Learning as a platform:
Redefining how learning delivers value to the business
Featuring the experiences of ATB Financial
Corporate learning is in the midst of a sea change.
Corporate learning is in the midst of a sea change. Companies and employees are searching for something that is dramatically different from the status quo. On the one hand, people want their learning experiences on the job to match or exceed those they enjoy as consumers outside of work. They want digital experiences that mesh seamlessly into the work they do, the technology they use, and their human interactions. And, they want these learning experiences to be useful in expanding an ever-evolving constellation of capabilities and accomplishments. This constellation represents their careers and it is “the stuff” of which resumes are made. On the other hand, companies need better performance, capability, and speed from their talent. Organizations and workforces are changing in ways that can seem uncertain and complex. Everything is digital, markets keep getting disrupted, and the competition just keeps coming. The corporate learning function is under pressure to deliver more capable, more engaged talent, faster. How can chief learning officers (CLOs), together with senior executives across the business, meet these escalating expectations?

In our view, the answer is not better training programs. It’s a complete transformation of the role of learning. Simply put: the answer is creating a new kind of learning platform to deliver real value to people and to the business. And by “platform” we don’t mean a technology platform—though the new breed of learner experience and other solutions certainly contribute. We mean a “platform” that comprises an entire ecosystem. This ecosystem is made up of strategies, processes, and tools that integrate so seamlessly into the business that the learning function itself becomes invisible—not because it is less relevant but because it has become interwoven into the fabric of the organization. And, from this new “undercover” vantage point, the learning function is empowered to deliver more value than ever.

Introduction:
The world is becoming digital, and digital is changing the world. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than within the workforce. Digital technologies allow businesses to become more agile, and agile organizations require adaptable workers. At the same time, new talent increasingly wants more flexibility and dynamism in their career development.

With the average tenure in a job being 4.5 years, and the half-life of a learned skill being only five years, linear career paths and functional silos are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of companies and workers in the digital age. In order to be effective, the modern work experience must deliver continuous, always-on learning and development. Rather than helping employees to progressively climb the ladder, it’s about helping them to continually evolve and amass a “constellation” of capabilities and experiences that are woven together by the meaning and story given to them by the individual.

Amid these forces, the learning function can’t remain the same. Companies and their learning departments have not traditionally been set up to provide a seamless, interactive, and iterative learning experience. It’s time to recast the role of the learning organization to support an agile, digital business. At its core, this implies embedding learning more deeply into the DNA of the organization.
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Learning in the flow
Redefining corporate learning and embedding it into the DNA of the organization entails shifting one’s mind-set to think of training and development not as something “to be done” (i.e., an event that delivers knowledge), but as something “that is” (i.e., a platform for powering continuous growth). This platform ultimately enables individuals and the organization “to become.” Going beyond technology, this platform encompasses an entire ecosystem, the components of which are united in a common purpose: to connect people in near-real-time with the information they require to add value to the business and with the experiences they need to expand and stretch their capabilities.

Three dynamics are central to approaching learning as a platform (Laap) rather than as a stand-alone function: 1) developmental agility, 2) environmental enablement, and 3) informational empowerment.

### Three Dynamics of Learning as a Platform

#### Developmental agility
Individuals, teams, and organizations all need room to grow. Developmental agility entails giving them space by removing traditional barriers, such as functional silos, career paths, and job descriptions that prescribe how they can and cannot contribute. It also involves enabling new perspectives from which people can envision innovative solutions to entrenched problems.

- **Career experiences**: Making opportunities and roles visible to support two-way matching for assignments and growth
- **Agile teams and incubation**: Leveraging ad hoc teams to enable innovation and continuous learning
- **Organizational analytics and outcomes**: Collecting and providing evidence of improved performance and business outcomes

Developmental agility implies greater visibility into the needs of both the learner and the organization, as well as the ability to flex to meet those needs. Consequently, individuals are empowered to learn on their own terms; teams are better equipped to tackle challenges; and the business can more rapidly produce the desired outcomes.

#### Environmental enablement
Technology is the nerve system of the organization. While often not intended explicitly for learning, enterprise systems not only underpin daily business activities but are essential for embedding learning into every facet of the business and incorporating it into daily work. For instance, with the help of digital technologies, such as mobility, analytics, machine learning, and the cloud, an organization’s collective knowledge can be placed in the palm of everyone’s hand. When learning is just a click or chat-box away, the need quickly fades for lengthy classroom trainings or tedious troubleshooting sessions.

- **Systemic learning**: A holistic perspective of learning and development and a structure to support it, cutting across functional and business silos
- **Integrated technology**: Integrated systems, channels, and infrastructures to enable seamless learning, feedback, and growth

With proper environmental enablement, learning is everywhere and nowhere: it is simply a positive condition of organizational effectiveness.

