Working Smarter using Informal Learning and the 70:20:10 Framework

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Marc Prensky has noted that ‘too many teachers see education as preparing kids for the past, not the future’.

It could equally be said that too many Higher Education establishments and too many Training and Development departments in business and industry are designing and delivering training for the past, not the future.

This paper addresses the issue of effective learning in a world of flux, where knowledge is no longer power but where access to the right information and knowledge at the right time, in context, is where the power for effective action lies.

The paper also discusses a framework, or reference model, that is being used by an increasing number of organisations across the world to harness the power of informal and social workplace activities to provide a powerful resource for improving individual and organisational performance.

Working Smarter in a World of Constant Flux

Huge changes are afoot in the workplace. Hierarchies are flattening, organisational boundaries are softening and extending, and even the traditional concepts of a ‘job’ and a job role are being questioned as work becomes more focused on bringing the right expertise together at the right time to solve specific problems and challenges.

Josh Bersin, a respected US analyst, terms this world ‘the borderless workplace’ – an ecosystem where workers communicate continually and seamlessly across time and distance with co-workers both inside and outside their own organisation.

A good term for the effective response to the borderless workplace is ‘working smarter’.

Working Smarter is very different from the traditional process where learning and working are two separate activities carried out in different locations, with different purpose, and in different contexts. Working Smarter involves a continual cycle where we learn through work and share learning continuously with our colleagues within our organisations and with fellow professionals outside our organisations.

The Inertia of Traditional Training

One of the principal challenges learning and knowledge professionals face is the inherent inertia in traditional learning and employee development approaches. This inertia slows workforce development and lacks the agility and ‘always-on’ requirements of today’s world.
Today’s work demands learning at the speed of business. Anything less will result in failure.

The way some organisations are addressing this problem is to encourage and exploit the learning that already happens in the workplace – the learning that goes almost unnoticed if you are not looking for it.

Learning at the Speed of Business

Apart from the unprecedented levels of change in the way organisations are structured and manage their work, we also are seeing the rise of the ‘extended’ enterprise and the push for work to get done faster – the ‘speed of business’ is increasing.

The evolution from discrete to extended enterprises is as a response to the working world of continuous flux. Where change is the normal state and speed of execution is the key driver.

Today’s organisations are working more closely than ever with their clients, their suppliers, their distributors and their customers. These business relationships and communities are focused on effective service provision.

Every year organisations respond to the pressures to deliver new services and products faster and with greater levels of innovation. Everyone is under pressure to do more with less, and do it better year-on-year. This simply can’t be achieved without high levels of co-ordination within organisations and across their business partnerships – their suppliers, their resellers and, ultimately, their customers – their value chain.

The two key enablers in this rapidly changing world are the capabilities of workers, and the flexibility and capabilities of the technologies that support them in their work.

It is often said that ‘it’s not about the technology’. However, the technology is vital and there is no denying that in a world that is becoming increasingly dependent on technology to ‘get stuff done’ the technology is the lynchpin for success.

It is no exception for working smarter, learning and capability building.

Without the right technology it is very difficult to achieve our aims. But without the right mind-set and workforce capability it is impossible.

Organisational Learning under the Microscope

Workers in the 21st century are less and less likely to want or need to leave their working environment to learn. They are increasingly demanding that their development meshes with their work. In fact, many now realise that work is becoming learning and learning is becoming work.

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1Allan Tough, Emeritus Professor, University of Toronto. ‘Adult Learning Projects’
However, many providers of learning services – commercial operations and in-company Learning and Development (L&D) departments – have not yet understood this sea change, or have not yet grasped how to address it.

The Corporate Leadership Council, a well-respected professional body with many corporate members around the world, publishes an annual L&D Team Capabilities Survey.

The CLC 2011 survey presents salutary reading for all learning professionals.

When line managers (business leaders) were asked to rate their internal learning and development organisation in terms of performance and effectiveness in helping them achieve their business outcomes, less than one in four (25%) considered that the Learning and development department provided added value.

More damning, only 14% of line managers said they would recommend that their colleagues work with their Learning and Development department to address critical business problems where worker knowledge and skills development was required.

52% responded that they would actively discourage their colleagues from working with their Learning and development department.

