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Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

Working In the Flat World of Learning **June 2007- Jeanne C. Meister**

There is one sentence in Thomas Friedman's "The World Is Flat" that I often recite to my daughter: "When I was growing up, my parents told me, 'Tom, finish your dinner — people in China and India are starving.' Now, my advice to my daughters is, 'Girls, finish your homework — people in China and India are starving for your jobs.'"

The flat world, as portrayed in Friedman's book, presents nearly every business function with an opportunity to dramatically rethink what it is doing and how it can have much more impact on the organization's success.

This challenge can be a wake-up call for CLOs and their HR counterparts. Rather than simply focus on how to improve their business partner role within the organization, CLOs should pay attention to one overarching priority: how to have more impact on the business.

This means being able to:

1. Identify mission-critical talent in your organization.

Mission-critical talent is defined as those individuals or job families who drive a disproportionate share of your company's business performance and generate value for customers and shareholders. The nature of this talent varies by industry. In thinking about your mission-critical talent, here are three questions to answer:

- What strategies, skills and capabilities are crucial for your organization's current and future success?
- How much of your learning budget goes toward developing mission-critical talent?
- What emerging trends will affect your organization's ability to succeed?

2. Develop innovative methods to grow mission-critical talent.

Mission-critical employees thrive on independence, so growing and managing them can be challenging. The key will be to give them many opportunities to be engaged and helping them build the necessary networks to improve their performance.

An MIT study found people are five times more likely to ask a co-worker for advice and data rather than consult an intranet, database or formal learning program. The research suggested people who cultivate broad and diverse networks are more likely to be successful than those who rely on inner circles or formal means to solve problems. Helping mission-critical talent develop social networks both on and off the job is becoming a new focus for CLOs.

3. Develop powerful business metrics to prove learning's business impact.

Ideally, the metrics of success should be so compelling, a CEO, COO or CFO irrefutably can see the connection between the investment in learning and improved business indicators. Often, this means setting up test and control groups of mission-critical workers to compare the on-the-job performance of those who benefit from access to increased learning and development with those who do not.

This also can involve using more precise business language when explaining your impact to the C-suite executive. For example, instead of simply stating you were able to improve the bench strength of your organization with a leadership development program and reduce the need to recruit outside professionals, you have the opportunity to be

much more precise in reporting the value you create for the organization.

You can start by providing context and refer to research that states the typical U.S. company spends nearly 50 times more to recruit a \$100,000 professional than it will to invest in the annual learning plan.

Then, you can report the value your new experiential leadership development program has on the organization. For example, you might profile how it reduced outside recruiting expenses by 30 percent and saved the company \$5 million annually.

As we prepare for tomorrow's flat world, remember: Success belongs to the agile and the innovative.

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