Transforming the workplace.

Critical skills and learning methods for the successful 21st Century worker.

By Sam Herring, CEO Intrepid Learning, Inc.
There are many explanations for today’s uncertain economy. But Nobel economist Joseph Stiglitz of Columbia University has advanced an analysis that’s starting to resonate.

In a recent article, Stiglitz says that our problem is “rooted in the kinds of jobs we have, the kind we need, and the kind we’re losing, and rooted as well in the kind of workers we want, and the kind we don’t know what to do with.” To advance our economy, Stiglitz believes that wrenching, fundamental change is required – no less dramatic than the shifts experienced by an earlier generation during the Great Depression.

While Stiglitz and I work in different worlds, I see evidence in all types of organizations that we need to better prepare, train, and inspire successful self-directed learners to meet today’s challenges.

As I see it, there are two big questions to consider. First, what are the critical 21st century skills that the workforce of tomorrow needs to develop and master today? Secondly, how can we improve our learning methods to enable the self-directed learner to thrive in this new environment?
A Workplace in Transition

Today’s workforce exists in a riptide of change. At one end of the spectrum, where new entrants are joining the workforce, there exists a significant, distressing skills gap. A 2011 Pew Research study found that only 55 percent of graduates from four-year colleges say that their education was “very useful in helping prepare them for a job or career.” These findings dovetail with ASTD research conducted in 2009, in which 51 percent of those surveyed said that the skills of the current workforce do not match changes in their company’s strategy, goals, markets or business models.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have educated knowledge workers who came of age in the last few decades of the 20th century. Often middle managers once prized for overseeing steady, slowly evolving corporate bureaucracies, today these same individuals are increasingly dispensable in a globally connected marketplace characterized by rapid change. The competencies that previously armed middle managers for success to manage steady-state operations are now insufficient at best, and in most cases profoundly counterproductive. Today, organizations and their managers are forced to continually re-invent themselves in the context of continuous change and complexity. An apt, if unfortunate, example of an organization that failed to do this is Eastman Kodak. As the world became more digital, the company struggled to keep pace. Now it finds itself in bankruptcy. Or consider RIM—just a few years ago, the Blackberry seemed untouchable as the world’s dominant smartphone brand. Today, thanks to the advent of the iPhone, Android, Windows Phone and other devices, RIM may be closer to RIP.

The fading ranks of middle management have lost their edge, thanks to revolutions in both technology and globalization. Indeed, the latest wave of technology advances—cloud computing, advanced mobile applications and devices, and rapidly expanding social networks to name a few—have greatly eased access to knowledge work. Nowhere is this change seen more dramatically than with the rapidly ascending workforce in high-growth markets outside the United States. Business writer Seth Godin remarks ominously, “If you’re the average person out there doing average work, there’s going to be someone else out there doing the exact same thing as you, but cheaper.” The game has shifted to a far more competitive, globally-connected field of play, requiring individuals to differentiate themselves in authentic, compelling ways like never before. Godin concludes, “If you’re different somehow and have made yourself unique, people will find you and pay you more.”

I believe the accelerated pace of change, the increased complexity of the business environment, and the requirement for individual differentiation will place a new premium on individual, self-directed learning. Continual, personalized learning will be the key to individual growth and differentiation, and could eventually lead to a personalized learning and development revolution.

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As leaders responsible for designing and implementing successful business strategies, and preparing our workforces to shape and execute them, we face clear challenges. We must find new ways to help yesterday’s knowledge workers take responsibility for their own development, and to see that development as central to not just their employer’s value creation, but their own value creation as well. We must help the knowledge workers of yesterday move beyond their comfort zones to become the innovation workers of tomorrow. It is critical that they embrace self-directed, continuous development in order to differentiate their skills and make themselves invaluable contributors to our economy. This, in turn, will help their organizations accelerate business results, spark innovation, improve performance, and drive growth.

**What We Need: Agility, Curiosity, and a Commitment to Continuous Learning**

To achieve these ends, workers must become more agile, curious, and committed to continuous learning. For the past few decades, knowledge workers have been required to master only their particular areas of expertise, but subject matter expertise is no longer enough. Applying one’s knowledge to an organization’s existing strategy or operations is only part of today’s business challenge. We need leaders and employees with foresight who can identify new opportunities, design creative solutions, and bring them to market. Simply put, we need innovation workers, not just knowledge workers. Innovation workers differentiate themselves through their ability to understand context, to judge situations, and to deviate from established norms in order to create new, creative solutions to the challenges they face. This requirement for adaptability is identified in ASTD’s report, “Bridging the Skills Gap”, as one of the three highest-demand skills that will be required of the workforce in the future (and the future is today!).

