

FOLLOWING L&D TRENDS: CONTINUOUS LEARNING IN CANADA**Halyna Nosulich**

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Summary

The article analyzes the best practices of building the culture of continuous learning in Canadian organizations through the prism of such global corporate Learning and Development trends as increasing investment into corporate learning, extensive use of technology, effective prediction, assessment and addressing skill gaps, especially in the area of soft skills development. As the Canadian authorities play a significant role in promoting the culture of continuous learning in organizations, the following aspects of their involvement are analyzed: recommendations of Canadian government on continuous learning within a company, predicting and addressing demands of the future in terms of emerging skills development, enabling access to education at all stages of person's life. The article further dwells on two major challenges faced by companies in Canada due to technological disruption: keeping up with rapid pace of changes in terms of employees' digital literacy and using technology effectively to build the culture of continuous learning. The issue of constant lack of time for a modern professional is also addressed. As companies strive to keep up with the pace of global changes, new employment opportunities are constantly created requiring professionals with diverse skillsets which might be currently in scarcity. A number of ongoing projects run by Canadian companies and authorities is analyzed to illustrate the best practices of building the culture of continuous learning to address the issue. Particular attention is paid to soft skills development.

Keywords: learning & development, continuing education, skill gap, learning technology, Canada.

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Introduction

The most important corporate L&D trend in the world nowadays is building the culture of continuous learning which is crucial for company's sustainable development and creating its competitive advantage. According to the research by authoritative Association for Talent Development, more than a half high-performance companies worldwide make continuous learning a priority in their L&D strategies and encourage their leaders and employees to become lifelong learners (*Ho et al., 2018: 2*). Coursera, one of leading online-learning providers with access to data on millions of learners, states that building the culture of lifelong learning within an organization is one of the most consistent global L&D trends (*L&D from both sides of the table, 2018*).

In view of this, the paper dwells on the experience of Canadian organizations in building the culture of continuous learning. Canada is a highly developed country ranked the 13th in the IMD World Talent Ranking 2019 by the International Institute for Management Development (*IMD World Talent Ranking, 2019*). Canada has a diverse system of corporate L&D which is significantly supported at the governmental level. This research aims at analysing Canadian experience on the issue of continuous learning at workplace in order to benchmark it against current global L&D trends and reveal the best practices applied in Canada which can be implemented by companies in other countries.

Review of previous studies

Continuous learning lies in the core of any learning organization which constantly adopts “translating new knowledge into new ways of behaving” (*Garvin, 1993: 80*). It “gives organizations the vehicle to build skills, which increase morale and encourages employees to reach their full potential” (*Margol, 2017: 15*).

Continuous development of employees’ skills and competencies is an indispensable part of professional life (*Billet et al., 2014: xviii*).

An important feature of continuous learning is self-direction (*Ho et al., 2018*). Knowles (1975) stated that responsibility is an essential aspect of self-directed learning as learners should be able to identify their learning needs and choose what learning activities could meet those need. According to the latest LinkedIn Learning report on workplace learning, one of the major L&D trends is understanding a learner (*3rd annual 2019 workplace leaning report, 2019: 32*). Tannenbaum (1997) argues that diversity of learning activities and opportunities for employees significantly contributes to effectiveness of continuous learning in an organisation.

Since the activities are provided to the learner at workplace by the company, this is L&D organization’s task to make such selection relevant, qualitative and aligned with business goals. Technology has become an integral aspect of corporate learning culture. According to Edwards (2002), technology motivates learners through enabling more personalized learning experience. Appropriate application of technologies in learning organizations reinforces the culture of continuous learning as it increases engagement, especially with Millenials and Gen Z employees (*3rd annual 2019 workplace leaning report, 2019*).

