Exploring what skills the best-of-the-best L&D professionals of the future will need to succeed

L&D Master Class:

TRAINING THE TRAINERS OF TOMORROW

BY:

SPONSORED BY:

IN ASSOCIATION WITH:
When it comes to finding a training firm that’s exceptionally committed to your business, there is no shortcut.

Or is there?

ISA is a distinguished group of companies that lead the industry across the learning & development spectrum, all with a common commitment to growing their clients and supporting their business needs. They come together to learn from each other and find out what’s working and what’s not so their clients can reap the benefits. When you work with a company from ISA’s member list, you’re getting a partner with access to an unequaled collection of experience.

There may be no quick and easy way to arrive at the best solution, but you can certainly get a head start.

Choose training providers and consultants who belong to ISA. It’s one shortcut that’s certain to carry you far. For ISA member list go to http://bit.ly/ISA-MbrList0419
Learning and Development (L&D) continues to evolve. Are the traits that make a top L&D professional changing, too? Exploring what skills and competencies the best-of-the-best L&D professionals of the future will need to succeed.

**BY THE TRAINING TOP 10 HALL OF FAME**

Every organization’s most important asset is people. As such, Learning and Development (L&D) professionals play a vital role as they develop and grow people through training and, thus, have an impact on business success. That means it is crucial for L&D professionals to continuously build and enhance their own skills. But what exactly are the needed skills and how are they changing? As a profession, there are few agreed-upon, universal standards outlining exactly what L&D professionals need to know and do to help employees change their behavior and improve their skills. It’s about more than just mastering core competencies. It’s about identifying certain traits that allow L&D professionals to meet today’s needs and move nimbly into the future.

This white paper aims to identify the factors that separate the good from the great by exploring the traits and competencies that characterize the best-of-the-best L&D professionals and what skills will be needed in the future.

The goal is twofold:

1. To identify the traits and competencies of the highest echelon of L&D professionals
2. To lay the groundwork for creating a master class curriculum that can propel L&D professionals from proficiency to mastery of their profession. What form that curriculum may take remains to be determined; this white paper is the first step in the process.

**Overview**

Today, L&D professionals are expected to play multiple roles. The instructor must facilitate…the subject matter expert must instruct…the instructional designer must produce short videos…. The list goes on, and the need for cross-over skills will only increase. But varied skill sets alone won’t propel L&D professionals to the next level.

While familiarity with the emerging technical landscape and business environment is important, deep knowledge (such as how to deploy a blockchain algorithm) typically isn’t required. Instead, it is the uniquely human characteristics
that set the very best apart from the merely good. Those traits include curiosity, divergent thinking, resilience, agility, emotional and social intelligence, and the ability and willingness to collaborate individually and in teams. Tomorrow’s L&D leaders must be creative, innovative, and strategic to become true partners with the business.

Tomorrow’s L&D professionals also must be comfortable with change, because its pace is relentless. Every aspect of business—from the technology and regulations to the scale and scope of an organization’s reach—is being transformed. Savvy L&D leaders must anticipate those changes and prepare their teams to lead in the future, as well as today.

Despite rapid changes in business and technology, L&D leaders’ qualifications haven’t changed substantially in decades. Degree programs specifically for learning and development are scarce (most of the ones out there focus on Organizational Development), and relatively few L&D professionals outside the largest companies have acquired many certifications. Although the Association for Talent Development (ATD) Certification Institute provides many of the foundational courses and certification training, the leaders of the future need to go beyond core skills and they themselves need the opportunity to learn how to lead in today’s continuously changing workplace.

**Reskilling for the Future**

To prepare for what’s coming, the Training Top 10 Hall of Fame (HOF) organizations are beginning to explore the future of work both in general and within their companies. That includes identifying the skills required by their professionals in the future and, based on that, determining the optimal role of L&D within their companies.

Many see the function morphing from a provider of courses to a provider of experiences. As experience architects, L&D must be capable of selecting, defining, developing, and deploying a holistic set of L&D solutions that puts the learner at the heart of the design and development process.

In this new role, L&D goes beyond content development to integrate learning into the work itself, and to help learners expand their networks and strengthen their relationships. This holistic approach incorporates developing virtual instructor-led training, live simulations, experiential programs, on-the-job opportunities and activities, peer learning, mentoring, communities of practice, and curated content, as well as instructor-led training. Although many of these experiences are controlled by the business units, L&D can—and should—work to further those opportunities.

