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### 'Little's Britain'

#### The challenges of change



London (UK), February 2013 – (by *Bob Little*) There's always change but the corporate learning sector has been experiencing more than its usual share recently. On a strategic level, there's a growing trend towards learning technology suppliers moving away from control by learning technologists. A recent 101-page IBIS Capital report on the eLearning sector, with market information and analysis from Learning Light, highlights 42 significant mergers and acquisitions in this sector since the beginning of 2011.

Since those figures were compiled, the UK-based Kineo has been acquired by City & Guilds and Italy's global player in the learning content management system market, eXact learning solutions, has been acquired by the international management consultants, Lattanzio Group. Neither of these buyers had previously owned a learning technology company.

On a tactical, technological level, the sector is experiencing change in terms of new sources of learning delivery. These tend to be social media dominated, such as Pinterest, Pearltrees, Storify and ShortForm. As Seth Godin, the blogger and best-selling author, has observed, "We don't have an information shortage; we have an attention shortage."

These new technologies build on and encourage the easy spread of information and conversation. They are encouraging those in the field of corporate online learning to widen their understanding of learning and development (L&D). There are now many acknowledged routes to 'learning', along with a growing range of learning delivery channels. Results, in terms of improved job performance, having 'learned' – rather than following a prescribed method by which to learn – are becoming the key criteria in corporate learning effectiveness.

This trend is unstoppable – given the continued growth both in vehicles for learning and in things to learn and apply – but it's putting greater strain on L&D professionals. When 'learning' was a simpler business, it could be managed and administered. Outputs in terms of numbers (the number of people who took a 'course' or achieved a 'pass score' in a test, for example) could be determined and were unambiguous – even if they didn't mean a great deal in terms of the learners' transfer of skills and actual job performance.

L&D professionals are now facing some deep psychological issues which strike at the heart of their identity, self-image and self-worthiness. For example, is their role to continue creating and/or finding learning materials and then making them available to learners? Or should they be enablers, counsellors, mentors and then 'learning accountants' who assess the value of a learner's learning experience in the light of that person's resulting change in job performance?

The latter may be preferable in today's business world but it will be hard to do.

How can L&D professionals establish an objective basic performance level for a learner, from which to benchmark that learner's subsequent performance? How will a piece of 'achieved learning' be discovered and analysed by the L&D professional? Over what period will that piece of learning remain 'valid' to enable the L&D professional to take account of it to see if the learner applies it in her/his job?

Increasingly, learning activities are informal and, thus, will probably be unmonitored since modern learning technologies make it easy for people to learn from others – especially their peers. Many 'amateur' learners won't necessarily know they've undergone a learning experience and yet they will have learned something which will help them do their job more effectively or efficiently.

Developing technology offers humanity a great many advantages. Yet for the L&D professional, this will pose problems. It merely multiplies to opportunities for informal learning. This should have enormous benefits in terms of performance and productivity but it makes it even harder to quantify and justify the L&D professional's job.

So there could be even greater changes ahead where corporate learning and corporate learning technologies are concerned.

*For over 20 years, Bob Little has specialised in writing about, and commenting on, corporate learning – especially elearning – and technology-related subjects. His work has been published in the UK, Continental Europe, the USA and Australia.*

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