An Overview of the
Sustainable Learning Implementation Model

White paper

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Sustainable Learning Implementation Model

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What is Sustainable Learning?

Sustainable Learning is a holistic methodology that combines adult learning strategies with the concepts of communities of practice, competency-based learning and team-based learning to acquire, preserve, create and share knowledge.

The Sustainable Learning implementation model provides both an organization and employees with a rationale and a framework for knowledge sharing. By engaging employees in the assessment of their organization's learning profile and inventory, and then by re-engaging them during the codification process of their collective business intelligence, they begin to understand that their knowledge can make a difference in the organization's performance. Employees also begin to take ownership of learning events and learning content because they understand the relevancy of what they are learning and are motivated to apply and share what they have learned to help the organization meet its business objectives.

The Sustainable Learning implementation model provides a suite of tools for identifying the key practices that are required to increase the learning maturity of an organization; to benchmark the activities in support of performance measurement; and to learn from an organization's collective experience. The true value of Sustainable Learning is that the associated investment is focused upon delivering organizational business objectives instead of individual training goals, while still respecting employee career development.

What are the benefits of Sustainable Learning?

Using the Sustainable Learning implementation model will require a paradigm shift by everyone involved, but the benefits to the organization and to individuals are substantial.

What's in it for the organization?

Implementing Sustainable Learning:

- Enables knowledge transfer and continuity
- Helps to retain corporate knowledge
- Improves training return on investment
- Reduces the learning curve of new staff
- Facilitates horizontal and matrix management of business activities
- Increases the mobility, flexibility and adaptability of the workforce
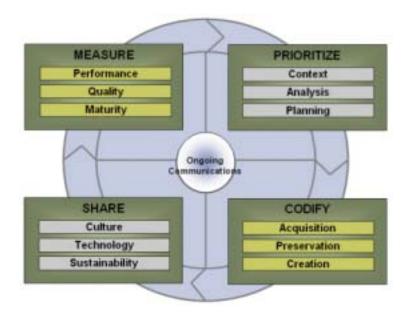- Gives your organization a competitive advantage

What's in it for the individual?

Implementing Sustainable Learning:

- Gives people better access to information
- Helps to eliminate duplication of effort
- Promotes a feeling of being valued and supported
- Provides opportunities for personal growth
- Creates a sense of ownership and empowerment toward a shared vision
- Enhances quality of work

Implementing Sustainable Learning

A four-stage iterative model guides the organization through the process of increasing its learning capacity and its transformation towards learning maturity. The diagram below depicts the flow between stages in a cyclical fashion, but it is not a linear, one-dimensional flow chart—it supports both backtracking and forward thinking. Often organizations will have processes and activities already underway that are part of the model, but are currently not being used to maximum effect. Whether this is capturing lessons learned or developing a corporate business glossary the Sustainable Learning implementation model provides a framework for any organization to leverage these activities to their full potential.

Stage 1: Prioritize

At this stage the model helps build awareness of what is enabling or hindering learning within an organization. Through the use of well documented techniques and processes an assessment of the current business context is followed by an analysis of the findings and establishment of action priorities. These processes generate dialogue among employees, and provide an opportunity to take individual and group ownership of learning events. All activities at this stage of the model are a form of learning.

Context

Vision, strategy and policy

You need to know if your learning practices are aligned with your strategic direction

It is essential to understand the context in which learning is currently taking place in an organization. The vision and its supporting strategies and policies play a big role in determining whether learning is tied to competency development to meet organizational

objectives, or is based on individual learning plans to help meet career path goals. This is an important distinction.

Learning profile and inventory

You need to know *how* you are learning

The model requires an assessment of whether training is focused on the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) pertaining to group performance or individual performance; to assess whether training is focused on knowledge acquisition or creation; and to assess knowledge holdings, sources and sharing methods.

Technology and resources

To know which technologies and resources must be allocated to support Sustainable Learning, it is necessary to understand what, how, why and when they are being used. Most importantly, it is necessary to assess employees' techno-literacy and how high management ranks techno-literacy on their list of priorities.

Analysis

Describe required competencies

You need to know what you need to know

Sustainable Learning focuses on competency models. Competency models represent the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) required to perform the occupational roles of an organization and to help meet its strategic and business objectives. This is necessary to ensure that employees' learning plans are designed to develop the required competencies rather than promoting their individual career paths.

Define learning scope

You need to know what you don't know

The gap that is produced when KSAs don't meet competency requirements can be eliminated by training, and by learning on the job in communities of practice. This gap provides a basis for action and helps define the scope of learning to achieve the desired learning maturity of an organization. For example, if the scope of learning involves improving existing competencies and processes rather than creating new ones, this will impact the choice and design of learning events.

Define roles and responsibilities

Clearly defining roles and responsibilities helps to stabilize communities of practice and project teams by controlling and aligning their developmental efforts. It also helps to avoid any limiting factors, such as potential conflicts, confusion, and duplication of effort.

Planning

Establish goals and time lines

Think big and act
small

Implementing Sustainable Learning is not a daunting, overwhelming task if an organization develops realistic and attainable objectives, setting out to achieve one goal at a time. Incremental small wins will build momentum which will translate into exponential progress. Since this is an iterative model, an organization builds upon previous achievements and improves its performance with each new round.