There is broad acknowledgement that the ADDIE model of instructional design (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation) doesn’t work anymore. Instead, the learning system must be

**Walk a Mile in Learners’ Shoes**

Many trainers have no idea what is going on in learners’ lives or what it takes to do their jobs, which means the training they develop might miss the mark. For example, for new salespeople, going on cold calls to generate leads is often stressful. “They’re sweating bullets,” one L&D leader says. Before L&D can help, we need to put ourselves in their places. Imagine having the ability to pay next month’s mortgage or your child’s college tuition riding on your success today. Particularly among new agents, there’s a palpable sense of desperation.

Offering another training class—particularly one that takes time away from sales—may not be the answer. Instead, can you make professional support services easier to consume while they’re on the go? This insight...this empathy...significantly improves the effectiveness and impact of learning and increases buy-in from business stakeholders.

**Changing the nature of learning isn’t a threat to our jobs but is, rather, an opportunity.**
configured in a new, more flexible way. This may mean adding coaching to a program or requiring cohort feedback, for instance. Whatever the details, L&D professionals must be able to create learning solutions rapidly while considering the entire experience, start to finish.

Likewise, some HOF members say they are hiring more L&D specialists than generalists. Instructional design is a case in point. During the last few years, the basic questions such as “Who is your audience, what are you trying to help them do, and can you measure success?” seemed archaic in a digital environment in which training was built using agile, iterative methods and nothing was considered permanent. “The instructional design role got watered down,” notes one HOFer. “We added media, graphics, etc. It became more about how quickly we can implement training programs.” Today, however, instructional design is regaining its mojo as a coveted skill.

L&D leaders understand that even with iterative development, solid instructional design is key to ensuring measurable outcomes. This is especially true given the need to work with subject matter experts, ensure hands-on practice, and document and repackage content for multiple channels and platforms. Applying recent insights into the neurological basis of learning and memory to content design can only enhance such design.

Today, designing a good course with measurable outcomes is the baseline. Those expectations are expanding to including articulating the skills, tasks, and performance of the most effective people throughout the organization, translating them into clear learning objectives, and aligning those objectives with business priorities. This addition benefits the business by making it more effective, and the L&D organization by making it more prescient and, therefore, more effective and valuable.

While L&D professionals are expected to be skilled in multiple disciplines, their competency needn’t always be deep. Outsourcing to access specific expertise is a viable option. What is most important is that L&D professionals understand how the myriad, diverse pieces of learning and development fit together to create a seamless learning experience.

**Top Skills for Tomorrow’s Top Trainers**

**Basic skills only go so far.**

**Top trainers also should be:**

- Curious
- Charismatic
- Credible
- Agile
- Resilient
- Emotionally and Socially Intelligent
- Empathetic
- Proactive
- Observant
- Prescient
- Innovative
- Open to Experimentation
- Strong Communicators
- Persuasive Influencers
- Motivational
- Change Agents
- Divergent Thinkers

**In practice, they:**

- Understand the Culture
- Build Relationships
- Engage in Systems Thinking (at both macro and micro levels)

- Possess Industry/Business Acumen (including knowledge of the business’ services/solutions, industries served, and customers/clients)
- Project an Executive Presence
- Love Learning
- Translate Data to Business Results
- Foster Diversity and Inclusion
- Support Facilitation
- Think Critically
- Work Collaboratively

**They also should understand:**

- Program and Project Management
- Budgeting
- Stakeholder Management
- Leadership Alignment
- Assessment
- Digital Technologies (mastery isn’t required)

**From Instructors to Facilitators**

On the content delivery side, many HOF organizations note it is being transformed from an instruction-based model to a facilitation-based one. Specifically, an instructor’s role is to be the expert who provides data and insights. A facilitator’s role is to guide learners through that
data so they develop their own insights. The skills are different. It’s not an easy transition for instructors, and some never make it.

At least one HOF member pushes that transformation by designing the facilitator guides, scripts, and other learning materials so tightly that facilitators can’t do anything other than facilitate. For example, to encourage the transition, never let facilitators answer a question. Instead, suggest such phrases as, “What were you thinking then?” or “Does anyone else have an answer they’d like to provide?” Then wait. Research by Mary Budd Rowe conducted in the 1980s shows that by waiting three seconds, the quality of responses improves markedly (https://www.scoe.org/blog_files/Budd Rowe.pdf).

