perspectives and stakeholders be included in internal decision-making processes.

In today's dynamic work environment, it's not easy to react — and harder still to get in front of — sophisticated buyers who demand more value from their vendors and partners at every touch point. At a macro level, economic forces are forcing many companies to continue to invest in their supply chains, rethink how they bring products and services to market, or even redefine their business models — clients are changing, too.

Companies have to be a lot more precise about the value they bring to the table. At a micro-level, companies and their learning functions probably aren't organized the way customers buy. They may not be organized to make it easy for customers to get what they need, or for learning leaders to identify and then attach targeted skill development options where they will impact customer-facing employees most, especially when a customer needs cross-functional silos.

For example, customer service agents need to move more quickly to resolve customer issues. That means technology, operations, marketing, service and sales functions need to work together to help them do that, and the learning function must support these departments by providing the necessary competency development employees need to perform. Further, salespeople need to be able to bring together products, services and education in insightful ways for customers — and that means product, marketing, sales and learning groups must be aligned to support actual conversations with customers.

Doing the heavy lifting to figure out how to work differently in ways that benefit customers can be lucrative. One only has to consider how Apple Inc.'s focus on creating value for customers led to a product set people didn't even know they wanted, such as the iPhone. This created organic growth at Apple as well as a renewed focus on product innovations coupled with a relentless drive to pursue a customer-centric design discipline.

### Blending Old and New Ways to Work

Creating value for today's more-sophisticated customer likely means working in new ways that may or may not be compatible with the old ways. To help employees make the shift to new ways of working, the learning leaders' challenge is to create purposeful, future-looking development activities that support the employee of tomorrow — the critical employees directly involved in revenue growth, engineering and operational processes, for instance — while fine-tuning the organization's operating model to meet or exceed buyer expectations. This need provides a massive opportunity for learning leaders who are willing to embrace the challenge.

To meet this need, learning leaders must be able to embrace the reality their business leaders face. Addressing that reality involves more than a cursory meeting once a year to talk strategy; it requires CLOs to take proactive action to bring ideas to leadership that address complexity at the business unit level. For example, if customer net promoter scores are slipping, learning leaders may need to convene a work group that brings together multiple functions to create an evolved set of requirements — and related learning interventions needed to develop them — for employees in multiple roles who must contribute to increase those scores. And CLOs must bring that information forward to gain executive-level consideration and buy-in.

This proactive, increasingly collaborative way of working could create friction as departments rethink their value contribution and different groups team up to create new outputs. Further, this type of disruption is likely to occur at various levels within the organization because employees aren't necessarily equipped to cope with the changes. Likewise, leaders may not be equipped to manage employees in the new way, which means business strategies could suffer from poor adoption, and execution in the trenches may lag, creating frustrated employees who may feel like they need to operate in the old and the new ways simultaneously.

Learning leaders will need to manage and orchestrate a shift across people, process and technology by taking iterative and incremental steps to emerge at the right answer instead of asking the business to make wholesale changes. To institute a more customer-centric lens, leaders have to take a top-down approach to understand business strategy and the gap between the current

**FIGURE 1: A HUMAN CAPITAL ENABLEMENT VIEW OF IMPROVING PRODUCTIVITY**



and future state. Then they are better-positioned to develop employees to elevate their existing contributions to the organization and make a more lasting impact in how those employees communicate, deliver or create value for new and existing customers. To get to this type of business impact, learning leaders need to ask themselves:

**How should we revisit our learning and development strategy to make sure it's aligned to our business strategy?** Many companies may find they haven't revisited these strategies recently. Others may not have a working strategy in place at all.

**What roles do we need to execute our strategy?** Organizations have to ensure their executive teams think through what different roles new ways of working might require. Does the organization have the necessary skill sets in house? If not, could they be developed internally?

**How do we define our roles more clearly so they add value to customers?** For instance, a systems integrator should not have more than 300 different definitions for a salesperson. The objective is to facilitate work and better enable high performance.

**What skills do we need to equip those roles with?** What if a software company created more than 550 hours of available service training, but it became next to impossible for service associates to figure out exactly what they need? Meanwhile in another part of the organization, the learning team neglected to train salespeople on how to sell to executives ahead of a request for proposal, even though it was the clear differentiated sales strategy. Learning leaders must have a way to identify the skills the business needs today and tomorrow so they can build the appropriate levels of development before they're needed, not after.

**How do we develop existing employees to work the new way?** For example, if a financial services firm's ongoing training is built with a rear-view mirror approach — only reinforcing old ways of working while employees are repeatedly told to work in new ways — it will need to change.

**How do we source and select candidates for roles?** Any organization's hiring and development processes can be subjective or completely hit or miss if the work hasn't been done upfront to define roles clearly.

**How do we onboard new talent?** Without considering new ways of work, the gap between what new hires bring to the table versus what skills they need to be successful can be massive.

**How can we leverage our management team to reinforce a forward-leaning strategy and help employees achieve stated future objectives?** Be sure leaders have the coaching and other skills necessary to help employees work through the change required.

Since executing today's customer-centric business strategies requires people within a variety of product, marketing or sales functions to work together within complex and changing businesses, the top-to-bottom learning and development strategy must be re-examined to reduce organizational drag and impediments to the shift from the current to the future state.

This isn't easy. Most employees develop behaviors over decades of training and reinforcement that emphasize siloed thinking and a deliverable-focused mindset rewarding random activities, not a cross-functional view of what needs to be done to drive outcomes that ensure customers realize the value they want and need.

For the learning leader, the key to driving an organizational shift across the business requires the individual:

**Take an outside-in view of work that needs to happen.** Think about and define the organization's clear interactions with customers.

**Create a coalition of the willing.** Find like-minded leaders who can champion change and the associated development needed to help make progress against one of the eight aforementioned areas.

**Make small gains that lead to bigger successes.** Find an initiative to support and advertise to facilitate progress and create impact. **CLO**

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