The digital dilemma: navigating leadership and learning in the modern age

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to help organisations navigate leadership and learning in the digital age.
Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on desk research and the author’s expertise from a 20-year career in L&D.
Findings – This study finds that for organisations to respond to technological change they need to get their employees fit for the future. They can do this by focusing on leadership in testing times, embedding transferable skills and adopting the latest approaches to Learning and Development including live learning, learning content and a learning platform.
Originality/value – This study is original thinking by the author and builds on his experience as a senior L&D consultant.
Keywords Performance, Training, Leadership, Learning and Development
Paper type Viewpoint

Senior leaders in global businesses grapple with a dichotomy. They want to grow but do not know how to upskill their employees. The pace of digital transformation is increasing, and companies are under pressure to adopt technology.

Rather than focus on creating the employees they need now, they need to get them fit for the future.

Businesses can do this by developing leadership skills, instilling transferable skills and adopting the latest learning and development methods and techniques.

The changing workplace

The pressure for businesses and their employees to adopt technology and transform digitally is ever-increasing. For many firms and their people, the pandemic introduced technology in a way they had not used it before. It ushered in the era of mass hybrid working.

In the past year, we have seen the rapid adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) across many sectors and business functions. Indeed, a recent analysis by the Department for Education Unit for Future Skills found that professionals based in London will be most affected as generative AI transforms the UK’s labour market.

The report, which looked at the abilities needed to perform different jobs and how far they could be aided by common AI applications, found that management consulting was the occupation most affected by any type of AI application. This was followed by financial managers, accountants, psychologists, economists and lawyers.

From hybrid structures to AI, innovations in the workplace are changing how, when and where employees work.
The role of people in a tech-dominated world

However, amid the explosion of technology, people remain critical. As the rise of AI continues at an ever-increasing pace, the people who will thrive are the ones who can master it, not the ones who will become reliant on it. Over the coming months and years, we will see a significant difference between enthusiastic amateurs and genuine experts.

So, with the increased adoption of technology comes the dilemma of how companies can help their people keep up. How do they perform at their peak during rapid change? How do they adapt to ensure success?

Because of the increasing pace of change, organisations and senior leaders may feel like they are guessing what skills their employees need to succeed. For instance, training in coding skills may have been a sensible investment. But, with AI, is this still true? Leaders are now asking themselves this type of question across many skills.

Alongside technical skills, businesses and their leaders realise that nurturing their workforce is critical. So, how should leaders create future-fit employees?

Leadership in testing times

First, it starts with the leader.

Business leaders face several significant challenges, but they are proving their mettle. The focus has shifted from a command-and-control style to a more outward mindset, where leaders understand the ripple effects of their decisions.

Yet, as always, there is an expectation to deliver more with less. With the increasing prevalence of learning platforms and easily accessible content, leaders and their employees now expect to access knowledge or learning instantly.

However, although the information may be readily available, can leaders translate this knowledge into a learning pathway that equips employees with the right skills?

Among these concerns, leaders tell us that building, maintaining and enhancing their network and connections, both inside and outside their business, is crucial.

Leaders do not want to feel alone. They want a safe environment to try experimenting with initiatives. They also want to learn from other global leaders to understand the external environment to meet internal expectations.

As a result, connected and collaborative leaders will understand the skills their employees need to learn, adapt and succeed.

For instance, to develop future-ready employees, we helped an international flag-carrying airline with its leadership and management development.

Working in partnership with the client, we designed and delivered a management development programme that established the company’s expectations of managers and helped them build the capabilities needed. At the heart of our solution was a desire to fuel leaders’ curiosity and inspire growth.

Crucially, the programme helped build managers’ skills and confidence to deliver the business requirements. Furthermore, it worked on a personal and corporate level.

We also helped make the training come to life by encouraging delegates to think about how they would apply it in the real world. Demonstrating curious tenacity, the client concluded that their people were very positive about the learning and the content in the workplace.
The value of transferable skills

Second, while technology might make some roles obsolete, a certain mindset and skillset will become more relevant.

At OnTrack International, we talk about employees developing a mindset of “curious tenacity” — or the desire for learning combined with the ability to do something with it. When so much information competes for attention, businesses need their employees to be able to direct that learning and implement what they know to enhance performance.

With this mindset, employees can learn the skills they need to get future fit.

But what skills are critical? Five stand out.

1. Emotional intelligence, or the ability to manage one’s emotions and understand the emotions of others, is crucial.

2. The ability to think critically and analyse evidence, data and arguments to form an unbiased judgement will be fundamental as we become increasingly reliant on machines to perform repetitive tasks.

3. Leaders need to instil adaptability and the ability to adjust quickly to a changing environment.

4. Given the wealth of data now at our fingertips, businesses and their people need to understand how to interrogate, present and tell a story with data.

5. Last and perhaps most importantly, business is about building trust. So, the ability to make connections and build relationships remains undiminished.

These competencies not only add to an employee’s CV, they pave the way for agile thinkers in an unpredictable world. They are as critical and relevant now as ever.

Learn and adapt

Third, businesses, leaders and employees must adopt the latest learning methods.

When employees can access almost anything they want from their phones, age-old knowledge acquisition methods are under scrutiny. The conventional workshop has metamorphosed into a webcam session, but does this transition suffice?

With many approaches available, businesses must determine what resonates with their employees.

The overarching goal is not just to provide information, but to assist individuals in becoming the best versions of themselves.

For business leaders, this means instructing the L&D team to look for consultancies and training providers that can solve the business problems that digital transformation elicits. It means looking beyond functional materials or content and instead focusing on the strategic objective.

Often, modern learning methods require a carefully curated mix of live learning, learning content and a learning platform.

Live learning inspires change and improves performance through high-impact in-person sessions where learning creates sustainable change through relevant and engaging content.

Knowledgeable and responsive facilitators are critical in live learning.

A learning platform enables L&D executives to help their people learn anywhere, anytime, on any device – essential for global businesses with a disparate workforce.
Through a combination of such learning methods, leaders and their organisations can ensure their people learn the skills they need, in the way they need.

**Developing future fit people**

The future remains uncertain. How will AI continue to develop and impact jobs and industries? How should firms adapt their processes and adopt digital tools to drive efficiencies? How will geopolitical tensions change the operating landscape for global businesses?

Business leaders cannot know all the answers.

Whether it is adapting to new technological advances such as AI or understanding the evolving external environment, many complex and uncertain issues will always remain in play.

To navigate these issues, leaders must focus on developing future-fit employees with a mindset of curious tenacity through the right combination of critical thinking, emotional intelligence, data analysis, networking and adaptability.

Developing such skills may not be easy. But, in doing so, businesses and leaders can better respond to future challenges and unforeseen uncertainties.

They will be better able to adapt to change and ensure they are well-positioned for future growth and success.

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