At the same time, skilled facilitators must adapt to a virtual world. They need to know how to facilitate a class that may be spread across the world, or a course that may be online and accessed on the learner’s schedule, or adapt material designed for face-to-face encounters that may not translate well to virtual settings. Therefore, design, development, and delivery must be linked for best results.

There’s also a push for facilitators to not only manage events but also offer “office hours”—either in person or online—to support continuous learning after a course has ended. Their role remains the same: to coach people and help them build connections in a continuous learning environment using any methods available.

Rather than “one-and-done” events, L&D leaders are suggesting a series of perhaps weekly gatherings on a topic, rather like a college class. This allows time for learners to reflect on the information, apply it in their jobs, and meet the facilitator during office hours to discuss the learnings.

Embrace Informal Learning, Too

There is a sharp difference in how people learn in their personal lives and how they learn professionally. Unless L&D can better mimic commercial options, it will fail, one HOF member believes. Therefore, L&D professionals should investigate how employees consume commercial learning and be able to incorporate that into their own offerings.

Employees as a whole want to learn from their managers. Recognizing this, some of the HOF members actively minimize L&D’s role as deliverers or facilitators of training. Instead, the vast majority of some members’ formal learning is delivered/facilitated by business leaders. These leaders are content experts, and are responsible for developing their people. Their active participation improves alignment between L&D and the business, and also builds a pipeline of strong L&D candidates.

Millennials, conversely, tend to prefer to be given a task and determine how to deliver on that task themselves. General wisdom says this generation is technologically savvy. The reality is that they’re often digitally naive. They understand how to use technology in their personal lives, but not necessarily in their professional lives. Consequently, they can find the data they need, but not the information to do their jobs optimally.

Although people are learning on the job, they want help in figuring it out. L&D has an opportunity, therefore, to teach people how to learn in today’s complex, content-saturated environment. But, as one HOF L&D leader admits, “we’re not yet designing in a way that prompts ‘figuring it out.’”

L&D Must Evolve

To continue to add value to their organizations, L&D professionals are recasting themselves as learning consultants offering a wide range of solutions. In this role, the ability to think critically and strategically is vital. These learning consultants first help managers define the problem, determine whether learning can solve it, and, if so, design solutions that integrate a range of formal and informal learning opportunities.

To provide the right level of guidance, L&D professionals must recognize and include learning opportunities that exist outside their standard courseware solutions. Increasingly, addressing a specific learning need may
involve blending a variety of opportunities such as job assignments and projects, mentors and coaches, internal courses, and external resources.

Before that becomes possible, L&D must know what is available. Someone must curate opportunities and create structure. Many L&D professionals, with a bit of training, can thrive as curators. Their challenge is to catalog not only internal learning options, but to also include learning options from large learning platforms such as Coursera and TED Talks, as well as from lesser-known niche platforms that address specific skills (such as how to run a drill press).

Digital Can’t Replace Human Guidance

Although companies are pushing for digital learning options, there’s a growing recognition among L&D professionals that those options are no replacement for people. Working directly with people provides a level of insight (particularly in terms of institutional knowledge, networking, and innovation) that technology can’t easily replicate. That realization was a driving rationale behind the large brick-and-mortar training center HOFer KPMG is building in Orlando, FL. The relationships learners form with peers,

**CASE STUDY: How One HOFer Develops L&D Professionals**

We hire L&D professionals from the business. With 10 to 20 years’ experience and advanced degrees in engineering, these professionals have led large projects. They typically have demonstrated capabilities in terms of business and industry acumen, teaching and presentation, and L&D operations management. For development, they are divided into three tiers.

**Tier I: Years 1-2**

New L&D professionals focus on:

- **Business/Industry Acumen** (demonstrating keen understanding of our industry, customers, culture, processes, and strategies)
- **Teaching/Presentation** (demonstrating platform skills, audience management, Q&A, time management, etc., to deliver packaged content)
- **Operations Management** (managing the finances, resources, classrooms, learning management system, vendors, supplies, program management, etc., that keep L&D running)

**Tier II: Years 2-4**

We enhance professionals’ strengths in:

- **Coaching** (learning to conduct single and successive one-on-one coaching sessions to help clients move toward their personal goals)
- **Change Management** (designing and executing the change management portion of business initiatives)

**Tier III: Year 4 Onward**

We develop professionals’ natural affinities in:

- **Facilitation** (designing and executing a workshop to help a team achieve its goal, typically in such areas as brainstorming, teambuilding, planning, organizational development, decision-making, etc.)
- **Media Creation** (graphic design, script writing, e-mail writing, editing, video production, etc.)
- **Instructional Design** (designing a learning event that takes an attendee from unskilled to skilled and applying measurable outcomes)

Each member of the L&D organization must have at least remedial knowledge of each of these nine skills. We view this as the top bar of a “T.” The L&D team also needs one or two people with deep knowledge in each of those competencies. We view this as the vertical portion of the “T.” As leader, my job is to ensure that while everyone has a different “T,” the L&D team covers the complete spectrum of skills.

