Importance of training intelligence in education and skills development

The focus should no longer be on learner outcomes, but performance outcomes. That is the unequivocal message from Paul Hanly, co-founder of South African end-to-end online learning solution provider New Leaf Technologies.

Source: Getty Images

Hanly was a keynote speaker in the latest edition of the eLearning Indaba, an annual conference that features a range of expert speakers who provide insights on resources, latest trends and best-practice methods in the e-learning space.

Role of big data

In his virtual presentation in the third session of the 2021 eLearning Indaba, Hanly explained how developments in big data and technology were revolutionising not only workplace training, but overall business performance.

He stressed that there needed to be direct correlations between returns on training and what was actually happening in a business.

Traditionally, it has been expensive to measure this because many systems were server-based and slow. But the fourth industrial revolution has been a game-changer.

"This means there's no reason why small to medium-sized enterprises can't have access to the same tools as bigger companies," he said.

Hanly and other industry leaders have placed a strong focus on what is termed "training intelligence" – a modern take on business intelligence, which gives a collective view of everything that is happening in a business' training initiative.

Because access to big data – higher internet speeds, more bandwidth and better capacity to process – has become more accessible, more learners and the organisation itself are able to benefit.

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Is the content effective?

"What we need to do is deep-dive analytics, which is so much more than whether a learner has achieved a result or not. We need to ask questions like whether the content we're providing to the learner is actually working effectively. If we pick up trends on content, maybe we need to reshape that content."

Not so long ago, online learning was more an individual pursuit, but these days learners have the ability to engage with their facilitators in real time.

"You can ask the instructors questions which can then be answered and discussed. It really keeps a conversation going and gives that encouragement."

The organisation, by studying metrics, is also able to identify and measure knowledge gaps.

Hanly said that in the past, reports had often taken the form of Excel spreadsheets, which then had to be downloaded, filtered and added to before being sent to a manager.

It was an incredibly time-consuming process.

Real-time analytics

However, the New Leaf Training Intelligence System can be configured in such a way that it can be analysed once and thereafter provide meaningful, analytical dashboards that happen in real time.

"A lot of this has come about because of big data," Hanly said.

"Big data has given us a lot more data to analyse. We can analyse this data far quicker than we've ever been able to do before. And it's all in real time, so it's not a matter of waiting and pulling a report at the end of the month. We can start to use that data to predict and diagnose what's going on in our learning. You can diagnose where there are currently gaps, where there might be gaps in the future and what sort of interventions we need to look at."

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Industry leaders have noted that many South African companies are still lagging behind in terms of metrics uptake.

"They do some sort of basic measurement, usually around completions and maybe learner satisfaction, but not a lot beyond that. But the leading organisations are looking at the different types of learning, whether it's formal, informal or classroom-based. They're measuring this all the time and they're aligning that data to business goals and how training impacts on business results."

Meaningful metrics

Business data, e-learning data and other intervention technology should all be factored into training intelligence.

Hanly said, "What we do for a lot of our clients is to provide a completely customised training intelligence system that goes alongside the learning management system.

"It gives you an overview – what is the subscription rate like, what is the drop-off rate like, how many inactive users have you got, who's not started, who's completed, how much time is being spent in training, what's the best time to learn? By analysing this, you can let line managers know who the people are who might be inactive, and establish whether learners are being encouraged to learn. These types of metrics immediately mean something."

"It was incredibly important that business helped define what the metrics were," Hanly said. "If we can prove there's a direct return on investment, we are likely to unlock further budget for training and development."

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