Formalize feedback process

Formalizing a feedback process ensures 360-degree communication. The model includes how feedback will be obtained, shared and incorporated and helps to foster buy-in from employees because they know they will be kept in the loop and have consistent opportunities to contribute and make a difference. The model also provides ongoing opportunities for improvement. Peer reviews, field trials and pilots are powerful improvement tools used to shake down and validate learning events to determine their effectiveness and efficiency.

Develop a reward system

Rewards must be relevant—they must mean something to the people who receive them. In a Sustainable Learning organization, people choose their rewards and build them into their action plans. They determine what accomplishments should be rewarded, who should bestow the rewards, and what form the rewards and kudos should take.

Stage 2: Codify

In a Sustainable Learning organization, "codify" means capturing learning outcomes and tacit knowledge in an explicit manner so that they can be made accessible, visible (i.e. people know it exists) and usable to the whole organization. It is a method of communicating and disseminating knowledge and of replicating it over time and space. The codification activities themselves provide the context and framework for knowledge sharing in a way that comes naturally to employees.

Acquisition

Establish business language

Establishing a common business language in an organization provides a valuable opportunity for knowledge transfer. Glossaries and other authority lists provide a consistent set of definitions and terminologies, and eliminate ambiguity. By participating in their development, experienced employees can transfer their tacit knowledge into explicit, shareable knowledge. Instructional communicators, with their skills as wordsmiths and ability to negotiate meaning, are in a key position to facilitate this exchange in an organization.

Capture business rules and processes

The process of capturing business rules and processes turns tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge. It provides employees with opportunities to articulate the types of knowledge that characterize a job or function. This information can also be used in the development of learning tools, thereby saving instructional designers countless hours of rework and avoiding duplication of effort. The explicit knowledge that is captured helps an organization train new or transferred staff on how to perform specific job tasks.

Collect employee input

Employees take ownership

Employees are the most familiar with the quality and availability of the knowledge that needs to be captured. The model ensures that they have an opportunity to give meaningful feedback at every step of the implementation process. Participating employees acquire a sense of ownership and responsibility for implementing Sustainable Learning, thereby improving the chances of success.

Preservation

Document lessons learned

In a Sustainable Learning organization, best practices and lessons learned are built into existing processes and it is the norm for people to find and use the collective knowledge of the organization. When lessons learned are documented and made easily accessible, organizations have an increased opportunity to improve due to their ability to reflect and learn from their mistakes and successes. Organizational learning is accelerated in the process.

Manage content

A Sustainable Learning organization needs to integrate the use of data, information and knowledge assets within day-to-day business processes. Disseminating electronic materials in a networked environment requires processes that are different from those that were established for print-oriented publications. Content management systems and processes help an organization to manage valuable information assets as reusable components. The creation and maintenance of glossaries, lexicons and repositories play an important role in knowledge continuity.

Manage repositories

Repositories such as network shared drives and intranet portals are virtual spaces where community practitioners can find documents or tools (e.g. past presentations, contracts, forms, strategic plans) that they need to complete their tasks. To ensure that content in repositories is relevant, current and easy to find, it is important that someone in the community of practice be designated as a curator with maintenance responsibilities.

Creation

Develop learning materials

Learning materials are written using the business language, rules and processes captured in the Acquisition stage. Writing for Sustainable Learning delivers information in an enjoyable and engaging manner that facilitates assimilation and motivates learners.

Model business processes

Defining, documenting and modeling business processes achieves a state of business continuity. Organizational business process models should describe the reason for the process and the events that drive it, inputs and outputs, sequences of activities, and required resources.

Create style guides and templates

Style guides help instructional communicators present clear and consistent training materials and learning support tools according to a standardized set of style, formatting and usage conventions. Templates can be designed for almost any type of documentation. By storing them on the web, everyone in an organization can access and use them.

Stage 3: Share

Sustainable Learning makes knowledge sharing possible through a combination of opportunities, competencies, tools, processes and activities. Employees who don't normally share information because they believe "knowledge is power" begin to understand that their power lies in the sharing of their knowledge so that it becomes important to a wider cross-section of the organization. Alternatively, employees who want to share but don't know how can learn through membership of communities of practice.

Culture

Facilitate team-based learning

In the classroom, workers learn as teams rather than as individuals. Together, they develop the skills required to solve problems, think critically, and communicate as they help each other work through meaningful scenarios/case studies and perform tasks.

Enable communities of practice

Communities of practice are important for Sustainable Learning because in time, they acquire, preserve and create knowledge that remains in the organization even when employees leave. Conversely, new employees are quickly brought up to speed by tapping into the collective intelligence of their communities of practice.

Encourage open communications

Participatory activities encourage open communications, inquisitiveness, creativity, and the expression of all kinds of ideas and opinions with internal and external stakeholders. Informal learning is maximized when individuals and teams reflect on, discuss and consciously capture the key learnings from activities, events and outcomes. Examples of such activities include debriefs, feedback sessions, and knowledge cafés.