In 12 years with this group, we haven’t hired anyone who didn’t become successful through the use of this model.
facilitators, and instructors provide a network they can turn to when they get stuck on something or need to kick around an idea. So L&D professionals need to focus not only on honing their content-developing skills but also their ability to foster more human connections among learners.

One of the most needed traits for L&D professionals is curiosity, Hall of Fame members believe. L&D professionals need to be philomaths—lovers of learning. A passion for learning why things are a certain way and how they can be improved sets stellar L&D leaders apart from the rest. Even at the most junior levels, the best performers are curious. They ask probing questions aimed at connecting the dots within the function, the business, and the industry. Curious people put themselves in the position of learners, asking the questions that may not occur during a class.

Curiosity is hard to measure, but one surrogate marker may be the breadth and depth of the networks people build within the organization. With large networks, curious people invariably know who to ask when they need help. And, importantly, they’re willing to ask for that help. They realize we each have specialties and niche knowledge, so asking for help—whether they call it background information, advice, insight, or something else—is a strength rather than a weakness.

A willingness to ask for help and traits such as curiosity or empathy may not be taught, but tactics to enhance existing levels of those traits can be learned. Sometimes it’s just a matter of remembering to ask, “Why?” or taking a moment to imagine themselves in another’s position. Sometimes it’s a matter of learning the skill well enough to teach it. One HoF organization goes so far as to design certain tasks specifically so people will fail unless they ask for help. As soon as they ask for help, they’re in the learning mindset.

Innovation Can be Learned

The ability to innovate is another crucial trait. Innovation is both a mindset and a process. Sometimes there are “eureka!” moments, but most often innovation occurs because people set themselves up to succeed. Innovators don’t allow themselves to get stuck in the weeds, performing constant maintenance. Instead, they see their world as a beta version, just one iteration away from, if not perfection, then something better than what exists now. They are willing to experiment.

Diversity is an important contributor to innovation. While race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation are top of mind when it comes to diversity, the concept also means including people with divergent perspectives, backgrounds, experiences, and ages, and those from different parts of the organization and geographic locations. The person from the tax division may have a great idea that applies to the advisory part of the organization, for example. Networking with a broad mix of people stimulates insights that catalyze innovative ideas and approaches.

The best L&D professionals also challenge their own assumptions of how things work. A boots-on-the-ground perspective (which isn’t always that of the subject matter expert) lends credibility and often provides fresh insights on how a process or procedure, or even equipment, actually works.

See “Top Skills for Tomorrow’s Top Trainers” box on p. 6 for additional skills L&D professionals will need to succeed.

What Does Proficient Look Like?

If “good” is assumed, then “proficient” is the next step, and “mastery” is the ultimate goal for L&D professionals. But what separates the three? Answering that is challenging, even for Top 10 Hall of Fame organizations, but current thinking suggests it has less to do with specific skills and more to do with building overall capability.
As L&D leaders struggle with that, they are trying to build experiences that enhance proficiency at all levels within the organization. For example, one HOF company incorporates a project manager readiness program into its risk management program to ensure project managers are proficient in the necessary skills before they are placed on the job. Proficiency is assured by testing for relevant

Emerging Training Leaders’ Perspectives

During the Training Top 10 Hall of Fame meeting to discuss this white paper, members indicated they wanted to tap Training magazine’s 2018 Emerging Training Leader winners for their perspective and input on the topic. Here are their insights:

1. What advanced competencies/skills do you think effective L&D professionals will need to have in the next 5 to 10 years?

   Learning and Development professionals will need digital enablement skills (digital savvy, systems thinking, design thinking, etc.), along with more human-centered skills (enabling teams, client/employee-centricity, emotional intelligence, navigating ambiguity).

   In addition, L&D professionals will need to be skilled in developing advanced memory retention techniques. Training will need to adapt to continuously keep up with advancements in technology that will add levels of complication to the majority of jobs around the world. Simple tasks have been eliminated through technology and automation, but the need for higher-performing employees is increasing to fill the gaps technology has yet to cover. Since there is a larger level of knowledge required for these higher-skilled positions, training will need to be more effective and have longer staying power in the learner’s memory to avoid having to retrain on material that hasn’t changed within an organization.

