

# CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER

Solutions for Enterprise Productivity

## **TRAINING / E-LEARNING: Web-Based Corporate Learning Takes Off**

*The Net Generation is changing the way companies are tackling the challenge of institutional learning in the 21st century. \_\_By Jeanne C. Meister*

The newest generation of employees to join the workforce is vastly different from any generation to come before it. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, today's college student will have 10 to 14 jobs by age 38. These students are preparing for jobs that do not yet exist in the marketplace, and they spend at least one hour per day searching online for answers to questions.

What does this all mean to human resource executives? This new demographic segment, known as the Net Generation, born between 1980 and 1994, is accustomed to a fast-paced life of constant communication, where the number of text messages sent and received every day currently exceeds the population of the planet. They carry an arsenal of electronic devices to work, and the more portable, the better.

These Net Geners, as they are referred to by demographic analysts, are accustomed to juggling several instant messaging conversations, surfing the Web and listening to music on their iPods -- all while doing their homework. They are quite adept at seamlessly mixing learning, communicating and playing. They will have a profound impact as they enter corporations and demand to learn as easily as they shop and bank on the Web.

To address this demographic segment, organizations will need to institute processes, technologies and change-management strategies to provide tools so everyone can co-create and become a subject-matter expert, extend networking and collaboration within and outside the organization and develop learning at a modular level that can be accessible from a personal digital assistant.

For human resource executives, this means corporate universities -- in-house corporate learning departments now in place at many Fortune 1000 firms -- must be re-invented to meet the needs of a demographic segment that has no patience or interest in classroom training.

In fact, in order to attract and retain Net Geners, companies will have to create corporate learning that resembles the personalized networked life Net Geners lead on Facebook or MySpace.

### **Web 2.0 Will Change Learning**

Net Geners will demand to be in charge of their own learning just as they have been in charge of their own lives since high school. A new approach to learning is needed: one that incorporates Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wikis, RSS feeds and links to del.icio.us accounts. (Del.icio.us is a social-bookmarking service that allows users to tag, save, manage and share Web pages from a centralized source.)

The goal is for Net Geners to both contribute and consume learning as often as possible in their daily jobs.

We have all heard of Web 2.0, but what is it? Web 2.0 refers to the Web as a platform used to publish and create new content. Net Geners are accustomed to the Web as a dynamic mix of creativity and fun where much of the content is now generated by the users themselves.

This has resulted in a social phenomenon in which there are now more than 70 million blogs, and this has been doubling every six months for the last three years, according to blog search engine Technorati.

The three biggest challenges facing human resource executives in 2008 will all involve the Web and how to harness it to best provide learning for a new generation of workers.

### **A MySpace Approach**

MySpace now has more than 100 million users. As they enter the workforce, they will demand learning that is accessible across multiple channels allowing for learning modules to be accessed on consumer devices so that learning becomes "wearable" via an iPod or personal digital assistant. Learning must also become flexible to allow for content re-use, so its assets can be multipurpose and available online, in the classroom and in audio format.

The best approaches to providing knowledge will be modular in nature, to enable learners to find and consume only the portion of the content that is relevant to them and to the task at hand. They must also be dynamic so learning objects are updated quickly and seamlessly by subject-matter experts as key content

changes.

Training must also have a collaborative element to it so users can easily contribute content, share experiences and add to both their personal and the organizational knowledge base. It must also be engaging so users will participate in interactive instructive games and simulations that hold their attention and interest just like the multiplayer games they have grown up on.

Content must be personalized to the point where the information presented to the user is relevant to his or her job performance and delivered at the point of need. Finally, it must be user-generated so content is increasingly provided by other Net Geners and everyone becomes both a contributor as well as consumer of new knowledge.

### **Open and Integrated**

The growth of knowledge work is perhaps the single most important factor driving the future of the workforce. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, roughly 34 percent of the entire workforce in 2005 could be classified as workers who "think for a living."

In other words, they have high degrees of expertise, education or experience, and the primary purpose of their jobs involves the creation, distribution or application of knowledge.

So the question becomes, how can organizations support knowledge workers with the information, knowledge, access to continuous learning and performance support they will need to succeed on the job?

Increasingly, organizations will bundle access to corporate learning with performance support, business intelligence and search capability, as well as libraries of user-generated content.

With the emphasis on the power of the community, there will be more links on a corporate university home page to Flickr ([www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)), the online community for sharing photographs that is now also being used for sharing power point presentations, and iTunes ([www.itunes.com](http://www.itunes.com)), Apple's successful music store that is now also being used to access business-related podcasts.

### **TiVo for the Desktop**

As human resource executives and chief learning officers, we will be left behind if we remain tied to our linear production model of instructional design. Instead, we need to experiment with Web 2.0 tools for corporate learning.

Some suggestions for ways a corporate university might start experimenting to incorporate Web 2.0 tools for enterprisewide learning include creating a Wiki on the topic of new-employee orientation or requesting input from recently hired employees on what to include in future employee-onboarding programs. So, rather than spend six to nine months in an instructional-design model, start by creating such a Wiki.

HR executives can also develop a podcast series profiling subject-matter experts who share their "top tips" in less than 10 minutes. Use as a model Harvard Business Review Ideacast, [www.hbrideacast.org](http://www.hbrideacast.org), the company's weekly podcast featuring breakthrough ideas and commentary from leading thinkers in business. In fact, HBR Ideacast recently earned a spot on the People's Choice Best of 2006 and Staff Best of 2006 on iTunes.

Executives may also want to create a channel on their intranet sites to have learners "rate" their courses just like Amazon does for books. This can provide learners a fast and easy way to give feedback on learning programs and a way for human resource executive to aggregate these back to learners.

You may want to develop a private online community for the corporate university or enterprise-learning organization to share ideas on how to use the latest Web 2.0 tools for learning. This can become a robust way to capture the "online chatter" among corporate learning professionals and act on this in a timely manner.

Finally, as HR professionals, we should take a page from the best-selling book, *Blue Ocean Strategy*, in which authors W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne challenge businesses to ask themselves four questions when creating a new value proposition for corporate learning. These questions can be a starting point to think about transforming corporate learning:

- \* What can be created that the learning industry has never offered before?
- \* Which factors/services should be raised above industry standards?
- \* Which factors should be eliminated to accommodate a new audience?
- \* Which factors should be re-created to accommodate a new audience?

The time is now to think about how learning can be designed and delivered differently throughout the organization. These four questions can be your starting point as you begin to transform your corporate university.

As we look into our crystal ball, we begin to see that the lines will blur between learning, working, communicating and entertaining, with learning being embedded into all the devices we now use in our daily lives -- telephone, computer, MP3 player and even the car.

Without question, if organizations are successful in creating "Open Source Learning" for the Net Generation, they will be rewarded with both greater productivity and higher rates of employee retention, and be designated as a truly "Great Place To Work."

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