Self-directed learning as a result of effective and ongoing skills assessment is the most effective approach to developing the workforce (*ibid., 2019*). In time of shrinking budgets, skills gaps identification allows L&D organizations build relevant learning solutions for employees to develop continuously (*Ho et al., 2019*). Additionally, assessment of the areas for employees’ improvement increases engagement of employees into learning activities (*3rd annual 2019 workplace leaning report, 2019: 19*).

Methodology

By employing the research methods of systematization and generalization, the paper thoroughly analyzes findings of such organizations as The Conference Board of Canada and Statistics Canada which investigate diverse aspects of the L&D industry in Canada. The Conference Board of Canada is a national research institution publishing the comprehensive reports on the state of L&D in the country. The latest report was fully dedicated to learning cultures in Canadian organizations (*Cotsman & Hall, 2018*).

Theoretical analysis and synthesis allowed to benchmark the Canadian experience against the world trends in the area of continuous education. For this purpose, the research refers to an authoritative L&D organization Association for Talent Development (ATD) and a number of world-leading online learning providers like LinkedIn Learning and Coursera which track and analyze consolidated data from millions of learners and a big number of corporate clients. A number of ongoing projects run either by a specific company or by Canadian governments is analyzed to illustrate the best practices employed by Canadian organizations in building the culture of continuous learning.

Proactive Attitude of Canadian Authorities

The governments of the Canadian provinces are committed to helping business in transition to continuous learning culture. In general, Canadian employers are aware of increasing need in investing into L&D within their organizations (*Navigating change, 2018*) as this will prepare employees for the challenges of the future and prevent unsurmountable skill gaps. However, a substantial part of Canadian private sector, i.e. small and medium businesses, often lacks resources to face these challenges efficiently (*ibid.*). The steps to build continuous learning culture suggested by the government do not require as much resources as, for instance, developing and implementing cross-company long-term educational programs.

The government of Canada distinguishes the following most effective actions to be taken for establishing foundations of continuous learning culture: company's management should re-evaluate their approaches to measuring employees' performance so that learning activities were taken into consideration; non-formal learning has to be encouraged and rewarded at all organizational levels; company has to realize that formal training should constitute only 15 per cent of all learning as it is usually enough for a professional to function effectively; continuous learning should be promoted along with the processes of knowledge management in organizations (*Navigating change, 2018*).

Canadian government together with the private sector put a lot of efforts to address the issue of rapidly changing demands of the job market acknowledging that working people will need to acquire new skills and adapt to changing work environments as global economy is rapidly transforming (*Learning nation, 2017*). According to the Canadian Council for Economic Growth, about \$15 billion of investment in general will be required for reskilling employees in Canada within the next two decades since at least 20–25 per cent of work-related activities will be automated across all industries (*ibid.*). The main steps in this direction are aimed at encouraging employees and their employers to take proactive attitude. And employers respond respectively: according to the 2018 Business Council Skills Survey, more than 50 per cent of Canadian organizations reported spending at least \$1000 a year per employee as expectations for entry-level and mid-career workers increase (*Navigating change, 2018*).

Canadian authorities recognize necessity of access to education at all stages of life encouraging interconnections between formal learning at educational institutions and training at the workplace. The Skills Plan for Working Canadians is one of the initiatives launched with the purpose to allocate more than \$220 million over five years starting from 2017 in order to provide a great number of work integrated learning placements within Mitacs initiative (*Canada's innovation and skills plan, 2017*). Mitacs is a non-for-profit organization building connections between educational institutions and industry through research, training programs, and funding projects for fostering innovation in Canada.

Access to relevant information on effective skills development is very important for closing skill gaps and preparing professionally to the challenges of the future. In scope of the research on developing skills, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has suggested implementing and maintaining the database of open educational resources as such repository could be reused and adapted by companies for internal training. Such resources would go in line with formal training and thus, contribute to facilitating the continuous learning environments (*Skills for an automated future, 2018*).