This is a clear indicator that the traditional approach being taken to learning and development is inadequate to meet the demands of today’s organisations in today’s world.

It also hints that the skills that current learning professionals possess are not the skills needed to build a capable, efficient and highly flexible workforce that can adequately face the demands of the 21st century.

**Working Smarter Activities**

The new world of unlimited information, distributed work and hyper-networking makes very different demands on workers and learning professional that of the 20th century industrial world.

The demands on organisations in an environment where change is the ‘new steady state’ require totally new approaches from learning and development professionals, and across the organisation as a whole.

This is what working smarter is all about.

A good analogy for working smarter are the principles of agile development, where developers of all types – software, physical products, services and so on - undertake very fast, iterative product development through close collaboration with their user base.

When agile techniques are applied to building human capability it becomes immediately clear that we need to move beyond the ‘course/programme’ mind-set where learning consists of a series of events. Agile requires the integration of a continuous flow of learning opportunities into daily workflow.
Learning: Experience, Practice, Conversation and Reflection

The majority of adult learning is almost unnoticed. It comes about through the informal and social activities that occur as part of work, not separate from it.

Informal learning is driven by the ‘need to do’ – the desire to complete a task, or achieve a goal. It happens in many, often unpredictable, ways. Through new experiences in the workplace, through the opportunity to practice, through rich conversations with colleagues and other professionals working in the same field, and through taking the opportunity to reflect and learn from reflection.

The increased interest in exploiting informal learning has come at a time when we are witnessing unprecedented innovation and growth in communications and when leading-edge businesses are becoming social businesses. They are evolving into self-organising networks of people and teams that respond to opportunities and threats in near real time.

These emerging social businesses are leveraging the intelligence of their workers and customers. Social businesses work smarter and innovate faster. They delight their...
customers and are inspiring places to work. There is no doubt that they will continue to grow and outperform traditional businesses.

Organisational learning must develop if it is to meet the needs of these new businesses.

**Learning in Context**

We have known for a long time that learning works best when it takes place within the same context where the learned skills, practices and behaviours are to be used.

Dr Hermann Ebbinghaus demonstrated the importance of context for memory as long ago as 1885. From his research, and from the research of others, we know that if learning and context are not tightly coupled, and if we don’t have the opportunity to put what we’ve learned into practice as soon as we’ve learned it, we will forget a significant amount very quickly (Ebbinghaus’ figures suggested a forgetting rate of around 50% within the first hour).

Also if we don’t have anyone to turn to for help and support once we’re back in the workplace we often simply continue on doing what we did before we attended a learning event. I’ll discuss this last point in some more depth in the next article when I’ll look at the role of managers in organisational learning.

So it’s not surprising that with this reawakening of an understanding for the need for context in learning over the past ten years, much of the sheen has been rubbed off training for which we need to leave the workplace to attend. Of course away-from-work training and development serves a purpose. But that purpose is being seen as an increasingly narrow one.

The days where training met all needs are over.

Prior to the turn of the millennium the world of training was much simpler. If you worked in an organisation with commitment and budget devoted to employee development you discussed your development needs with your manager at the annual appraisal meeting and agreed the courses you would attend during the following 12 months. If you were in middle or upper management tiers, you did the same but called it ‘management development’ or ‘executive development’ and sometimes wrapped coaching and other activities in too. The courses for these groups were designed and delivered along the same lines as those for individual contributors. They were often just more expensive and usually run in a delightful green and leafy hotel or centre in some exotic part of the world.

Today the world of learning is a much more complex endeavour needing more than courses and curricula as the solution.

**Continuous Learning is Becoming the Work**

For many people, particularly those who earn their living with their heads rather than their hands and those who work in the knowledge industry, learning and work are becoming intertwined. In fact, learning is becoming the work for many people.
In order to improve the performance of our work we need to embrace a culture of continuous learning. This means viewing our work as a series of on-going learning experiences, continuously reflecting and improving as part of our daily activity.

A focus on continuous learning is leading the death of the out-of-date idea that formal education, training and development programmes are the best answer to the challenge of improving performance in the workplace.

In fact, we are finding that formal, structured education is simply not adequate for a world in which knowledge needs to flow rapidly and where information becomes outdated at almost the speed of electrons.

