UNLOCKING POTENTIAL IN AUSTRALASIA

BY LAURA OVERTON AND NAOMI DINNEN

In January Laura Overton from Towards Maturity chatted with AITD CEO Naomi Dinnen *about Unlocking potential in Australasia* a new benchmarking survey that had just been released.

Tell us how you came to be doing this incredible work researching the potential of learning and development in Australia?

Well the passion that we got for learning and innovation and business impact has been driving the work we've been doing for a several years. We started our research in 2003, exploring why some people are more successful with technology rather than with getting things right with their technology. We had 6500 learning and development leaders around the globe take part in our research programs about their strategies, considering what they are doing, how they are doing it. It has just gone beyond technology now looking at learning innovation and the business impact of learning innovation. Over the last years, it has increased from this area from people who have participating online and so we have data to allow us to see what is happening in the region rather than the rest of the globe.

What is your background in learning and development and how did you decide to pursue this sort of reporting and this area of work?

I've been working in this field for the last 30 years. I started in the learning and development department, but I got hooked on technology. I helped organisations implement the latest ways of doing learning for my first half of my career. In 2002 when the dotcom bubble burst, a lot of people were saying that the technology enabled learning wasn't working. Yet I saw that it was working sometimes but not others. That's how our data programs started - was with a burning question of why some people more successful than others. And from that question, we started the research

programs. Working with learning and development professionals working with their learners, which was a first in the industry at the time that we could get data from and in-house staff like to learn. It was interesting way of looking at the whole environment. And the passion for understanding more about what the evidence says rather then what opinion say became very important for us. We have been looking at that evidence based decision making since then.

What are the main things that you have found about that gap between successful eLearning and face to face training?

Early in the program, in 2008, when we released a report called *Towards Maturity.* We found that it wasn't tools and technology that was linking back to success but rather the mature thinking and mature organisations of those that were looking at the business environment and learner context with new and fresh eyes. It became much less about if this is face-to-face or is technology enabled and more about what is important to the business and what's important to the individuals in a rapidly changing business. In one of our first reports the first line read "Business is changing. Customer expectations are changing, we need to be thinking about how we do learning in a very fresh and unique way." Over the years, that starting line has remained the same expect the changes have accelerated. It is less about eLearning or is it face-to-face but about exploring how to be a learning and development department today equips organisations for their future of work. Equip individuals for the future of work and the way we do things, and who we connect with, and how we connect is changing. We need to have convincing evidence to help us make strong decision to within the organisations.

Can you typify the organisations that are ahead of the game by industry or is there a benchmark? What are the things

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you found that make some organisation leaders in this space?

We started asking what does success look like? What does business impact look like? Then we worked backwards in our research from those improving customer satisfaction, productivity, revenues, sustainability for public sector and charity organisations. But we found that it is their practises that set them apart rather than industry.

Over the years we have developed a framework of effective practises, that people are benchmarking against. When you take part in a benchmark review, you are looking at your strategies, reviewing your goals, your objectives, your risks and then your tactics. What we found in the Towards Maturity framework, that those at the top end of the index, are those delivering against those objectives. The organisations themselves are completely spread across sectors.

It's great to see this report has surfaced some top performing organisations globally in Australia, who are really setting the game. They are not organisations that have got the biggest budget or the biggest teams, or the multi-national organisations that are across sector and across country, across size, but what they got in common, is a set of practises, that consistently relate back to business impact.

What are your favourite pieces of data you encountered whilst compiling this report?

One of the things we have been looking at consistently is the statistical relationship between what we do and the business outputs that are so critical for organisations success. For us seeing those correlations is very exciting. It has shown that the technology we use do

not influence the business results. There is no statistical relationship between whether I would use a piece of micro-learning or a learning management system or whether I use an enterprises experience system. It's not these tools delivering the impact.

