

# THE CHANGING SKILL SET OF THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

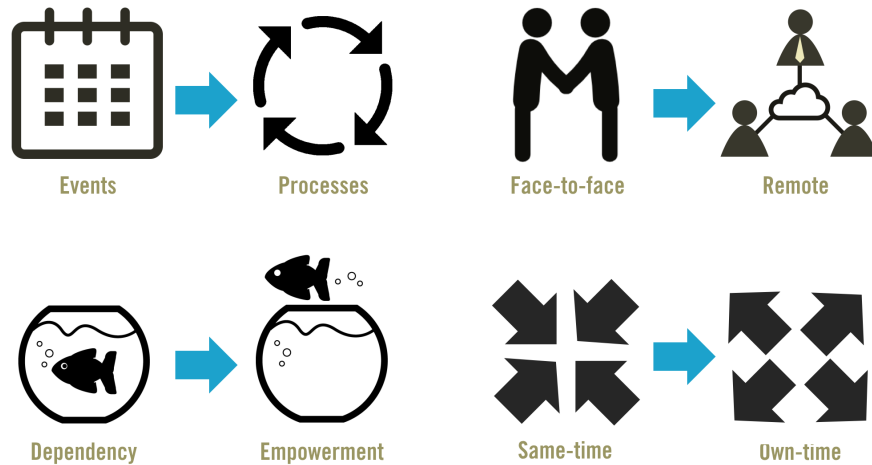


Skills define us. They are what make us useful and productive. They are the foundation of our achievements. On our death bed, it is our skills that we will reflect on with pride.

These could be physical skills – our ability to knit jumpers, drive vehicles, perform gymnastics, play the violin, cook tasty food, swim or make beautiful furniture. They could be social – our ability to make good conversation, present to an audience, flirt with the opposite sex, negotiate deals or handle customer complaints. Or they could be cognitive – our ability to write poetry, perform mental arithmetic, fix faulty equipment, solve crossword puzzles or program computers. Yes, skills are what make us what we are.

'What we are' is constantly changing as we continue to develop our existing skills and take on new challenges to respond to a changing world around us. Learning professionals are no different. Perhaps more than ever before, we need new skills to respond to the developing expectations of both employees and our key stakeholders, and to take advantage of the fantastic opportunities afforded by technology.

## What's changing?



It comes as a surprise to no-one that learning professionals are operating in a very different world to those of a generation ago. We'd like to highlight four changes in particular that impact heavily on the skill set of the learning professional.

### Change 1: From events to processes

It is, of course, still commonplace for learning solutions to be delivered in a single hit, whether in the classroom or as a piece of interactive content. However, there is a much greater realisation of the inadequacies of this approach, as new learning achieved in this form is rarely properly consolidated and is liable to rapid decline.

Blended solutions, with ingredients that are distributed over time and properly embedded in work performance, are much more likely to achieve success. Rather than delivering events, learning professionals will increasingly be establishing processes that blur the distinction between formal and informal learning.

### Change 2: From face-to-face to remote

There is no doubt that a face-to-face learning experience has the potential to be more engaging and more memorable than something similar experienced online. Not convinced? Just think back to those big sporting, musical or theatrical events when you were they on the day - we bet they stick in the memory.

But on a day-to-day basis we don't always have the luxury of being there in the flesh. Learning is an everyday experience that we can routinely participate in remotely, typically online and, more often than not, through mobile devices.

Digital learning, in all its forms, requires new skills of the learning professional. And let's remember there can be no such thing as a technophobic professional, in any field you can imagine.

### **Change 3: From dependency to empowerment**

Historically, learning professionals everywhere have wished for a time when learners could take a greater responsibility for their own development. Over the last few years, as people almost everywhere have gained near-instant, every day, any place access to mountains of information, they have got used to the idea that learning is something you just do as it pleases you, without reference to their employers or to 'teachers'.

This is what we always wanted. Now it has happened we're maybe not so sure how to cope with the change. Empowered learners enjoy being in control; they expect quick solutions to their problems; they don't take any one person's opinion as gospel; and they realise that everyone, including them, is now a teacher as well as a learner. The days of the 'sage on the stage' seem numbered.