Leveraging Technology for Continuous Learning in Organizations

Technological disruption has been influencing every aspect of a modern life. The pace of technological development raises two major challenges for organizations of all kinds: keeping up with rapid pace of changes in terms of employees' digital literacy and using technology effectively to build the culture of continuous learning. A global consulting and technology services company Accenture suggests that Canadian companies should look for ways to increase their return-on-investment with the help of using technology. Employers are encouraged to take great advantage of technologies for delivering modern and relevant education at workplace which, in its turn, would drive productivity of employees and competitiveness of business (*Increasing the return, 2015*).

Due to numerous efforts both at the governmental level and in the corporate context, Canadians are above the OECD average in technology use, according to the OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) (*Scerbina et al., 2013*). In 2013, Canada was the second at the highest level of proficiency in technological problem-solving, with 37% of Canadians demonstrating the best results, compared to the average of 34% (*ibid.*). Consistent approach to developing and implementing digital literacy strategies will most probably increase these numbers. On the other hand, around half of Canadian companies need more digitally skilled workforce for implementing strategic initiatives (*Digital IQ 2017, n.d.*). According to the OECD PISA Study, though above average globally, Canada is behind some of the highly developed countries in terms of training employees on digital skills (*O'Grady et al., 2016*). Companies and trade unions have to put more efforts into increasing digital literacy among adult Canadians (*What employers can do, 2017*).

Another aspect of fast technological change is usage of technology in innovating learning delivery methods which enable learning at one's own pace at the right time. Studies show that number one reason for employees not to engage into learning is the lack of time (*2018 workplace learning report, 2018; Ho et al., 2019*). Efficient use of technology might be a solution to overcome this issue.

Businesses that provide "on-the-job training, mentoring ... sharing knowledge and social learning, skills gap analysis and talent development plans" stay ahead in the competitive market demanding highly skilled and digitally literate workforce (*Asliturk et al., 2016: VII*). Nevertheless, companies still heavily rely on instructor-led training and online learning (*Lee & Lee, 2018*). Organizations gravitate towards online learning with increasingly preferred micro-learning format which allows delivering "small, coherent and self-contained content for short learning activities" (*Göschlberger & Bruck, 2017: 545*). This results from the fact that the most pressing issue for ensuring effective learning at workplace, especially in North America, is scarcity of time (*Ho et al., 2019*). To ensure quality of technology enhanced learning and communication, the Canadian eLearning Enterprise Alliance (CeLEA) was established. The Alliance maintains the Canadian eLearning Directory which enlists 228 organizations providing various formats of online courses, including micro learning.

Continuous Learning for Building Skillsets of the Future

As companies strive to keep up with the pace of economic changes, new employment opportunities are constantly created requiring professionals with diverse skillsets which might be currently in scarcity. Therefore, corporate L&D organizations need to face this challenge, find effective ways to train employees respectively and thus, enhance the culture of continuous learning in their organizations.

A bright example of such activity is “Workforce 2020 Program” of the company AT&T in Canada. Company’s management acknowledges the fact that more than a third of employees held positions which might become obsolete by 2020. The company spends more than \$250 million a year on the program which provides employees with information on the required skills, career opportunities, and learning solutions to progress towards desired results. All training activities, including online learning, are free of charge to the employees on the condition that working time is managed appropriately (*Learning nation, 2017*).

Demand for soft skills training remains the priority for most companies in the global market and Canada is not an exception. The latest research by the Royal Bank of Canada “Humans Wanted – How Canadian youth can thrive in the age of disruption” shows that more than a half of working Canadians will be impacted by ongoing automation at the workplace in the nearest future and there is urgent demand in developing such “human skills” as critical thinking, active listening, problem solving (*Humans Wanted, 2018*).

A survey of large private-sector employers conducted by the British Council Canada proved that Canadian companies are seeking employees with developed soft skills since they are indicative of leadership potential (*Developing Canada’s future workforce, 2016*). Professional organizations in Canada suggest that the most effective soft skills development results from on-the-job or experiential training, observation and feedback (*Cotsman & Hall, 2018*). At the same time, though Canadian employers highly value soft skills such as communication and problem solving, they tend to invest more in job-specific and industry-specific skills of employees (*Learning nation, 2017*).