In place of event-driven learning we are seeing two things happen:

**Firstly**, many structured programmes are quite rightly extending into the workplace. Pre-learning activities and experience and support and coaching back in the workplace are being integrated with formal away-from-work learning and development events. Most business schools and many in-house programmes now use this approach as a matter of course.

However, this represents an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach. There is no doubt it is a step in the right direction but I it is likely that we will not be able to adapt to our rapidly changing world by taking a series of small steps rather than a few large ones.

**Secondly**, along with the phenomenal developments in technology we are seeing increased interest in, and focus on, informal learning approaches. These are the ways we can support learning and development as part of their daily tasks, and the ways workers can take responsibility for their own learning and development.

From this trend towards continuous learning have emerged new, or newly-revised, learning approaches – eLearning, social learning, workplace learning, on-job coaching and mentoring, mobile learning, and performance support to name just a few. Together, these all provide greater flexibility and increased access to information and knowledge resources.

**Not Just a Bend in the Road**

These changes are not some temporary aberration. The drivers have been building for at least the past 15 years.

In 1999 the authors of the ‘Cluetrain Manifesto’ posited the significant ways the Internet and associated technologies would transform all business activity. ‘Markets are conversations’ they said, and ‘companies that assume online markets are the same markets that used to watch their ads on TV are kidding themselves’.

Equally, we now know that organisations that assume the online generation want the same ‘stuff’ that’s delivered in classrooms and formal learning situations are also kidding themselves.

> Your organization is becoming hyperlinked. Whether you like it or not. It's bottom-up; it's unstoppable.”
More recently writers and researchers such as John Seely Brown and Daniel Pink have identified fundamental trends in the knowledge (from ‘stocks’ to ‘flows’) and the drivers for workers (autonomy, mastery, purpose) that verify significant changes are afoot.

It is clear that new approaches are needed.

**The 70:20:10 Framework**

The 70:20:10 framework has been adopted by a large number of organisations across the world to help de-focus on formal training and integrate workplace, informal and social learning into their strategy.

It is a framework, or reference model, not a recipe.

**Background to the 70:20:10 Framework**

The 70:20:10 Framework is based on a number of studies that indicate most learning in organisations occurs in the workplace informally through work.

The research most often referred to as the origin of 70:20:10 for organisational learning is often misunderstood and misquoted.

Morgan McCall and his colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership in North Carolina carried out surveys with accomplished and high-potential executives and asked to them to describe key developmental events in their professional lives that made a difference to their management effectiveness.

The results suggested (and reported the 1996 book ‘The Career Architect Development Planner’ by McCall’s colleagues Michael Lombardo & Robert Eichinger) that ‘the lessons learned by successful and effective managers are roughly’:

- 70% from tough jobs
- 20% from people (mostly the boss)
- 10% from courses and reading"

An important point to note about this data is that it is an extrapolation of survey data only. The data collection methodology itself was not carried out in a rigorous manner and certainly does not hold up to robust academic scrutiny.

That, however, is no reason to dismiss the framework. It is a reference model only.

When the findings of McCall and his colleagues are put together with the growing number of other studies and surveys that have drawn similar conclusions it becomes evident that

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2 The CAREER ARCHITECT Development Planner’. Eichinger & Lombardo. 1996
3 Including studies by: Loewenstein and Spletzer for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics; A 2-year study involving Boeing, Ford Electronics, Siemens, and Motorola by The Education Development Center in
most of what people learn (or retain and put into use) is learned as part of doing their work, not through formal training.

Allen Tough – Early Insights into the 70:20:10 Framework

Earlier work than McCall and his colleagues looking at adult learning was carried out by Alan Tough⁴ in the 1960s and 1970s. Tough, now emeritus professor at the University of Toronto, also revealed the 70:20:10 pattern.

Tough’s research focused on the 70% of adult learning that is self-guided without relying on professionals or institutions for direction. His two best-known books from this research are ‘The Adult’s Learning Projects’ and ‘Intentional Changes’.

