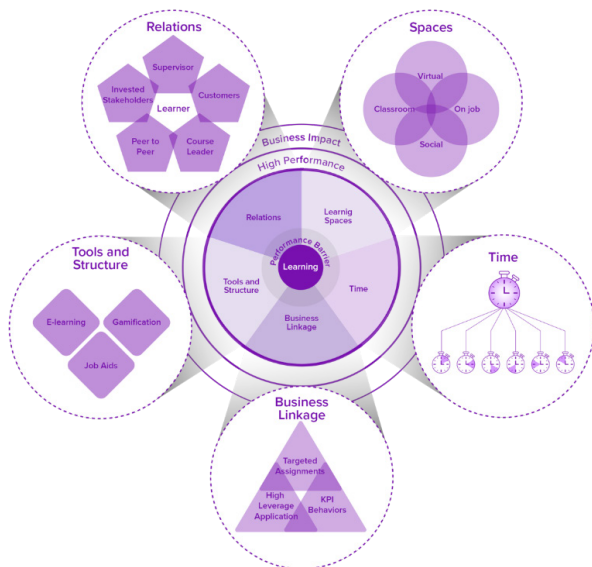


Stretching the Dimensions

Using different dimensions of design to maximise the results of learning events and some approaches to do just that.

By Alex Brittain-Catlin



Over the past few years increasing demands have been put on learning events. More needs to be done with less, employees have the same learning requirements but need to be away from the workplace less. This comes not only from organisations but also from the learners themselves, who really need to see the benefit of being out of the office for extended periods of time.

To that end, Learning and Development are having to look at how they design programs, to ensure that employees get what they need but in way that is less disruptive. A way of addressing this is to design programs whilst taking into account the different dimensions that a learner operates within.

As part of Promote International’s look at how to create a High-Performance Learning Journey, one of the areas that we examine is how to stretch the different dimensions in which a learning event exists. The aim being not only to design more effective programs but also address potential performance barriers ahead of time. The dimensions that we look at are: Relations, Learning Spaces, Time, Business Linkage, and Tools and Structure. When we design our programs to make best use of these dimensions, we can then begin to realise more of the real value of a learning event.

Our belief is that we can create programs that can be more effective by addressing the five dimensions as part of the design process.

Relations

The traditional approach, where learning is dependent on a facilitator, even an extremely talented and knowledgeable facilitator, has been challenged for a while. Whilst the facilitator may still play an important role, we believe that a sound approach is to build on the relationship dimension by building on the relationships that learners already have in their working environment. To utilise their supervisors, peers, other invested stakeholders, and even customers where possible, because it will be with these different target groups with whom they will be applying their learning.

Learning Spaces

Utilising technology but also other potential learning spaces and designing a program to ensure that learning takes place in different environments. The traditional classroom still remains an aspect of this, not least because of the value it provides in terms of a safe environment in which to practice but also to bolster networking and the sharing of best practice and individual approaches derived from participants own working reality. We also find that utilising the virtual environment supports shorter learning chunks, as well as interaction, and enables learning to take place efficiently and effectively over a longer period of time. Furthermore, we believe that

learning can and should take place in the workplace where participants are expected to apply their newly acquired knowledge, as well as creating more social interaction to ensure that learning is not just limited to a classroom event but expands out into other areas.

Time

Should learning be limited to a sole or series of face-to-face classroom events or can the learning be stretched over time? The answer partially depends on what level of challenge we expect to address. For those areas where behavioural change is crucial to the success of a learning, we believe that the design and implementation of a learning journey can be most effective. To do this effectively stretching on the time dimension enables us to provide key pieces of theory in advance, so as to build the knowledge background and awareness of the subject matter. Later, this can then be supported by practice in a safe environment where the time is spent on what really matters, which is then followed up through guided application in the workplace. This approach stretches the learning over time rather than all three of these phases taking place in a prolonged face-to-face classroom interaction.

