

**LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS:
HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR “PEOPLE POTENTIAL”**

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LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS: HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR “PEOPLE POTENTIAL”

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YOUR BUSINESS IS ONLY AS GOOD AS YOUR PEOPLE.

It's an old adage but, like most, it contains more than a kernel of truth. You can have the most sought-after product or service in the world, but success depends on the people who touch your business.

- **Employees** must safely, efficiently and consistently design and deliver error-free, quality products and a satisfying customer experience.
- **Sales staff** must utilize effective selling strategies, while accurately representing your brand.
- **Distributors** must confidently consult with customers and present products in ways which optimize sales.
- **Customers** must understand your product or service, while experiencing a positive gut reaction to your brand.

If any one of these areas suffers, your business suffers. The big question: How can you maximize your “People Potential” — the performance of the individuals who make, sell and buy your product or service — in today's vast global marketplace and uncertain economic times?

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO LEARNING.

Companies that offer consistent, comprehensive training have a greater chance of success attaining their business goals (Pfeffer, 1998). Products are produced better. Customers have a more thorough understanding of their purchases, and are more satisfied. Services are delivered more efficiently and with a higher customer rating. Vendors “get” your brand and business goals. Distributors raise consumer awareness and sell more. And a quality training program attracts top-notch recruits who are more likely to stay with the same employer (Hudson-Martin, 2008).

In short, learning provides a competitive advantage that you simply cannot get in any other way. You are only as good as your people.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES + CHANGING BUSINESS WORLD = UPDATED LEARNING.

It's difficult to keep learning programs current when technological advances and marketplace changes are everyday occurrences.

Businesses have become more global, often with a distributed workforce at home or overseas. Even local employees are on the move; they can't always report to the home office for training without wasting time in transit and sacrificing valuable work hours. Partnerships with distributors and vendors are increasing to help reach business goals in an expanding, yet economically-stressed, marketplace. Products are becoming more and more complex, and customers' expectations continue to grow; many companies require more customer training than employee training (Harward, 2010). These are just a few of the more serious issues facing learning professionals today.

The colossal challenge is to keep all of these people educated and ready to move your business and your brand forward. In order to maximize this People Potential, a corporate learning program must use current technologies and methods. It must efficiently train a distributed work force and extend learning content outside the organization to customers, distributors, vendors and other stakeholders. And it must be closely aligned with your brand; the importance of exposing both internal and external audiences to your brand is key to achieving longterm business goals (Kobel, 2008).

LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS: HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR “PEOPLE POTENTIAL”

A more flexible way of expanding learning capabilities to improve performance and competitiveness, is a Learning Partnership.

IT'S NOT SO MUCH WHAT TO DO, AS HOW TO DO IT.

Updating and expanding your corporate learning program is a tricky proposition in today's marketplace and economy. Resources are already being stretched. The last two years have seen training budget cuts of 21 percent (Bersin & Associates, 2010). The ratio of training staff for every 1,000 learners has fallen from 7.0 to 6.2 because of hiring freezes and reductions (Bersin & Associates, 2010). Trainers barely have enough hours in a day to develop and deliver new knowledge to the workforce. How are they expected to create, deliver and manage learning content, update their company's Learning methods, **and** plan for the future needs of a distributed workforce?

The trend during the last several years has been to seek solutions from external Learning Service Providers. Off-the-shelf learning products are convenient, but they aren't specific to a company's particular learning needs or business goals. These products have no relevancy to a company's brand, nor are they adaptable.

Many businesses have turned to outsourcing, handing over entire segments, if not all, of the learning process to an external vendor. If downsizing or redirection of internal resources is the goal, this may be the answer. Outsourcing involves comprehensive and often long-term contracts, and can sometimes mean the loss of jobs.

A third option, a more flexible way of expanding learning capabilities to improve performance and competitiveness, is a Learning Partnership.

A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP WORKS WITH YOUR TEAM.

If you read beyond the media headlines and take a closer look at training outsourcing stories, you'll see that some are actually engaged in Learning Partnerships.

What's the difference between a partnership and outsourcing?

A Learning Partnership is much more flexible than an outsourcing agreement. Training needs fluctuate with industry trends and business cycles. A Learning Partnership helps companies cope with these fluctuations without hiring additional permanent staff or signing long-term contracts.

A Learning Partnership supplements and complements the internal team and its capabilities. They assist in whatever tasks are necessary to ensure that the learning program is successful. No jobs need to be cut. Nobody loses control over content or delivery. Businesses simply get the help they need to make the most of their People Potential and increase their competitive edge.