Tough’s research led him to explain:

“It doesn’t seem to matter where you are or what group you study, you get a very similar picture of informal adult learning. Informal learning just seems to be a very normal, very natural human activity. But it is so invisible; people just don’t seem to be aware of their own learning. They’re not aware of other people’s learning; educators don’t take it into account and so on. People are spending 15 hours a week at it on average, and yet it’s not talked about, it’s not recognized, it’s sort of ignored or invisible.”⁵

Tough also noticed that when he looked at informal learning taking place, he distinguished three kinds of ‘planners’:

- 73 percent of all adult learning is planned by the learner himself or herself. The learner decides what to learn, how to learn it from one episode to the next as they go along.

- 3 percent of learning was with a friend, a relative, a next-door neighbour or a co-worker teaching you something.

- 4 percent of learning was a peer group, a group of peers who get together and learn something without using any kind of professional assistant

Research Shows Informal is a Major Part of Organisational Learning

A sample of other research into informal learning has confirmed the underpinning premise of the 70:20:10 Framework, that most organisational learning occurs in the workplace and is informal in nature. The following are findings from a number of surveys and studies carried out over the past 15 years:

“People learn 70% of what they know about their jobs informally”⁶

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“80% or more of corporate learning is found to be informal”

“70% of what people know about their jobs, they learn informally from the people they work with”

“Approximately 75% of the skills employees use on-the-job were learned informally through discussions with co-workers, self-study, mentoring by managers and similar methods. 25% were gained from formal training”

Although these studies were not carried out with academic rigour, they provide an insight into an important aspect of organisational learning – that most occurs in the workplace, not in the lecture hall, classroom or workshop.

Metamorphosis of the Framework

With the recent rise of social media the ability to learn and from others has become much easier. And learning with others has also become much easier, too. So the 20 percent part of the 70:20:10 model will no doubt increase over time.

Also, ‘the boss’ is no longer the main source of learning for workers. The communications revolution has had significant impact and workers now communicate, connect and learn from each other in an almost continuous stream.

However, regardless of the fine detail of the 70:20:10 model, and regardless of industry, worker age, technique or individual learning style, it is clear that most adult learning is balanced heavily towards experiential learning.

The Impact of the 70:20:10 Framework

The basic principle of the 70:20:10 framework is that it provides a structured approach to de-focus on event-based learning and re-focus on the broader aspects of organisational learning, principally the experiential elements.

70:20:10 is a tool that helps approach the challenge of building a learning environment and encouraging a culture to support efficient and effective learning and development provision in an integrated way.

From experience it is clear that learning is essentially a rather ‘messy’ business that varies from person to person and from organisation to organisation. The 70:20:10 Framework helps build an operating model to manage it

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7 Peter Henchel, Executive Director, Institute for Research on Learning
8 Education Development Center, Massachusetts (1997). A 2-year study involving Boeing, Ford Electronics, Siemens, Motorola
9 CapitalWorks study
The 70:20:10 Framework and Managers

Managers have a twofold role in informal learning and in the 70:20:10 framework in particular.
   a. Most of the learning occurs ‘on their watch’.
   b. Managers themselves tend to be the heaviest users of informal learning.

Learning ‘on Managers’ Watch’:

Managers have oversight of the workplace. We know that is where most development happens. So managers can have far more impact on employee development than either in-house HR or learning and development professionals can.

There is plenty of evidence for this.

The extra 20%:

Some research carried out by the Corporate Leadership Council’s Learning & Development Roundtable\(^{10}\) unit (LDR) carries out employee development surveys across its membership (mainly large global corporate organisations).

As part of these surveys, the LDR found that managers who provide opportunities for their team members to participate in ‘projects that develop’ increase their overall performance by almost 20%.

The same level of improvement was demonstrated if managers give their team members an opportunity to reflect and share the learning from such activities.

This is the equivalent of demonstrating that managers who support informal learning in the workplace (the ‘70’ and ‘20’ parts) will release an extra day’s work each week from every member of their teams - at no cost to employee, to manager, or to organisation.

It is a simple solution for any organisation trying to do ‘more with less’ and not destroy morale and cause burn-out at the same time.

Effective managers:

The LDR surveys have also found that the teams managed by managers who are effective at developing their teams out-perform teams managed by managers who are ineffective at people development by approximately 25-27%.

