

Does Your Learning Department Operate at the Speed of Business?

Jeanne C. Meister

Operating at the speed of business has been making headlines in 2006. Why? Because a good idea for a new product or service does not operate in a vacuum, so speed to market becomes a key competitive advantage.

Consider the following cycle times as reported in Business Week: The development of new cars at Nissan Motor Company used to take 21 months, and now takes just 10.5 months; new cell phones developed by Nokia and Motorola have decreased in cycle time from 12 to 18 months to just under nine months; and an entire new business, Virgin Comics LLC, was created in just 11 months.

If companies want to thrive, they must innovate at a faster pace. This correlation between speed to market and innovation was a major finding of the recent Business Week and Boston Consulting Group (BCG) survey of 1,000 senior executives interviewed to compile the list of the World's 25 Most Innovative Companies.

According to the survey, although 72 percent of senior executives named innovation as one of their top three priorities, almost a third said they were dissatisfied with the pace of innovation in their companies. The number-one obstacle to innovation was slow new-product development cycle times. Fast-changing consumer demands and global competition make speed to market a crucial ingredient for success.

Chief learning officers take heed. This focus on speed to market is now impacting the learning department. Case in point: Kevin McNamara, former vice president of franchise training for Dunkin Brands, said, "Cycle times are now as important to the training department as they are to the new product development area of Dunkin Donuts. As we develop new products faster, training has to be in lockstep with new product development so training programs are ready when the business needs them."

The Smoothie product training is one of the best examples of providing product training at the speed of business. McNamara developed a new training program for the introduction of Dunkin Donuts Smoothies in the form of a game—complete with job aids and competitive scores. The training program was designed, developed and piloted in a matter of weeks rather than the traditional three to four months. Why the push for speed in this case? The exact recipe for Smoothies kept changing until the last week before its introduction, so the cycle time for product training had to be in sync with the iterative product development process. And the results speak for themselves: 7,000 crew members completed the new product training in the first week of its introduction.

Operating at the speed of business is mandatory, especially if CLOs are concerned about being aligned to their organization's business priorities. So how can you evolve your learning department to operate at a faster pace while retaining your quality standards? Obtain the latest benchmarks on how your company is evolving its cycle times for new product development. If the learning department is truly aligned to the business needs, then CLOs must continually be aware of the changes in business-cycle times. For example, if your company is able to cut its cycle time in the manufacture of new cars from 21 months down to 10 months, the learning department has to operate at this pace in order to be relevant to the business.

Develop specific benchmarks on how long it takes the learning department to design, develop and deliver new training programs. Before you can really operate at the speed of business, you must have accurate data at your fingertips. That means examining the current cycle times for instructor-led, online self-paced and synchronous Web-based courses. Then you can begin to set goals for how to reduce these cycle times while maintaining quality.

Develop an iterative mindset in the design and development of new training programs. Develop a "pilot mindset," which includes time for input from users on how to enhance and revise a training program so it meets "consumer usability" standards. This iterative process will ultimately generate a higher-quality program that meets the needs of users and business-unit sponsors.

Get intimately involved in the cycle times of your product development process and then align your learning department goals to meet these business demands.

Jeanne Meister is an author and independent learning consultant. She can be reached at jmeister@clomedia.com.

copyright 2002 - CLOmedia.com / Chief Learning Officer Magazine - MediaTec Publishing

Chief Learning Officer Magazine
<http://www.clomedia.com/>