#### Informational empowerment
The Internet has democratized information access and therefore learning. Employees expect to have ready access to relevant information or to the people who can provide it, with minimal restrictions. An effective learning platform fulfills these expectations by supporting multidirectional information flow. This includes visibility into performance data, access to relevant content (both public and proprietary), connections to colleagues and subject-matter experts, and embedded feedback loops to drive continuous improvement.

- **Employee-driven**: Empower and facilitate learning wherever it occurs in the day-to-day course of work
- **Information flow**: Provide access, aggregation, and contextualization of content to support the flow of information
- **Feedback loops**: Create multiple and frequent feedback loops

The hallmarks of informational empowerment include:

- **A holistic perspective of learning and development**
- **An integrated structure**
- **A focus on performance data**
- **Accessibility to relevant content**
- **Connections to colleagues and experts**
- **Embedded feedback mechanisms**
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**LaAP in practice**

It is one thing to hypothesize about learning as a platform, but it’s entirely another to put it into practice. Nonetheless, progressive organizations are demonstrating that it can be done, and perhaps there are none more progressive than ATB Financial. With approximately 5,300 employees, ATB Financial is a community-focused regional financial institution based in Alberta, Canada. The organization has been “using banking to create happiness” for Albertans since 1938. Though it has a long and distinguished history, the company is anything but traditional in its culture and in its approach to learning.

Debbie Blakeman, vice president of People & Culture at ATB Financial, describes the company as being “the ideal size with a leadership team that focuses intentionally on culture, which enables the organization to reimagine learning.” She elaborates, “With our record-high employee engagement providing a springboard, we have capitalized on unleashing the power and passion of our internal crowd or peer-to-peer learning system in a very big way.”

As Meriya Dyble, director of Learning Reimagined, at ATB Financial, further explains, her organization’s journey toward learning as a platform is linked to the company’s strategy to become “a technology company that does exceptional banking,” rather than a bank that simply uses technology. With this shift, leadership started to consider the skills, environment, and tools that would be required to support an agile, digital business, along with how the learning organization could keep up with the rapid pace of change in business. It quickly became apparent that the traditional approach to learning would not be sufficient to support such a significant transformation.

“Our learning strategy is based on the idea of evolving the learning organization’s role from creator to connector,” said Dyble. “We had an opportunity to experiment with this concept last year, when the company deployed the G Suite (i.e., Google) to enable its digitally focused vision. We brought together a multidisciplinary group dubbed the ‘G Team,’ and we tasked ourselves with not only transitioning to a Google shop, but also creating a work renaissance. The objective was to unlock the potential of over 5,000 team members and empower them to reimagine the way they work.”

Dyble further noted that achieving this goal required a completely different approach to learning. She explained, “The idea of peer-to-peer learning and many-to-many, rather than one-to-many, really resonated with me. My hypothesis was that learning needed to become more of a connector than a creator, so we likely didn’t need a big team of learning professionals to make this transformation happen. Instead, we needed a way to harness the amazing community ATB had created.”

In order to break through silos and leverage the passion and creativity of the organization, Dyble called for volunteers from every part of the business to help ATB transform. More specifically, she asked for 50 team members to put up their hands and be change agents. Successful candidates would gain a once-in-a-lifetime experience where they would participate in a 30-day boot camp and then be tasked in helping to create a work renaissance. Almost 400 people applied, and 50 were chosen from across the province, spanning all generations and every area of the business. Dubbed the “G Evangelists,” none of them had ever done anything like this before.

“While we were working with the G Evangelists, it became apparent that their talents could best be used to focus on people and work impacts rather than technical support,” said Dyble. This led to the creation of a second level of support focused on technical skills. Also,
because so many team members had put up their hands to be G Evangelists, the learning organization sought to build upon this momentum and to leverage “the crowd” as much as possible. This desire spawned the G Academy, which was a self-driven assessment of skills in the G Suite. Dyble elaborated, “People already used Google at home, so we figured there were some very capable individuals out there who could support their peers.” Using the tagline “I teach, I learn,” the organization enticed team members to take the assessment and teach others how to use the tools, thereby furthering their own expertise. The first 250 to pass the G Academy received early access to the G Suite. “We were hoping to get at least 250 team members to pass and have them ready to provide support on technical questions for launch. To our delight, we had 1,300 pass the G Academy in two weeks. The power of peer-to-peer was totally unleashed.”

This peer-to-peer approach allowed the early adopters to expand their portfolio of capabilities and experiences, exposing them to new business areas and data they otherwise would not have encountered. “This really shined a light on how much networking and building connections can strongly enhance the capabilities of our organization, much more so than trying to create the right content,” commented Dyble.