In this study ‘effective managers’ were selected through 360 feedback and other methods. ‘Ineffective managers were selected in the same way. The ‘ineffective managers’ were those who were considered not to have the skills and capabilities, or the interest and motivation, to focus on developing their teams.

This study also found that people working for managers who are effective at people development not only out-perform their peers, but that the people in their teams are more satisfied with their jobs and are 40% less likely to leave. In other words, employee retention for this group is 40% greater.

\(^{10}\) ‘Engaging Managers as Agents of Employee Development’. Corporate Executive Board publication.
In addition to employee satisfaction and retention, employee satisfaction and adaptability were also shown to be significantly increased.

The lesson from these studies is that managers are critical if informal learning is to be encouraged and exploited and if the 70:20:10 Framework is to be effectively used.

**How Managers Learn:**

More recently (2010) a survey\textsuperscript{11} conducted by Peter Casebow and Owen Ferguson at GoodPractice, a company based in Edinburgh, Scotland, found a split similar to the 70:20:10 framework in their survey of 206 leaders and managers.

Casebow and Ferguson found that informal chats with colleagues were the most frequent development activity used by managers (and one of the two activities seen as being most effective – the other one being on-the-job instruction from a manager or colleague).

82% of those surveyed said that they would consult a colleague at least once a month, and 83% rated this as very or fairly effective as a means of helping them perform in their role when faced with an unfamiliar challenge.

The other top most-frequently used manager development activities included search, trial-and-error and other professional resources.

Clearly, conversations (through informal chats with colleagues) and learning from the experience of others (through workplace instruction from their manager or a colleague - receiving the benefit of their experience and providing the opportunity for guided practice) are important in development of the surveyed group.

Jay Cross\textsuperscript{12} has listed other research into formal and informal learning (’Where did the 80% come from?’) and explains why definitive figures have little meaning in the larger context. Jay identified a rough 80:20 split between informal and formal learning which he discussed at length in his Informal Learning book.

**The Rise and Rise of Social Learning**

There is a good basis to argue that the real power of organisational learning is both social and contextual. Through others and in the workplace.

The rise of the use of social media over the past few years has only added to the pressure for organisations to exploit the power of social learning. In the words of the great educational psychologist Jerome Bruner ‘our world is others’.

We are already seeing social learning being embedded in learning through the 70:20:10 and through the deployment of a range of social platforms. Social tools have emerged and are being used by individuals to address their own learning and performance problems outside of formal training and learning.

\textsuperscript{11} Casebow and Ferguson. How Managers Learn – in their own words
http://goodpractice.com/blog/resources/how-managers-learn-in-their-own-words-white-paper/

Although many organisations still ban use of public social media tools internally, others are exploring the potential and embedding a wide range of tools into their organisational technical offerings. The general desire to support social networking in the workplace is also driving this trend.

Some Actions for L&D to Deliver Results through 70:20:10

There are some actions that learning and knowledge professionals can take to deliver results through the 70:20:10 framework. These actions separate into three categories:

1. Supporting the informal learning process
2. Helping workers improve their skills
3. Creating a supporting organisational culture

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support the informal learning process</th>
<th>Help workers improve their learning skills</th>
<th>Create a supportive org. culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide time for informal learning in the workplace</td>
<td>Explicitly teach workers how to learn effectively</td>
<td>Establish a budget for informal and workplace learning</td>
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<td>Create useful peer-rated FAQs and knowledge bases</td>
<td>Support opportunities for meta-learning</td>
<td>Support innovation and help make small failures ‘OK’</td>
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<td>Provide places for workers to congregate and share experiences</td>
<td>Share ways others have learned topics and subject areas</td>
<td>Incorporate informal learning into the heart of your L&amp;D strategy</td>
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<td>Supplement self-directed learning with mentors and experts</td>
<td>Enlist learning coaches to encourage reflection</td>
<td>Position learning as a growth experience and not something that workers need others to ‘do to them’</td>
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<td>Build networks, blogs, wikis, and knowledge bases to facilitate discovery</td>
<td>Explain the ‘know-how’ and ‘know-who’ framework to facilitate a shift from ‘know-what’</td>
<td>Conduct a learning culture audit</td>
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<td>Use smart technology to make it easier to collaborate and network</td>
<td>Calculate the lifetime value of a learning customer to L&amp;D</td>
<td>Add learning and teaching objectives and goals to job descriptions</td>
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<td>Encourage cross-functional gatherings</td>
<td>Encourage leadership of these gatherings from amongst the group</td>
<td>Encourage learning relationships and professional communities</td>
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How Can Universities and Educational Establishments Keep Up?