   L&D professionals will need to consider how to create short-term memories through the use of more classroom activities but also have a structured plan to move that knowledge into the learner’s long-term memory. A simple post-training evaluation no longer will be the norm but rather the initial step to long-term memory retention, followed by constant touchpoints to solidify the ideas the learner was taught.

   An effective L&D professional should be able to train a group of learners one time on heavy material and then boost that knowledge throughout their career in small doses without having to repeat the original in-depth training. If this is implemented correctly, organizations will be able to spend less time retraining and more time utilizing their L&D resources to tackle new learning opportunities within the organization.

2. How can L&D professionals’ proficiency in these competencies or skills be measured/assessed?

   L&D professionals will need to focus on the business-level results of the training defined in the needs analysis done before a course is designed. Understanding the goal of the training from the business perspective will allow L&D professionals to look at whether their training was effective for a short period of time, or if it helped the business maintain the results indefinitely. A training would be considered successful if the employees who received the training consistently met expectations without having to attend the training a second time. If there is a need to retrain a group of employees, L&D professionals should revisit how they are creating long-term memory for learners and make adjustments until results are maintained. Clearly defined metrics about business-level results should be tied to every training to measure effectiveness.

3. What types of content would be relevant to a curriculum to train future L&D professionals?

   Content aimed at teaching L&D professionals how to align the employee and customer experience, create scalable learning cultures, and enable teams would be key.

   In addition, L&D professionals need to be proficient in the basics of a learning management system and content development software. L&D professionals need to learn how to create content that complements the way the brain works to avoid having to consistently retrain the same employees. And they need to understand how to identify metrics for business-level results so they can measure their impact on the business.
knowledge—not arcane facts—and observing performance. It is determined by the ability to do the job well. Depending on the subject, some HOF companies let learners test out of training classes if they demonstrate certain levels of proficiency.

To enhance proficiency within L&D, one HOF member adapted Pixar’s Collective Hub concept, in which colleagues critique iterations of each other’s work. Within L&D, for example, a designer may bring a course or course outline to the creative collective and ask for suggestions for relevant, entertaining activities to add to the course. Some of the collective’s ideas may be incorporated and then the course is critiqued again.

Next the course is presented to beta testers. This segment of the intended audience experiences the course and gives feedback regarding course length, instructors, delivery methods, locations, and even the time of day when the course was taken. Often, L&D varies the details to allow A/B testing. Nothing is ever final. It always must be refined.

**For the Future, Curiosity and Adaptability Reign**

For the L&D leader of the future, being “good” isn’t good enough. Those who aspire to rise to the top of the profession must take their skills to the next level. They must think, up front, about the outcomes they want to achieve in L&D solutions and use that to shape the entire L&D program lifecycle. They must determine the business priority L&D is being asked to address, the capabilities that must be built among learners, and whether, in fact, an L&D response is the best course of action. They must determine, early on, what success looks like and design reliable measurements. They must recognize that accountability ends not when a program is deployed, but when the defined outcomes are achieved. That leads to a culture of continuous learning.

Leaders who become the best of the best need a mix of business, people, and technical skills that will set them apart and help them to thrive in a rapidly changing environment. The core skills, like those taught by ATD, are invaluable, but they provide merely a baseline from which L&D professionals must continuously grow if they are to become learning experts. Technical platforms will change and business expectations will evolve, but leaders who also possess curiosity, empathy, flexibility, resilience, and the other key traits discussed in this white paper will adapt and grow.

Few leaders, if any, possess all the traits outlined in this white paper. But, as L&D professionals develop these characteristics, L&D’s perceived value in the organization inevitably will grow, and a culture of learning will thrive. The qualities discussed here are those that we, *Training* magazine’s Top 10 Hall of Fame members, believe will be needed in the coming years. These traits will define the best of the best and will be embodied by the consummate L&D professionals of the future.
If planning an extraordinary training is an art, consider us your canvas.

Whether your training plans include state-of-the-art technology and an audience of 1,800 people or pens and paper in an intimate classroom setting, we have everything you need to bring your vision to life at The National Conference Center. With 265,000 square feet of versatile space at our fingertips, there's nothing we can't do.

Schedule a site visit and we'll show you how we can turn your next training into a masterpiece.