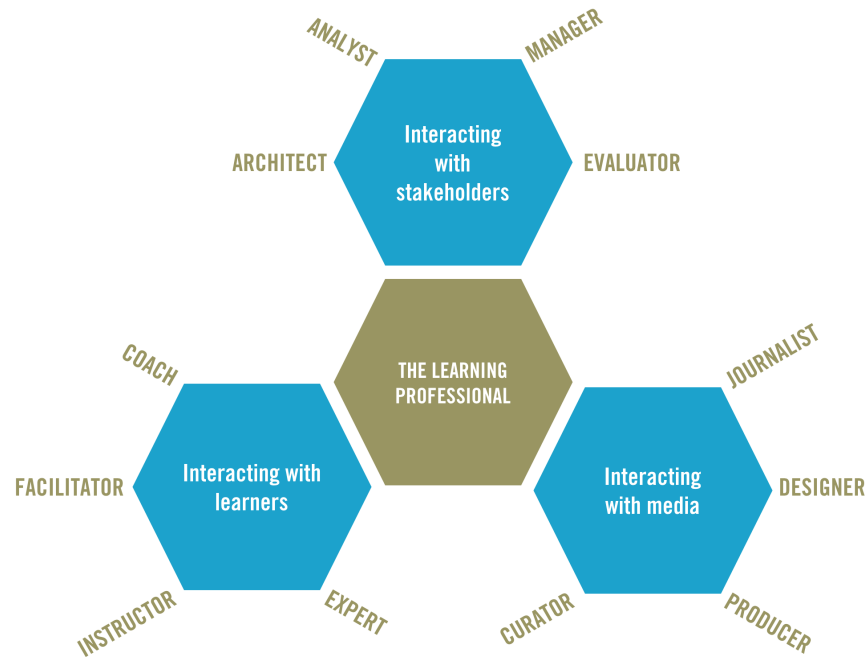
### **Change 4: From same time to own time**

All through history, humans have been busily devising ever more ingenious ways to communicate both at the same time (face-to-face, on the telephone, through TV and radio, using Skype, web conferencing and so on) and in their own time (through drawings, signs, mail, print, tapes, discs, downloads, streaming, web sites and much more). Although education and training has employed both

options, the overwhelming majority of learning experiences has been live, whether on the job or in a classroom.

Learning in real time has advantages: it is energising, immediate and social. It is also difficult to organise, inflexible and hard to scale. We have so many tools now to support learning in your own time, as and when it suits learners, that the balance has started to shift. The best blends will still include live experiences, face-to-face or online, but most of the time learners will be firmly in control of their schedule. And that changes things for us, as learning professionals, as much as it benefits learners.

## Three essential skill areas



The changes we have described above influence the skill set of learning professionals in interesting ways. Some skills have and always will be important, some remain but are de-emphasised to some degree, others are very new.

The analysis that follows defines three skill areas, each encompassing four roles. This method of categorisation is not so important. What matters is the new picture it paints of the world of

the learning professional. Note that we are not suggesting that everyone working in the profession needs all these skills – some will generalise while others specialise.

### Interacting with stakeholders

This area of skills is perhaps the most important because deficiencies here make it much more difficult in the areas that follow. We are looking at the learning professional as a trusted consultant, interacting confidently with clients, sponsors, specialists and project teams.

**Architect:** The learning architect looks at the big picture, fashioning an environment for a given population in which learning can prosper in all its contexts – formal, non-formal, on-demand or experiential. The learning architect puts in place the policies, budgets, tools and technologies that enable learning from the top down and the bottom up.

**Analyst:** When the client calls asking for help, you might go into sales mode and sharpen your order-taking pencil, but sales is not your profession, remember? As a trusted consultant, you analyse the cause of any performance problems and come up with the

solution that meets the client's needs. Often that solution will not be the one the client had in mind when they put in the call.

**Manager:** Getting a solution to market requires a great deal of care and attention. The learning professional will frequently find themselves in the role of project manager, bringing together a wide range of specialists to design, develop and deliver a solution. And all too frequently they must function as change manager, dealing with concerns that stakeholders will inevitably have when your solutions look increasingly different from those you suggested in the past.

**Evaluator:** The consultant cannot hope to obtain long-term credibility if the only way they can validate their work is in terms of happy learners. We know we must do better at evaluation. If things are going to change, we have no choice but to develop our business skills.

## Interacting with learners

Traditionally, this is an area of strength for the learning professional. But while our legacy skills remain important, there's a definite shift from trainer-centred techniques to those that put the learner at the centre.

**Expert:** The idea of experts presenting what they know to novices still has a place but expect this process to be packaged up on videos and other media. Yes, you'll be a great help in answering technical questions but don't plan your career on the basis that you'll be needed primarily as a lecturer.

**Instructor:** Instruction is definitely not going away, whether the goal is to impart essential knowledge or to help novices acquire critical skills. But much of this work will be taken over by interactive software, particularly as this becomes more intelligent and adaptive.

**Facilitator:** As you move from sage on the stage to guide on the side, your role in workshops and other group learning experiences becomes more facilitative. This role will already be familiar to those delivering soft skills, but for those who are more accustomed to answering questions than asking them this is a big step.

**Coach:** The important role of the coach is already widely recognised. The skills of the coach become even more vital as learners take more control of their destinies and learning journeys become longer and more embedded in the workplace.

## Interacting with media

This is perhaps the area in which most learning professionals are least comfortable. True, some have always been at home developing slides and handouts, but that was before the YouTube era and the ubiquitous role that digital content plays in modern life.