The developments in informal learning and the rise of the 70:20:10 approach for organisational learning described in this paper challenge Universities, Business Schools and other Higher Education institutions in a number of ways.

Firstly, the developments suggest that the model of education that has been in use for many years is not appropriate for a world that is awash with information and where much of that information changes on an almost daily basis. In other words, teaching information is no longer a plausible strategy or tactic.

“There was 5 exabytes of information created between the dawn of civilization through 2003 .... that much information is now created every 2 days, and the pace is increasing...People aren’t ready for the technology revolution that’s going to happen to them.”

Eric Schmidt  
CEO, Google 2001-2011  
Techonomy Conference, Lake Tahoe
There is a paradigm shift occurring in the world of work. Information half-life is shortening, most of the information people need in order to do their jobs becomes available to them as unstructured fragments, through conversations, email, on web sites and elsewhere. The concept of learning a body of knowledge in a formal, structured way and then going into the workplace and applying that knowledge may still work for some, but for the majority this model is simply not good enough. What you learn today may well be out-of-date, or disproved and wrong, next week.

**The Changing Workplace**

It is not only information and content that is changing at an increasingly rapid rate. People, too, are changing their jobs and employers more rapidly than any time before in history. The US Department of Labor estimates that students leaving school today will have had 10-14 different jobs by the time they are 38 years old.

By that time the concept of a ‘job’ may have almost disappeared as well. Already we are witnessing a change in organisational structures as work becomes more task-focused, with teams being created and dissolved around specific projects and tasks and where capabilities are more important than job roles. In a working world centred around tasks and projects, expertise is built through exposure to challenging experiences, through practice, through rich conversations and through reflection across ever-increasing networks of co-workers and collaborating organisations.

It is this world for which universities and business schools need to design and deploy their learning solutions. It is complex. It involves the provision of a wide range of learning experiences and continuous on-the-job workplace performance support. Learning solutions are no longer simple one channel activities. They may involve a myriad of interventions and multiple technology requirements – from simple web-based interactive learning content, through rich collaborative and immersive simulations and community-based learning, to informal on-demand support in the workplace.

Josh Bersin, the well-respected CEO of Bersin and Associates calls this world ‘the borderless workplace’ – an ecosystem where workers communicate continually and seamlessly across time and distance with co-workers both inside and outside their own organisation.

This is the real 21st century world of work.

This is the world that educational establishments, and HR and learning and development departments, need to address.

This is the world of ‘working smarter’.

The development challenges will only be addressed by switching focus from content to context. Moving away from the idea that learning and education is about ‘transferring knowledge’ to understanding that it is about helping people work smarter.
From Content to Context

As discussed earlier, one of the main shifts required is the move from focus on content to a focus on context. Very little is learned or retained without context, and the best learning environment is the same context where the learning is going to be put to use.

The challenge for educational establishments is to rethink their practice and provision in this new world where information and knowledge scarcity are things of the past.

They need to develop new approaches where their expertise, through research and innovation, can add value to the process of development in the workplace. This is a major challenge for many who find it difficult to think outside the ‘course/programme’ box.

If universities are unable to think and work at the increasing speed of business then they will be bypassed by more flexible and adaptable services and approaches.

Already we have seen the digital revolution change the worlds of advertising, newspapers, travel, and many other industries. The world of publishing, almost as old as the world of universities, is facing its own demise if it is unable to adapt and change in a world where authors can self-publish on-demand.

Knowledge is a disposable commodity in the 21st century. New knowledge will be along very soon for those who have the skills to find it.

Knowledge I no longer power. Access to knowledge is the new power. Universities and business schools need to learn this and then build their services around the fact if they are to remain leaders in the knowledge economy.

Whether they can do this remains to be seen.

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