It was fantastic to explore and be able to see that. But using the tools and experimenting with the tools is not giving us a link back to the business results. For example, you are using a lot of the social tools like Yammer and social media, yet the tactics being employed mean that in Australia you're less likely to find people who are experts within the organisation. So we are playing with the tools but we are not "using" the tools.

What are your thoughts on the curation versus the creation debate?

Well curation, user generated content, these are all aspects with correlation back to changing culture. The more we expect of each other, the more likely we are to see that self-directed learning is the norm. By self-directed learning I don't mean that somebody automatically goes to the learning management system and finds the course, it's the way that people are connecting. The way that people are connecting with each other sharing and engaging with each other and how learning and development people are making it easier to do that. That's the secret of success of high performing teams, is that it makes learning frictionless within our organisations.

It is not whether you become a curator or creator but it's how to facilitate the smooth exchange of knowledge and information. How do we provide permission to do that? That its ok to share your ideas. It is ok, it's in a safe

environment it's trusted. These are some of the principles that we need to be looking at as learning professionals rather they get caught up and ask if they are a curator or a creator. But what's the right thing and the right time that a business needs, and we are certainly see that surfacing through here in the report.

One of the challenges these days is that there is so much information available sometimes you feel as if creating your own content is a bit futile, everything is already being done. How do you stay ahead of the pack but without putting yourself on the line? Have you had any thoughts on that sort of issue?

As a learning professional, we can stay ahead of the pack by becoming leaders ourselves. What is very clear is that high performing learning teams are led predominantly not by business people those who have a history in learning and development but what sets them apart is they are leaders that learn. They are learning leaders who put themselves on secondment into the business. They are learning leaders who are curating their own contents and constantly looking for ideas. They are learning leaders who are reaching out to the wider communities to bring in the skills that they don't necessary have. They are aware that there is a lot of change that's going on but they want to be a part of that change. They are curious. They are just experimenting for themselves.

In terms of data trends. Comparing Australasia to the rest of the world, where do we need to catch up?

There a couple of areas that possibly we need to catch up on talking at a

lot of effective practises. One of them is around understanding our learners. Balancing the need of business and the need of individuals. Strategically alignment it is slightly stronger then that rest of the globe. Looking how we balance, the individuals experience, the way we think about the sense of the persons career in the organisation rather than just their course they're going on. That is one of the areas where others are perhaps a little bit stronger than others.

We have already talked about application of social principles and learners. Great on the tools and techniques but perhaps what we can learn from the rest of the globe is about how do people connect. How do they engage and what's their role in that? But the other key area where we can learn from our peers outside if the region and what is the whole are of understanding and demonstrating and articulating value. I'm not taking about measuring internal investment, but the way we capture stories of success, the way we share stories of success and the direct relationship with culture. It is one of all the things the region isn't quite as strong as the way we articulate and communicate success back to line managers and back to individuals. We're not as strong here. The way we use data and the way we make decisions here is not quite as strong as elsewhere, with that said, we are not quite good at it anywhere. Now, the high performing teams are but compared on average, that is one the areas we can learn from elsewhere.

Interesting, that's a good case for learning and development professionals. These are the sorts of skills that we should be trying to improve in our own practise and add to our own list of skills.
Well the fact that the data says that it recognises that learning leaders here recognise that these are some of the gaps that we have. There is a passion of learning in the learning community in the region. It's a hunger for change and hopefully it gives people an opportunity to have some evidence and open new conversations. We are strong believers are in the role of data particularly a time of constant change and their opinions flying elsewhere. There are new tools and new techniques that are completely changing the way we think about things. But we need to have the confidence and courage to go out and try something different. The data is really helping us to see, what can we do. Let's step out in confidence and let's open a new conversation around some evidence rather than an opinion.

Laura Overton is Founder and CEO of Towards Maturity – an independent, not for profit organisation that helps people professionals deliver improved performance through learning innovation. Since 2003, 5,600 + people professionals have used the Towards Maturity Benchmark to help them establish an effective technology-enabled learning culture.

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