Curiosity is the spark behind innovation and the driver that can differentiate a highly-valued employee from a mediocre performer. Curiosity is a fundamental attribute associated with many of the behaviors possessed by our greatest innovators. In their groundbreaking book “The Innovator’s DNA”, Jeff Dyer, Hal Gregersen, and Clayton Christensen share research demonstrating core innovation skills such as experimentation, questioning, exploring a broad range of interests, and meeting different types of people. According to their research, leaders who demonstrate these behaviors have a superior track record of leading innovation in their organizations.
In my own experience, I think of the curiosity I admire in my colleagues—those who embrace the opportunity to learn an entirely new subject. The best performers combine curiosity with a certain moxie that gives them the confidence to step into a new field and not just learn, but master and eventually promote their expertise. For example, a colleague of mine showed interest in social networking a few years ago, became a passionate user of multiple tools and applications, and read voraciously on the topic. Then he started sharing his experiences and ideas through presentations and articles, and eventually he wrote a book. Today, he is a nationally-sought-after speaker and expert on the topic. His success began with curiosity and a commitment to continuous learning. My colleague knows that stasis isn’t an option. To remain relevant in today’s workforce, he followed his natural curiosity to identify and master new areas of expertise.

**How We Will Learn: Technology-Enabled Informal Learning**

When we talk about fostering agility, curiosity and continuous learning, we’re fortunate because today we have a host of Web-based technologies (including social, mobile, video, games, and personalized portals) that can serve as perfect tools to support the self-directed learner. By utilizing technology-enabled informal learning resources, collaborative learners can easily share and exchange knowledge, and self-directed learners can continuously teach themselves. These tools allow us to gain and share knowledge when, where and how we want it.

Technology-enabled informal learning (that is, technology-based learning that takes place outside a formal classroom environment) also makes sense for organizations because we know that people learn in a variety of ways, and they usually like to learn on their own terms. This insight is derived from Howard Gardner, the influential educational thinker, who has argued that all of us have multiple intelligences.

Adjusting and adapting to this cognitive norm, Gardner explains, will generally result in greater skill development and sharper problem solving.

I’m seeing an increasing number of organizations in a wide range of industries begin to facilitate informal learning programs for their employees. For example, the use of social learning, which allows people to leverage their personal and social networks for knowledge, is rapidly growing. According to ASTD’s Learning Executive’s Confidence Index for the fourth quarter of 2011, almost 55% of learning executives expect an increase in the use of informal learning and Web 2.0 tools in their organizations over the next 6 months.

At Learning Services, we recently crowd sourced best practice videos on the topic of client communication skills from our top learning consultants. Rather than designing and delivering a traditional course, we identified the critical required skills, and asked our community of experts (that is, our employees) to share a best practice. And the results were simply fantastic. We had nearly twenty contributors post their videos to our internal social learning network, and from there, the community rated, commented and voted on the best videos. This approach highlighted a strong cultural value for us: it reinforced that we’re all peers, and we can learn from each other—no matter where we sit in the organization.

Another key element of informal learning involves the concept of agility. Quick learning that doesn’t dilute quality is paramount right now in an incredibly time-constrained business environment where lost time equals lost opportunity. According to Nucleus Research, the average sales person spends 3 to 5 hours per week searching for information across five corporate systems, leaving two out of every three searches feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information they must process. Recent research from the University of Texas concludes that a mere 10% increase in information accessibility results in a 14.4% increase in sales.

In this spirit of learning agility and instant access, we work with a financial services client to make short-form, expert-designed informal learning content about financial products and industry trends available to their partners at the moment of need—such as minutes before an important client meeting!

**The Self-Directed Learner Is an Inspired Learner**

Self-directed learners are intrinsically motivated. They understand that their passion for learning is fundamentally connected to their ability to differentiate themselves and succeed in the workplace. They know where they need to get smarter to add even more value to their organizations and to advance their careers. They take responsibility for their own learning because they are passionate, inspired and curious.

It’s these passionate, self-directed learners who will help drive the 21st century workforce transformation that our global economy requires. As I’ve shared, I believe adaptability, curiosity and commitment are the hallmarks of self-directed learners who will differentiate and succeed by leveraging the fantastic array of informal learning technologies available to them today. When individuals exhibit these characteristics, they will become highly valued and indispensable to their organizations. And in turn, the organizations that employ them will succeed – even in the most uncertain economy.
About the Author

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