Technology

Provide collaborative workspace

In a Sustainable Learning organization, knowledge-sharing goes beyond information exchange. It is necessary to exploit collaborative technologies to connect employees and stimulate collaboration. Consider groupware and technologies that enable real-time communication between employees and the development of work products in a shared workspace.

Develop Web-search tools

Information that is captured and codified has very limited value if it cannot be re-used by others in the organization. Technology adds value when it reduces the cost, time and effort needed for people to share knowledge and information. Use authority lists to make retrieval of information easier and more precise. The more often information is retrieved and used, the more its value increases over time.

Apply corporate usability standards

Well-designed and easy-to-use products (e.g. business applications, Web sites, e-learning, training manuals) aid learning and can reduce the time users need to spend on training, seeking support or looking at documentation. Applying usability standards also helps an organization achieve data integrity goals, program cost reductions, scheduling and delivery targets.

Sustainability

Transfer facilitation skills

Learning how to learn

Facilitators are skilled in group dynamics and equipped with techniques that foster critical thinking, problem solving, and the application of new knowledge and skills. Their major role is to guide learners through the learning process by helping them draw on their own resources, knowledge and skills, and by helping them to develop new ones. People take responsibility for their own learning. They are no longer just receivers of information, but makers of their own learning.

Transfer instructional communication skills

Writing for Sustainable Learning is a distinctive style of communication that relies on particular skills, techniques, and principles used by "instructional communicators". Instructional communicators combine the science of learning with the art of technical writing to provide a learning experience that is engaging, meaningful and sustainable. Their writing style is characterized by the use of casual plain language and the application of change management principles.

Apply a collaborative-design approach

Sustainability is not about maintaining an organization as it is today but rather as a continually evolving process, requiring an ongoing need to revise and create new learning events and products. Collaborative design facilitates a user-centered and participatory process for instructional design that enables employees to respond quickly and efficiently to the shifting demands of the organization. As employees design together, they share different perspectives and a shared understanding that can lead to new insights and ideas.

Stage 4: Measure

With Sustainable Learning the organization is always learning how to learn and improve its processes through a series of incremental small wins. Including performance measurement in an organization's learning activities is a key element in developing and sustaining core competencies. Measurement is a prerequisite for effective action. It must continually reinforce or redirect strategy and evolve as an organization's learning capacity matures.

Performance

Measure results

Develop metrics and evaluations that will assess whether learning events have satisfied and met learning goals, and whether the goals themselves satisfy an organization's performance and competency requirements.

Measure the re-use factor

Sustainable Learning is concerned with achieving re-usable results that can be measured and continuously improved. Achieving results are not sufficient if the methods and processes used are not reproducible. The model requires that an organization evaluates the amount of re-use of its explicit assets.

Monitor the use of technology

By monitoring the use of the technology used by employees, it is possible to assess performance or usability problems and identify the under utilized features or parts, which will trigger the need for improvement or supplemental training in those areas. It also provides opportunities to identify exemplary uses and to provide material for FAQs regarding common problem areas.

Quality

Recorded best practices

A best practice is a process or a methodology that outlines the most effective way of achieving a specific objective. The essence of identifying and sharing best practices is to learn from others and to re-use knowledge. It is one of the most effective ways to transfer learning back to the job. Much of best practice knowledge is tacit and not always easy to record. Therefore most strategies to document best practices combine two key elements: explicit knowledge such as a best practices database (connecting people with information), and methods for sharing tacit knowledge such as communities of practice (connecting people with people).

Enhanced staff performance

Employees that have the right combination of KSAs to do their job properly will improve their performance and ultimately their productivity. Sustainable Learning leads to productivity improvements through the application of new knowledge and skills in a real work situation. An organization that is able to effectively and efficiently capture, codify and share knowledge will be able to sustain and meet its business objectives.

Increased staff retention

There is a growing awareness among employees that knowledge-sharing is the most valuable commodity in today's labour market. Prospective employers are assessed in terms of the opportunities provided to continuously upgrade skills and knowledge. An investment in the training and development of employees is a powerful magnet for attracting and retaining top talent.

Maturity

Integrate learning methodology

An organization has reached a level of learning maturity when senior management openly supports, leads and funds a business strategy that includes the planning and implementation of learning and performance initiatives.

Institutionalize processes and standards

An integral part in successfully implementing Sustainable Learning is in institutionalizing the processes and standards necessary to provide consistency and commitment. It is a practical and effective way of applying lessons learned from successes and failures. Institutionalized processes and standards can be managed, re-used and sustained.

Recognize continuous improvement

A mature Sustainable Learning organization will be able to recognize continuous improvement in its people, processes and systems. It will be able to notice that it can now respond quickly, efficiently, and effectively to change; and that it can adapt and re-align its learning requirements to respond to new challenges, goals and priorities because these are on everyone's radar screen.

Conclusion

Sustainable Learning creates synergy that results in a high degree of adaptation, cross-pollination of ideas, innovation, and learning. The benefits of implementing Sustainable Learning far outweigh its costs. In time, a Sustainable Learning organization will attract and retain talent, skills, and knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, when an employee leaves a Sustainable Learning organization, most of the expertise stays behind.

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