Our view, and increasingly the market is requesting this, is for learning to be spread out into smaller chunks. The aim is not only to cut down on costs of participants being away from their work and the associated logistical costs but also to really enable the intake and application of learning.

Business Linkage

Two of the factors in the High-Performance Learning Journey are performance and results. To address these in the design phase of the program is vital if we are going to provide the right kind of learning. We want to ensure that we provide targeted assignments and highly leveraged application exercises that actually deliver the performance outcomes that we are after. To do this we also need to take into account the organisation's KPIs. We need to address what it is that we actually need employees to be doing that will, in turn, have the greatest impact on achieving these stated KPIs and achieve results for the organisation.

Tools and Structure

The tools and structure of a program can be stretched through the use of different media in order to support on the job learning and to provide an accessible resource that learners can access before they need to apply an aspect of learning. This challenges the view that learners will remember the content of a program that might have taken place some months or even years ago but actually supports them when they need to apply learning in specific situations. Such media also includes eLearning, job aids, and even gamification.

What the Professionals Say

Since starting on the High-Performance Learning Journey, Promote International has worked with hundreds of learning professionals, who embody many, many years of experience within Learning and Development. As part of our own program to assist these professionals to design their own High-Performance Learning Journeys, we have asked them to share with us what approaches they currently use in the design of their programs in order to stretch the different dimensions when it comes to designing more effective and efficient programs.

What follows is not the input of Promote alone but the combined wisdom of those with whom we have worked in the course of delivering our High-Performance Learning Journey programs. Whilst this may not be an exhaustive list, nor are the approaches applicable to each and every program that can be delivered, what we do have is significant input into how we can design programs that actually deliver the performance and value that is now being demanded from Learning and Development. Additionally, and this is something that we have found ourselves in our own design work, many of these approaches do not address a single dimension but may touch on more than one.

Relations

- Create accountability/learning buddies within the learning group, who have the role of checking in with each other and providing feedback on the application of the learning. These learning buddies can then act as an “anchor” in their work space, who they can then bounce ideas/approaches off of before they implement them in reality.
- Utilise peers, mentors, and managers in the feedback process for performance assessments. To ensure that they are bought into the program and take over the learning journey outside of the classroom. This can take the form of coaching, where managers/executives take on the task of coaching to ensure that the learning journey is really launched. Create “Meeting in a box” kits for managers, to use with their teams to spread the learning.
- That participants request feedback from someone else (customer or team member) when they try out a skill on the job and report this back to the learning group and take the learnings from it as a group discussion. This prompt for feedback serves not only to remind them of what the behaviour etc is that they are supposed to be applying but also enables a more detailed analysis of how it went afterwards. There may be some resistance when it comes to customers providing feedback, but an approach here is to try and create the what’s in it for them to provide this feedback.
- Create and provide light learning assets that can be shared with peers, managers, and direct reports as well as a light activity to do with them to not only involve others in the learning process but also create an awareness around what is happening and what is the intent.
- Create knowledge communities and practice communities so as to have a resource group whose input can be sought.
- Work with the customer to pilot new approaches based on feedback to address barriers to application.
- Create assignments for supervisors, so that as part of the learning they are responsible for implementation, not just the participants themselves. This can also take the form of the supervisor owning the program where L&D is there to support and bring it to life but where the supervisor actually has the responsibility. Get direct senior manager involvement in the delivery, not just during the introduction and overview.
- Formally, as part of the evaluation process, have the managers sign-off that they have had follow-up conversations with their learners. It is often a good idea to provide them with a template for what this conversation should look like, which is then signed off and submitted.
- Leverage all possible stakeholders throughout the program, line managers positioned up front where their role is clearly explained with the delegates/reports present to ensure the same message is delivered to all at the same time. Clarify what the expectations are on the different roles.
- Educate the participants and set expectations on them as learners. So, that employees actively drive their own development. This is not only in terms of what training to attend but also what coach/mentor should they engage with or what projects to take on in order to develop the skills and knowledge.
- Making the managers responsible for the training, so instead of doing a sales training with salespeople, do a training with their managers as to how to train their salespeople.