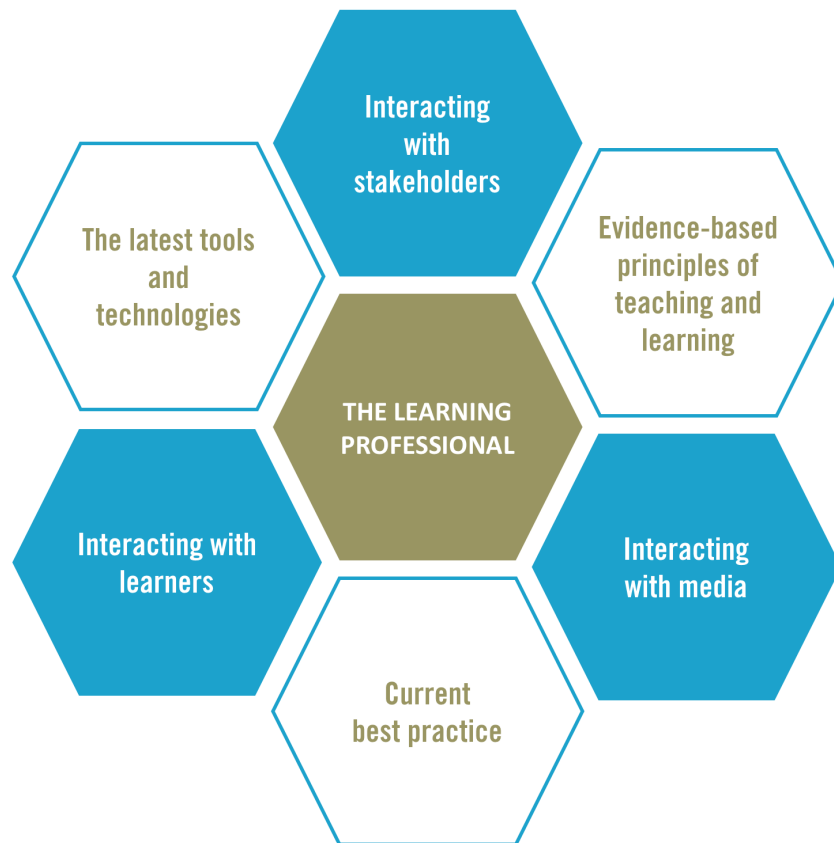
**Journalist:** This one may surprise you and this skill may never become widespread but some learning professionals are thriving by taking on the role of journalists within their specialist fields. Perhaps they maintain a blog, interview experts for podcasts or put out video commentaries on hot topics. Whichever medium they choose, if they can communicate well they have the potential to provide a really valuable service.

**Designer:** Many people are already employed as specialist designers of learning content, whether for e-learning, video, games or a myriad of other media. But we are short of these people and will need many more to meet the demand, not just at the top, 'Hollywood' level, but to design the 'good enough' solutions that meet everyday needs rapidly.

**Producer:** You might think we're entering the realm of the expert here, but not all graphic design, audio and video production, and e-learning development needs to be carried out by full-time specialists. Media production skills have always been useful nice-to-haves but they may just be becoming core competencies.

**Curator:** We end with another curious role for the learning professional. Just like the curator in a museum selects from thousands of artefacts to compose an exhibition designed to meet the needs of a specific audience, the content curator draws upon the wealth of information and people that could be valuable to their learners and suggests where they should start.

## Skills are not everything



Of course, we cannot function to the best of our ability with skills alone. Our actions need to be based on solid research and an awareness of what is happening in the world around us. Yes, knowledge does have its place, at very least the knowledge of where to look or who to ask.

**Evidence-based principles:** We have done a terrible disservice to our teachers and trainers by introducing them to so much pseudoscientific nonsense masquerading as theory. The learning professional can only act skilfully if they are conversant with the hard evidence about teaching and learning.

**The latest tools and technologies:** There can be no such thing as a techno-phobic professional. While we should never be led by tools and technologies, we would be negligent if we were to remain ignorant of what's possible.

**Current best practice:** The work of academics and other researchers can take us a long way, but so can a keen interest in the successes and failures of our fellow professionals. Looking beyond our own organisations to seek out best practice we can considerably shortcut our own journeys.

## It's time to begin your skills journey

Imagine a new development programme designed from the ground up with one aim in mind. To provide you with the skills and the confidence you need to fulfil your potential as a modern learning professional; a programme that focuses entirely on what is relevant and practical but which is founded on the very latest research.

Imagine a programme that gave you the flexibility to learn just what you need, when and where you want. But which provides you with the support you need to take your skills to the next level.

**Skills Journey** is that programme. Designed to support the changing skill set of the learning professional; providing you with the confidence to interact professionally with key stakeholders, learners and new media.

Perhaps it's time to begin *your* skills journey.



<http://skillsjourney.com>