

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF L&D: HOW TO ADOPT A CONSULTANCY APPROACH

Over numerous [articles](#) and many years, we've said that L&D is about developing your people and your workforce, helping them learn the skills they need to succeed. Our [company vision](#) takes it one step further, describing it as learning which 'transforms' and 'liberates your business,' by helping your people 'reach their full potential.'

This should be the ultimate goal for any L&D professional, but how is it done in practice? Having the highest quality designs and the world's best trainers to deliver them is still secondary to actually running the right courses and programmes for the right people.

At Speak First, we are primarily consultants. We know that the best learning solutions are the ones that live up to their name as 'solutions' – a way to solve a problem – and it's only through our consultation process that we know we're giving you what you really need.

To learn more about how we do it, you can read [our process](#). In this article, we want to show you more about what L&D consulting means for you and how you can adopt a similar approach to L&D within your organisation.

TRADITIONAL L&D IS FALLING BEHIND

How people work, and the skills they need, have always evolved. Industries find new trends, and new technologies create new opportunities and challenges. L&D professionals have always tried to stay one step ahead of these changes, or at least to react quickly enough that they never fell too far behind.

However, the pace has been increasing in recent years, and has only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which





sparked many major changes to working processes, and the priorities of organisations and workers.

For example, before the pandemic, 48% of workers in the UK said communication was the most important skill to do their job. This has now been overtaken by adaptability, which rose by 23%. Similarly, IT skills, resilience, social media and creativity have become more important as we acclimatise to new ways of working.¹

One of the knock-on effects of the pandemic and working from home is that over one-third of workers under 35 years old feel that they aren't getting enough workplace training, and 46% say that they've had fewer opportunities to collaborate and learn from their colleagues.²

It's become clear that the old method is no longer fit for purpose, with reaction times being too slow and having too many blind spots. With new skills to prioritise and a constantly altering landscape, it's certainly time for L&D to upgrade itself.

WHAT IS A CONSULTING APPROACH?

Typically, L&D professionals are approached by an internal stakeholder asking for a course on a particular topic. They then get to work on looking at how to help that team, by organising the design and delivery.

A consultancy approach flips this on its head. You are the expert in learning, but also in analysing needs. You can certainly take requests into consideration and listen to what

people are asking for, but you should also be proactive in making your own recommendations.

When someone asks for a particular programme, don't take what they say at face value. Ask them questions about why they think they need it and why they think it will help. Often, what someone wants and what they need are very different things – it's your job to recognise that.

You shouldn't aim to patch up a surface level issue within your company. Instead, delve into the root causes to create effective learning interventions that stop it happening again.

BECOME THE ALL-KNOWING EXPERT IN YOUR COMPANY

The most important element in reinventing yourself as a consultant is really understanding your company. If you're working externally (like us), then this involves a process of getting to know your clients. Depending on the organisation and their needs, we use a range of tools, such as in-depth interviews with senior executives, employee surveys, focus groups and more to get a full picture, before agreeing the content of any new programme.

If you're working in an in-house L&D team, it's much easier. Rather than needing to do one big push to learn all about the people you're working with, you can build your knowledge over time. Establish connections around the company, and in all



departments, granting you insight into what's happening and how it's going. It's important to understand which skills are required at different levels and how each team interconnects, while acting as a more detached and objective opinion than those working within the team.

It's critical you become comfortable and familiar with all the internal targets, metrics and KPIs your company uses. Every intervention you organise should use these organisational priorities as their start and end point, aligning with the wider business strategies.

Of course, how you do this will depend on the size of your organisation. If you work somewhere small enough to know everyone individually, then you can build and foster real relationships with the whole team. However, if you work in a large, multinational organisation, you'll have to take a different approach. In this case, focus first on getting to know managers and team leaders to hear how things are going, but don't neglect the rest of the staff. Managers and team members may have very different views of a situation, and you should aim to listen to both.

If you're in a larger L&D team, you may want to split the organisation up into more manageable sections, all reporting back to each other about what's required. This relies on information sharing to find which training is most useful and how it can align with current priorities.

This isn't a process that really ends – because there will always be something else to dig into – but after a while you'll transform yourself into a guru in your company, industry and processes. This gives you the knowledge to say what's needed, the information to influence others and the authority to start making it happen.

USE THE LANGUAGE OF THE BUSINESS TO GAIN BUY-IN

It has always been the L&D department's job to champion the importance of learning, but it tended to either be in the language of people already convinced, or L&D sessions were turned into a mandatory activity that no one particularly looked forward to.

As a consultant, you need to start talking the language everyone else in the organisation talks. Upping your [business acumen](#) means being able to discuss everything from performance to profits.

It also helps to get everyone in the organisation invested in learning. Make sure the C-Suite understands the need for L&D and the improvements it can make. It needs to be an investment in the future of the company, developing the workforce and closing skills gaps to create a more effective team. When you're trying to get buy-in for a new programme, rather than just saying how much it's needed, talk about its potential [return on investment](#).

You can get managers involved in recognising which areas their team could use help with. Ask them if any competencies are lacking or where development is needed. For individual team members of all levels, you can get them excited for opportunities to strengthen their CV and learn new skills, while getting them excited about being part of something bigger – aligning their personal development with the direction of the business.



TRANSFORM YOURSELF INTO A TRUSTED ADVISOR

Building relationships and trust throughout the organisation, becoming comfortable with how everything works and establishing a sense of excitement around L&D can be a slow process – especially if your colleagues are used to you working in a different way. But, we promise the hard work will pay off.

One way to speed this up is to share news of successes and how they've helped the business grow and thrive. Giving others an opportunity to see how well your consultancy process is working will quickly get any doubters on board.

Once you've established yourself as an expert in the company, you can position yourself as someone to come to for help. Your help can certainly be L&D focused when appropriate, but at other times your insight into the business may be enough. This in itself will strengthen your role as a consultant, showing that you can offer this kind of help. At all levels, people will know that when you suggest a programme, they should listen. You've proven that you know what you're talking about and you wouldn't recommend something that wasn't needed.

USE IT TO UPGRADE YOUR L&D

This is the path to, and the power of, a consulting approach to L&D. With your knowledge of the business, strategies and targets, along with good communication channels throughout the organisation, you can stand as a confident beacon of learning. Be a respected advisor and a trusted guide to increase the company's performance, creating

new and exciting opportunities for development, reacting in real time to upcoming challenges.

We use a consulting approach for all of the programmes we develop for our clients. This way everyone can be confident that we aren't simply providing them with what they've asked for, but with what they really need.

To find out more about how we can help you and your company achieve the very best results, you can take a look at [our learning solutions](#) or [get in touch](#).

¹ CV-Library (2021) Revealed: Employees face skills shortage ahead of return to the workplace

² Sharma, M. (2021) 'Only a fifth of staff say skills have developed since start of pandemic' HR Review. May 2021