While Canadian companies build their L&D systems around soft skills development, there are several stand-alone initiatives to help both private and public sector to address the issue of emerging skill gaps in general. One of them is MaRS Discovery District based in Toronto. Being a large innovation hub since 2005, the organization is focused mostly on developing training of entrepreneurial and innovation skills for adults. In 2015 the company launched online education delivery. According to 2018 MaRS Impact Report, the company had more than 17 million positive touch points through training, workshops, and other engagements (*Impact report, 2018*).

Building a culture of continuous learning in any organization is almost impossible without predicting future skills development needs through effective skill assessment. One of the initiatives to address the issue of emerging skill gaps in Canadian companies was “FutureSkills Lab” suggested by Canadian Council of Economic Growth. It was planned as “a national non-governmental organization to operate as a laboratory for skills development and measurement in Canada” (*Building a highly skilled, 2017: 2*). The organization would have operated in three major directions: discovering and supporting innovative skills development approaches, finding resources of information on new skills, advising federal and provincial governments on development and implementation of skills programs. Effectiveness of this initiative would strongly depend on established cooperation with existing organizations and direct stakeholders.

Though “FutureSkills Lab” has not been implemented in the initially suggested form, the attitude and approach has laid the foundation for other related initiatives. In 2019, the Future

Skills Center has been established as “a federally funded initiative to identify and cultivate emerging skills within the Canadian workforce” (*Bridging the gap*, 2019). Another organization funded by the Canadian authorities is The Future Skills Council which monitors the impact of emerging technologies and trends on Canadian job market. The Council is an advisory body for the Minister of Employment, Workforce Development and Labour at the national and regional levels (*Future Skills Council*, 2019). An important task of both organizations is raising awareness of the issue among Canadians.

Recommendations

In times of constant technological disruption and economic instability, the culture of continuous learning might become a lifeline for any organization, especially for small and medium businesses which often lack sufficient resources to develop long-term training initiatives. Example of Canada illustrates that encouraging and maintaining constant drive for learning results in higher engagement of employees and better readiness of organizations to face challenges for the future.

Active involvement of state authorities into promoting continuous learning among working adults proves to be an effective way to raise awareness and motivate employers to take proactive measures in covering learning needs of their workforce and thus, achieving business goals efficiently. Cooperation between public and private sectors in implementing national and local initiatives for identifying and addressing skill gaps, particularly in the area of soft skills development, leads to mitigating uncertainty among working population and enhancing their performance in general.

Culture of continuous learning should be integrated into daily routine of a demanding learner constantly lacking time. For this, L&D organizations should apply innovative learning formats and educational technologies based on efficient learning needs identification.

Conclusions

Canadian authorities and companies acknowledge necessity of building and maintaining culture of continuous learning within organizations. It is achieved through keeping up with such global L&D trends as extensive use of relevant technology, implementing effective programs for assessing and addressing skill gaps, placing focus on soft skills development inter alia.

Canadian government is proactively involved in ensuring the effectiveness of workforce learning, particularly by developing recommendations on enabling continuous learning in organizations and conducting skills assessment for Canadians to be prepared for the emerging demands of the future. The response of Canadian corporate education to rapid technological change is supported by deep analysis of the future of workforce in order to adequately predict learning needs of Canadians at the national and local levels.

Canadian employers understand the significance of continuous development of their employees. While investment into L&D function in Canadian companies has been on the rise, technology-enhanced learning and recognizing the importance of soft skills development became important aspects of learning strategies within organizations.

In general, the experience of Canada is exemplar in terms of the attitude and approaches to continuous learning of the workforce. Canadian organizations keep up with the global L&D trends. Canadian best practices in the sphere of corporate learning illustrated by ongoing projects at the national and local levels should be regarded as a successful example for other countries.

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