Innovation

Shifting the strategic focus of learning

Learning executives are seeking to drive innovation within their organizations and establish a more active role in the development of new business models, the creation and deployment of new products and services, and the development of new internal services and delivery channels. To accomplish this, they should begin thinking outside their traditional mandate of delivering formal course material and adopt a scope of work that facilitates a more strategic organizational role.

After years of focus on consolidation, cost control and delivery efficiency, a growing number of learning executives are now turning their attention toward the strategic boardroom issues of innovation and growth. There are a number of different efforts that fall under the innovation umbrella, from the creation of entirely new businesses to the development of new product/service offerings, to the application of new improvements to existing operations. Yet, at the heart of this innovation agenda is the need to create, share and apply both new and existing expertise to opportunities in the marketplace. For this primary reason, we believe that innovation needs to appear on the radar screen of today’s learning executive.

From the 2006 IBM CEO Study and experience working with clients, we see the importance of people in the innovation process. In this study, CEOs indicate that an unsupportive culture and climate are critical roadblocks in achieving breakthrough levels of innovation (see Figure 1). Many senior executives, looking to improve their organization’s ability to innovate, find themselves hampered by a corporate environment that hinders the ability to identify, act upon and deploy new ideas.

Given the need to support an innovative environment, where should the organization turn? While HR has a broad mandate to support many of the people-related issues associated with culture change, we believe that the learning function plays an especially critical role as it relates to innovation.

FIGURE 1.
Critical roadblocks to successful innovation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roadblock</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive culture and climate</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited funding for investment</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government and other legal restrictions</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce issues arising internally</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process immaturity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic uncertainty</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate enabling technologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inflexible physical and information technology infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient access to necessary information and data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce issues arising externally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IBM Global CEO Study 2006.
focus on the exchange of knowledge, ideas and experience, the learning function needs to be at the forefront of this discussion. Yet, for many companies, several questions remain. For example, how can the learning function have an impact on an innovation agenda? What are the different types of innovation that learning can support? What are the unique strengths that learning professionals can contribute to innovation success?

To obtain insight into these issues facing the learning function, IBM brought together senior executives from a range of industries, including financial services, retail, consumer products, telecommunications, media, public sector and the military, for a series of roundtable discussions. The sessions focused on three primary themes:

- How the learning function facilitates the development of new business models, particularly those that are global in nature
- What learning professionals can do to foster the creation and deployment of new products, services and operational improvements
- How innovation can be applied to the learning function itself, including the development of internal services and new delivery channels.

We believe these insights will be of interest to all learning executives looking to play a more strategic role in the future of their organizations.

To request a full version of this paper e-mail us at iibv@us.ibm.com

How can IBM help?
IBM's Human Capital Management practice can provide assistance in addressing a range of leadership development, collaboration and talent management issues:

- **Learning Solutions** – designing and implementing effective and efficient learning capabilities that are aligned with the organization’s business objectives.
- **Knowledge and Collaboration** – connecting and supporting a global workforce to operate productively no matter where they are located.
- **Integrated Talent Management** – leveraging IBM's Lotus collaboration software and Cognos analytics with selected talent management software providers and drawing upon HCM's consulting capabilities to rapidly design and implement effective talent management solutions.

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References