Most Learning Partnerships provide a wide variety of services. They usually are able to help a company develop its learning capabilities and bring training methods and technologies up to speed. They often analyze training needs and develop learning content. Most can teach the internal team methods to update content using standardized tools. They deliver courses or provide staff when and wherever needed. Sometimes they also assist with the marketing and promotion of training programs. After delivering the required services, a Learning Partner can transfer responsibility for updating and maintenance to the internal team.

A Learning Partner also keeps tabs on the latest and greatest learning technologies because it's what they do. When appropriate, they give their business partner a little tap on the shoulder to let them know there's something out there they should pay attention to – perhaps a new content delivery method, or a learning trend that affects their industry. It's like having someone watching your back.

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Companies who wish to keep their training infrastructure intact and stay intimately involved in the update and expansion of their training capabilities have turned to Learning Partnerships.

WHO ENGAGES IN LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS?

Even more importantly, what do these relationships look like?

Generally speaking, companies who wish to keep their training infrastructure intact and stay intimately involved in the update and expansion of their training capabilities have turned to Learning Partnerships. But each of these relationships looks different depending on the types of companies and their needs within any given business cycle. Let's examine what some Learning Partnerships look like, using fictional companies and common business models: a health care system, global manufacturing, and consumer services.

Health Care System: Partnering to reach a larger audience

Non-affiliated physician referrals generate a substantial amount of new business for ABC Health. To maintain a good relationship with the medical community, ABC Health's training department currently offers partially-subsidized continuing education credit seminars for physicians. These seminars are held in traditional classroom-type settings on specific dates and at specific times. ABC Health would like to expand this program, by transforming classes into e-learning courses, to make continuing education more accessible for busy physicians.

The problem:

ABC Health's training department is already extremely busy. They have the expertise, but they simply don't have time to do the instructional design and development for these e-learning courses.

The solution:

A Learning Partnership picks up the instructional design load and ABC's internal training department does the development, or vice-versa. No matter how the work load is distributed, a Learning Partnership enables ABC Health to expand their

educational offerings and make courses more convenient and accessible. This, in turn, extends ABC Health's reach to a wider audience in the medical community and enables them to achieve their business goals.

Global Manufacturing: Partnering to handle specialized needs

Worldwide Tools has a distributed workforce. Their internal training department has just about all of their product training needs covered. But Worldwide Tools plans to introduce a new sales process to improve time management and increase close rates. All salespeople and distributors need to be trained in the new sales approach.

The problem:

In order for the new soft skills training to be effective, it must include believable customer interaction scenarios. Although the training department at Worldwide Tools has produced basic product videos, they've never hired actors, written dialogue or directed scenes. They realize that if it isn't done right and isn't convincing — it won't achieve the desired results. A less-than-professional training piece could also hurt their reputation and brand image.

The solution:

A Learning Partnership provides the script-to-screen video production. An internal training representative works as consultant and procures the necessary approvals from Worldwide Tools stakeholders. Instead of trying to become proficient in an entirely new skillset that can't be learned overnight, the internal team carries on with their already full calendar of training duties and long-term planning, while the Learning Partnership takes care of fulfilling the specialized need.

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Consumer Services: Partnering to expand learning capabilities and features

Businesses sometimes offer educational content to build relationships with potential customers. As part of a campaign to attract and engage existing customers and targeted prospects, Long Life Insurance wants to offer free financial education online. They would like to include social learning features such as blogs and connect with social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube. Their vision also includes features for consumers to opt in for a sales consultation.

The problem:

Long Life’s internal training department traditionally focuses on employee learning and sales training for their insurance representatives. They don’t have the time or resources to design and deliver the curriculum for this new program. They also have little experience with social learning and opt in features.

The solution:

In order to extend capabilities without losing control, Long Life’s training department chooses a Learning Partnership. The Learning Partnership offers to work with the internal team to design and develop the consumer learning programs. The new social learning features, tie-ins with external sites and lead capture application are developed by the partner. The partner also transfers knowledge, documentation and templates to the Long Life training team so that they can update and maintain the platform.

Don’t underestimate the value of your People Potential.

Learning is the life blood of your people. It unifies them and connects them across space and across time to your business goals and your brand. It ensures that employees, customers, distributors and vendors are knowledgeable and enthusiastic

about your product or service. Simply put, learning maximizes your People Potential.

Today’s expanding marketplaces and rapidly advancing technologies necessitate current, relevant and easily accessible learning—no small feat for a corporate training department during uncertain economic times. Learning Partnerships exist in response to this need. They work collaboratively with internal training teams to anticipate and meet learning demands while providing flexibility in a constantly shifting and evolving business world.