- Create the full-time role of facilitator, whose job is to follow-up on learning. They can not only lead workshops but also be leveraged for coaching.
- Rolling out programs top down instead of bottom up, this can help build and maintain momentum.

Learning Spaces

- Conduct kick-off webinars to gain commitment. This also lends itself to senior stakeholder participation because they can normally join a 15-minute webinar from their offices if they can't attend in person.
- Use technology to change the location and time. Participants can work from their normal place of work for some parts of the journey. For those who don't have access to a computer, create labs where they can easily access the technology that they need.
- Create short, virtual or face-to-face pulse meetings on a regular basis to address barriers to applying knowledge and skills. This information can then be fed back to supervisors if a mandate is required to clear the way in order to make application possible. This can also take the format of "knowledge cafés, where participants, individuals or small-teams "pitch" their impact projects and results. This puts them in the spotlight, shares knowledge and drives accountability.
- Using social learning sites to connect learners outside of the classroom.
- Use tools such as Zing collaborative and Klaxoon to gain higher levels of participation in larger groups.

Time

- To cut down the theory into short bite-sized chunks, then conduct role-play simulations immediately afterwards, which are then followed by feedback. To create the learning, the practice and then reflections to create the impact in the participants. This also serves to cut down on unnecessary non-content related filler that often forms part of face-to-face learning events or lectures.
- Increase the challenge level when it comes to the bite-sized learning. So, each micro-learning is followed with an opportunity to practice before increasing the difficulty level. This enables learners to not only build their skills but also to gradually increase their confidence and competence in these skills, leading to an increased likelihood that they will apply what is being taught rather than a too steep learning curve that participants do not feel confident enough to apply. The more complex the subject, the more extensive the pre- and post-content.
- Being very deliberate about the learning build based upon the complexity of the subject. What are the perceived/real risks of putting the learning into action without a proper grasp of the knowledge or the confidence to apply it effectively? The more risk there is the more steps in learning and practice before real life application.
- Creating tasks that have to be undertaken every week for a certain period of time following the training event.
- Limiting learning to short two- to ten-minute videos with assignments immediately afterwards. To fit the mobile environment and time constraints.

- Include pre-study assignments and post-study, to take learning and application out of the classroom. Build these in already in the design/development phase to make sure that they are achievable.
- Support the learners by providing coaching programs in tandem with the more formal learning. Here, attendees bring their individual issues to this one-to-one environment meaning that they get the learning but are also able to address specific business issues that they are currently facing.
- For programs that have a modular approach, create separate learning events instead. So, instead of a 2-day workshop, it's now five virtual sessions that are two hours each. A project can then be used to hold it all together if necessary.
- Post-training participant cohorts for people to re-group and discuss their learning and on-the-job performance. This can have mixed results depending on the engagement of participants but what is appreciated is the access to job aides that are provided as part of this. A way of enhancing this is for there to be set agendas for the following meetings, having the structure helps these cohorts stay on track and committed.
- Blending learning so that learners experience a program over several months, to give more time to see occasions where learning can be applied and to build from each of these application opportunities.

Business Linkage

- Create measurable tasks/objectives to demonstrate success, to not only provide more motivation for the learners but also to help build buy-in from other stakeholders, who should be able to see the learning leading to concrete results.
- Link learning to current KPIs and create the link between the behaviour/skill and achieving the KPIs. Reevaluate this on a regular basis - particularly for long-running programs or programs that take place over many months or a year.
- Creating a clear link between the "on the job tools" available (eLearning's, templates, micro-learnings etc) and the value they bring if implemented. Value not just in terms of soft-skills but in terms of real results. Creating the "what's in it for me" link between a learning tool and a business result.
- Create a firm and visible link between learning and the performance evaluation process. This not only increases commitment through showing the clear link between what they are learning and how they are being evaluated but also shows why the training is actually relevant. Cause and effect.
- Turn the learning over to the participants, so that they can draw the linkages to what they are learning and make recommendations to each other as to application in their own business environment.
- Use live business challenges and scenarios to bring business linkage and make the development relevant, which also improves commitment because the bridge between the two is clear and apparent.
- Even for non-profit organisations, it's too easy to presume that the good that is trying to be promoted has an obvious significance to the audience.
- Linking the measures of success to real business KPIs, rather than "learning KPIs".