From these early wins, the learning organization quickly saw the value in putting a digital platform in place to connect learners with the right people, experiences, and information that would evolve their thinking and allow innovative ideas to come to fruition. In other words, the platform would support an “ecosystem that connects learners—where radical personalization is the norm.”

“We are in the process of creating this digital platform, while also transforming into an Agile development shop, where ‘squads’ are tasked with embedding learning into the DNA of the organization,” shares Dyble. These “squads” comprise people from learning as well as developers, designers, data scientists, and system architects from across the organization’s larger digital transformation. The goal of these horizontal, cross-functional groups is to create an always available, continuously growing digital ecosystem that embeds learning into the business. “One of the game changers for us is the simple ability for our team members to share all of their knowledge and content with one another,” explained Dyble. She continued, “Our platform not only enables that, but also allows us to continue the conversation in a way that leads to self-organized teams coming together to tackle challenges and implement ideas. With this ecosystem, learning has become a way of connecting people, information, and ideas with business problems that need to be solved.”

As the learning organization at ATB Financial goes down its Agile development path, it is starting to look, and even sound, dramatically different than a typical learning department. For instance, both within learning and throughout the entire company, hierarchies are becoming flatter and employees’ titles are being fashioned to more directly reflect their missions and the value they bring to the business, as in “chief evangelist” and “director of learning reimagined.” And perhaps most significantly, learning is becoming seamless. “For the most part, people in the business should have no idea that we’re the ones delivering the opportunities and experiences they value and want more of,” said Dyble. “Learning is moving behind the scenes. It’s no longer a siloed department; it’s an ecosystem through which people can be successful,” she concluded.

**Conclusion**

In the age of knowledge capital, the ability for organizations to create a learning ecosystem is a competitive differentiator. Those that provide developmental agility, informational empowerment, and environmental enablement by approaching learning as a platform will increasingly have a competitive advantage, both in terms of improved business performance and better talent acquisition, development, engagement, and performance. ATB Financial has demonstrated that it is possible not only to implement a whole new concept of “learning as a platform,” but also to place learning at the heart of corporate culture—and, in so doing, to forever change how learning delivers value to the business.
Intrigued by learning as a platform?

Here are the key components

**Vision and strategy** — Articulate what learning needs to accomplish for the business and for the people. Imagine what it should look and feel like—all while keeping the employee or learner at the center of the design.

**Operating model** — Reevaluate the typical activities of the learning department and consider if traditional divisions and definitions are still appropriate. For instance, training departments have traditionally created much of their own content. Increasingly, there’s so much information available on the Internet that the emphasis is shifting to “content curation,” rather than “content creation.”

**Organization design** — Think about what a new org chart might look like in a digital learning environment. What roles? Who reports to whom? Teams and Agile design will be more important than in the past. The role of the manager will likely shift to emphasize facilitation and enablement. The learning department can't do everything itself, so it must empower employees and managers alike to share knowledge and serve themselves.

**Deployment of resources and activities** — Consider what types of people and skill sets will be required to support always-on learning that is embedded in the business. For instance, technical experts, such as data scientists, are likely to be more prevalent since they will be needed to help analyze and measure the effectiveness of iterative learning. And, it’s not just about people: machine learning and automation will also play a role in creating the new learning environment.

**Capabilities** — Review the composition of the learning team and evaluate members’ skill sets, including both core learning resources and those scattered throughout the business. Succeeding with this new concept of learning will likely require new and different capabilities than in the past, ranging from content curation to data analysis to design thinking. Some of these can be obtained through upskilling or reskilling current team members, while others will require fresh talent.

**Learning business processes** — Perform a business needs analysis using a demonstrated methodology. Translate the results of this analysis into process maps that illustrate how the learning function will deliver a whole new set of digital capabilities to the business. While the resultant business processes may look different than they have in the past, the discipline of business process mapping remains essentially the same.

**Enablement with tools and technologies** — Consider the tools and technologies it will take to deliver a consumer-grade digital experience when it comes to learning. Consumer grade means available on your device or laptop, whenever you want it and whenever you need it. The system should also be “adaptive,” so it anticipates what the learner needs just as Amazon does based on a customer’s previous buying patterns.

**Vendors and partnerships** — Review where and how the organization works with external providers of learning tools and content. With the need for broader skill sets, learning organizations are increasingly turning to partners and subject-matter experts outside their four walls. In a learning-as-a-platform environment, it becomes more important to articulate a vendor strategy for delivering an always-on, consumer-grade experience and for rationalizing providers accordingly.