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WHAT EXACTLY CAN A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP DO FOR YOUR BUSINESS?

1. **Free up internal resources rather than replace them.** This allows the internal team to concentrate on subject matter and to focus on important internal business issues and objectives.
2. **Research and plan a learning strategy.** A Learning Partner can evaluate the current state of your curriculum, courses and delivery methods; make recommendations for improvement; define a vision; identify potential partners and stakeholders; recommend revenue or funding sources and chart a path to success.
3. **Bring your training methods and delivery systems up-to-speed.** Does your infrastructure measure up to current standards and learning approaches? What system do you have in place to deliver content to targeted learners? What is your bandwidth? What are your options for upgrades? What potential opportunities are there to blend learning and e-learning? A Learning Partner can evaluate, make recommendations and help with upgrades and improvements.
4. **Help develop learning content.** A well-qualified Learning Partnership is staffed with degreed, certified professionals experienced in instructional design. They can develop entire courses from initial needs analysis through final evaluation. Or they can perform specific tasks as needed—instructional design, development or delivery. Many are also versed in Learning 2.0 and can customize and implement community and social networking platforms.
5. **Keep everyone on the same page using standards and templates.** A Learning Partnership's goal is to make your job easier. They follow instructional design standards and use course development templates to ensure that all members of the partnership, internal and external, are on the same page. This also enables the Learning Partner to train internal staff to continue developing and upgrading content on their own.
6. **Evaluate your current Learning Management System.** A vital part of any training program is the management, tracking and reporting of progress. A Learning Partner can evaluate and help you better use your current system, or purchase and install a new system.
7. **Make sure your brand is seamlessly integrated into your training.** A good Learning Partner understands how to capture the messages and images of your brand and embed them in your learning content. The importance of exposing both internal and external audiences to your brand is key to achieving long-term business goals (Kobel, 2008).
8. **Market and promote training programs to engage your people.** An enthusiastic learner is a good learner. A Learning Partner can help you promote courses and programs to stimulate interest and enthusiasm among employees as well as distributors, vendors and customers.
9. **Evolve your internal learning and development operation.** There doesn't need to be long-term all-inclusive contracts. You ask for and receive only what is needed during any given business cycle. The goal is to supplement your existing resources, not replace them. A Learning Partnership works seamlessly with your team to reach training and business goals.

LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS VS. OUTSOURCING

ASK YOURSELF A FEW SIMPLE QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE WHETHER YOU NEED A LEARNING PARTNERSHIP OR LEARNING SERVICES OUTSOURCING.

- Do you want to keep your current training department intact?
- Do you want your external learning provider to help with some, but not necessarily all, aspects of your training?
- Do you want to avoid long-term contracts?
- Do you need your external learning provider to be flexible enough to work with the surges and ebbs in your work flow?

If you answered yes to even one of these questions, you may want to consider a Learning Partnership. But how do you go about finding one?

ASK QUESTIONS TO DISTINGUISH LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS FROM OUTSOURCERS.

The terms “outsourcing” and “partners” or “partnership” are often used interchangeably and indiscriminately. You’ll need to ask very specific, educated questions to help differentiate Learning Partnerships from outsourcing arrangements. If the company provides a true Learning Partnership, they won’t be offended by your need to investigate and clarify the working relationship. These three simple questions will help you distinguish Learning Partnerships from outsourcers.

1. What have you done in the past to help clients attain their training goals?

Don’t let them toss generalized marketing-speak back at you. Press for specific case studies. You’re looking for examples of times when they have provided services to help a client’s internal team develop a strategy, complete a project or expand capabilities. Perhaps they have provided training or technical support to a client, or they have taken charge of an entire course because the internal team was too busy to handle the additional work. But overall a Learning Partnership is there to complement the internal team, not replace it. They should talk about how their services **supplement** the resources of an internal training team.

2. May I see a current client list and contact some of your customers for references?

Any reputable external services provider will be more than happy to provide the names and contact information for customers who can attest to the quality of their work. While you’re talking to their customers, make sure you ask about the working relationship. What was their experience like? Was it a true partnership? Did the external service provider work **with** their internal training team? Were they flexible? Did they provide extra services and staff **when** they needed it?

3. What sort of contract do you require?

A Learning Partnership requires a short-term agreement only for the immediate services they provide. Binding contracts for a year or several years, or agreements that give them control over an entire function of your training department are indications of Learning Services Outsourcing.

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