# Putting Knowledge Workers' Knowledge to Work

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If there is a single word that describes the source, course, and goal of the roiling technological whitewaters inundating corporate learning professionals today, it is the quest for "sustainability."

Only recently have technologies evolved to the state where, by creatively linking disparate knowledge and information systems, we can begin to get a whiff of the end game: an immersive environment that allows knowledge workers who must continuously adapt to

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successive waves of change to instantly and dynamically scoop up the knowledge that each uniquely requires at that moment, and/or have it pushed to them as they need it. That's sustainability.

Unfortunately, many of us are looking for sustainability in all the wrong places. There is much debate over the best way to combine learning and technology: live classes at a distance, asynchronous courses, "blended" models, and so on. All of those models derive from the hundreds-of-years-old classroom solution, wherein one knowledgeable person has the "answer" and everyone else supposedly starts from the same place to obtain it. These may be okay for credit courses, but they are the worst of all possible solutions for the over-burdened knowledge worker in a rapidly-changing environment. Not only do these models pretty much ignore what the knowledge worker brings to the table (after all, that's why we call them knowledge workers), they also ignore our most important and expensive corporate asset: the knowledge worker's time.

If we had never seen a classroom and were tasked with designing a context-based corporate knowledge system to provide support to knowledge workers in real time,

would we even put such models as the "lecture" and the "classroom" on the list? Probably not. Newer visions are coming closer to the mark: simulations, just-in-time performance support, and embedded learning in business flow, to name a few. While such solutions begin to feel more "right," how will we know when we are finally "there," and if there even is a "there" at all?

The confusion and mixed messages in our field today are prevalent largely because the sustainable model for the use of technology in learning—a predictable model that invites large-scale investment and has meaningful measurable outcomes—has yet to be widely recognized. The landscape of knowledge acquisition and knowledge use is changing. To understand where it is all headed, it is important to differentiate between the academic model and the performance model. Academic programs—classes, courses, exams—may be useful when the main goal is knowledge (intellectual achievement) as an end in itself.

But in the workplace it is performance that matters, and more than ever before performance must be executed in an environment where individuals, teams, and business units must learn, adapt, and excel

in real time in the face of constant change. In the workplace, knowledge is no longer an end in itself; it is a means to an end.

A sustainable learning model in such an environment must acknowledge a new reality: that taken collectively, the time of the learners is more important, more valuable, and less available than the time of the subject-matter expert. Rather than building a structure around the provider, the new paradigm builds a support system around the learner. This requires a system that identifies context through an unchanging taxonomy linked to ever-changing personal profiles and performance objectives.

So here's my candidate for a universal benchmark: the sustainable corporate learning model will be the one that allows organizations to benefit most from the unique blend of knowledge and creative intelligence that each knowledge worker brings to the enterprise.

The learning resources are dynamically assembled by each knowledge worker in the context of what they know and the work they are performing. Instead of assembling disparate learners in the same room, virtual or otherwise, at a common time and force-feeding information as though each has identical prior knowledge, learning styles, and knowledge needs, this new system of learning starts with the premise that everyone has different prior knowledge and different needs and therefore optimal learning—high-performance learning—requires a much more personalized and productive solution.

Here the old rules change. Context trumps content, and less is more. Tiny bits or granules are assembled automatically around each learner as required by the context of the moment, blending outside sources, inside information, digital content, and human mentoring and assistance, all through a core taxonomy.

The corporate university is, in many ways, taking over some of the functions previously held by publishers, controlling how content is packaged and described and how it is aligned with their performance and competency models. As the pendulum swings from the historic model of universities and publishers as sole packagers of knowledge, to the corporation now acting as a publisher, the sustainable solution begins to come into focus. The swing of the pendulum, set in motion by the advent of new technologies, continues its arc past the enterprise and finally comes to rest pointing to the individual knowledge worker as assembler and publisher of personalized disposable content for an audience of one. The sustainable solution has arrived and as it does the answers begin to fall into place.

Technology in learning is in a stage of evolution that physics calls a "phase transition." For example, water in a glass is in a steady state, and so is water in a cloud. But when you want to move the water from one steady state (liquid) to another (vapor) there is boiling, chaos, turmoil. This is "phase transition," and this is where we are now in eLearning. We are moving from the academic model steady state, where learning is poured into containers that can be moved around, to a performance support vapor state, where learning is mixed with the air we breathe. During the phase transition there can be a lot of confusion, but once the new phase is established, things become more predictable.

When the learning system revolves around the knowledge worker, when it actually uses the knowledge that the knowledge worker brings to the moment as an important part of the solution, when it decreases time to performance and increases productivity, then sustainability is within reach.

Those who wish to play in this market need to understand this new business model, one that provides content and infrastructure for real-time change management. The organization's vision and strategy will be embedded in its learning and knowledge infrastructure to be metabolized by knowledge workers in the same way that our kids metabolize the vitamins that are embedded in their breakfast cereal.

Further down the road, there will be a gradual adoption of national standards and competency taxonomies that will enable transferable personalized knowledge maps between companies. Inside and outside content will be seamlessly blended with human and digital solutions on demand. As this happens, we will get our first glimpse of the mature state of this field, revealing real competitive value as inherent knowledge, information, granules of outside content, and resource people are assembled in various combinations on demand by knowledge workers.

Only then will we actually put knowledge workers' knowledge to work, leveraging, for the first time, the knowledge, creativity, and wisdom that we hired them for in the first place.