Determining the behaviours that are currently tracked and those that can be tracked, so as to establish baselines and measure ongoing success. Create and track a “capability index” to measure the effectiveness of the learning.

- Introduce learning-objective based coaching as part of the transition, to ensure that the knowledge is applied to current work-related situations, leading to actions that actually have an effect on the business.
- Create projects to produce specific targeted results that make a difference for the business, which are a stretch on what’s normally expected and require real application of what has been learnt to succeed.

Tools and Structure

- Ensuring that the learning is in line with the business requirements and employee needs through gathering feedback at the start of the year and then meeting with management to examine what could and should be included for the upcoming year.
- Reduce the cost element by including different tools but also to create a better learner experience and increase everyday development as opposed to only developing on a training course.
- Creating “quick and dirty” or “snack learning” material, where the linkage is just in time and personal. The credibility of the presenter is just as important as the content, so not always using “L&D” as the face.
- Minimising face-to-face events to only include practical sessions, where no new knowledge is shared, only the application of the theory shared prior to the learning event.
- Use different technology for different purposes. Have a clear plan of why a particular technology is being used and what is the purpose of doing so. Such as using Facetime/Skype/Google Hangouts to have manager interactions after trainings, where participant performance is evaluated and regular “virtual” coaching calls. This not only creates awareness but can also contribute to targeted learning for specific learners. Create Yammer groups to find relevant knowledge and share experience.
- Balance e-learning with classroom sessions, to ensure that the social-interaction part is addressed. This is now sometimes missed but there needs to be an understanding of how others apply the learning, their take on what’s being taught as well as sharing success stories and lessons learned from failure. Classroom sessions that enable “safe environments” where people can try and fail without consequence. Classroom sessions also expands the emotional connection and ensures that the learner has some “skin in the game”.
- Create a searchable catalogue of learning from which learners can decide what they need and in what order they learn. The learning is provided through bite-size content that doesn’t take up so much time to go through but provides a key learning that can then be applied. The challenge being to strike the sweet spot between flexibility and business linkage. Include observations and interviews as some of the tools.
- Creating automatic tracking logs of accessed learning. Not only to see what participants are finding most useful but also to ensure that the knowledge foundation is actually taking place.
- Creating an internal “YouTube” of short, sharp bursts of learning in the form of videos. Can be accessed when it’s necessary and serve as a reminder of the what, how and why.

Creating a meaningful career development resource page (and access to training) the educate staff on how they can take control of their own learning, not only in the classroom but beyond.

- Use the tools that are out there, such as Knowly. Though do not rely solely on videos or other eLearning, as it's very hard to replace the value and flexibility of an actual coach/facilitator. Creating example tip sheets, that are not just reactive but are reappraised on a regular basis to ensure that they are fit for purpose - today, not last year.
- Having clear templates/aids that participants complete or have access to between classroom sessions in order to practice new skills. These can then be debriefed with other learners/managers/facilitators.
- Record a video log after the training sessions to share with participant managers, so that they know what has been covered and what can be expected from the participants. This is a sprint through not an in-depth account and particularly to highlight what skills can now be utilised by the participants and what are realistic expectations.
- Conduct learning lab sessions after training events, so as to check what is working from the training and what is not. Then addressing the gap to ensure that changes are made and the program is delivering as intended.
- Conducting surveys post-training to assess how much of the learning participants have actually been able to apply in their day-to-day work. Then adjusting the content accordingly, so that what is learned is actually applied rather than lost.
- To check that the assignments can actually be completed by the participants, view what is being set from their perspective. This can be done by looking at their actual working environment or conducting interviews before the assignments are set.

For more information on High Performance Learning Journeys, visit HPLJ.org.