

Targeting Learning to the Social Network

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Coach Tom Coughlin of the New York Giants knows something about training and development. When the Giants lost a game to the Seattle SeaHawks in overtime, Coughlin said, "It takes a whole team to win—teamwork wins every time over individual effort." The response was remarkable because the Giants' kicker missed three field goals in a row to lose the game.

So, if teamwork is the key to success, how are we, as learning professionals, focusing our training resources on intact work teams? Leading benchmarking reports, such as the ASTD 2005 State of the Industry Report, do not address this issue. Instead, they focus on the amount spent on training individual employees, customers or channel partners. But doesn't the success of many business projects depend on a high-performing team?

The importance of training intact teams was brought home to me again after reading research conducted by Robert Huckman and Gary Pisano of Harvard Business School. Together, these professors analyzed the work of Pennsylvania heart surgeons who practice at more than one hospital. These professors found the unthinkable: The mortality rates from similar procedures performed by the same surgeon can vary as much as fivefold at different hospitals. In fact, patients did better in the hospital where the surgeon conducted the most operations.

Doesn't this counter the common wisdom, which says that when you are ill and in need of major surgery, you should do your research, network with your friends and family and then locate the best surgeon money can buy?

Huckman and Pisano's research points to a different trend. They found that the skills of a team working at peak performance are the most important factors. "The surgeon's interactions with the anesthesiologists, nurses and technicians are crucial to the outcome of the surgery," Huckman wrote. "Essentially the critical success factor is to be able to match the Star Surgeon with the 'right' team, and this creates the successful outcome for the patient."

Creating dynamic and high-performing teams has been a top trend in management and executive education for years, but maybe it's time to return to the basics. Have we somehow forgotten the value of intact work teams?

Consider the following:

Estimate how much of your budget goes toward developing formal and just-in-time learning solutions for intact teams versus individual employees. How does this percentage track over time? Look at this over the past five years, and project the next five years. (I see a trend here. A case in point: One large hospitality firm is considering totally revamping its hotel-general-manager

development efforts around intact teams rather than individuals.)

Examine your training budget. How much is devoted to developing modules on meta-cognitive skills? These are skills that are non-functional and focus on building competencies in areas such as learning how to learn, creative problem-solving, forming social networks both inside and outside the organization, and building collaborative communication skills. Why is this so important? Because learning organizations will never be able to teach all the job-specific skills associates require for success on the job. The shortening shelf life of knowledge has impacted every job—not just the high-tech ones. Workers need to be able to access quick references, perhaps 10-minute learning modules rather than a three-day course. Because change is constant, the key to success will be the ability to increase the speed of problem resolution.

Finally, while we continue our focus on how to leverage the Internet for learning, we must remind ourselves that real value created in the knowledge economy does not come from large production facilities but rather through the effectiveness of a small team of individuals working together. Are we providing sufficient resources to develop these intact teams? Have we identified the technical and meta-cognitive skills these teams need for success? Are we challenging ourselves to create an innovative array of just-in-time learning so these team members can be as productive as possible?

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