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Centralising Learning and Development within the UK Office for National Statistics – a case study on the challenges faced

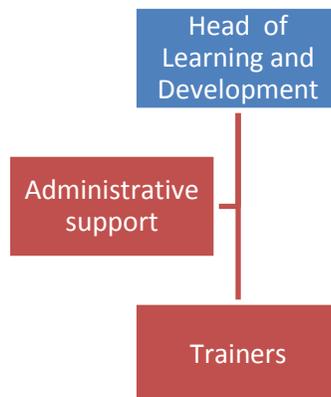
Section One

History

In 2011 the UK government founded Civil Service Learning (www.gov.uk/government/news; 2012) as a mechanism to save money on traditional training methods undertaken within many UK government departments. Minister for Cabinet Office in the UK coalition government in 2010, Frances Maude MP stated “For too long we have relied on expensive residential and classroom based training, duplicating effort across departments,” and as such many staff employed as ‘trainers’ within government departments no longer had roles and were absorbed into other functions.

The creation of Civil Service Learning (CSL) reflected a growing trend towards centralising learning and development functions across the UK Government civil service departments. Many government offices with learning and development functions had ceased to operate centrally controlled learning units in the 2000s. The Office for National Statistics operated a central Learning and Development function until the early 2000s, led by a strategic Learning and Development Manager with the responsibility for the delivery of learning for the entire workforce. This could be described as a ‘traditional’ structure made up of the following:

Figure 1



The purpose of ‘trainers’ was to deliver a centralised agenda of learning and development that included team diagnostics, leadership development (that was exported to partner statistical organisations in Europe) and soft skill sessions such as time management, presentation skills etc. It was a model adopted across multiple government and public bodies across the UK. But change was coming. Prior to the introduction of CSL in 2011, the thinking behind a centralised department ‘owning’ the learning that the business needed was being challenged by senior leadership. Pressure was mounting within

departments for greater ownership and accountability on a local level for their development. This was a reflection of successive UK government policies devolving decision making such as housing, planning and public health to communities, and in large scale instances establishing quasi-parliamentary structures in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales with variable taxation and legal freedoms for what could be termed 'self rule'. The result for ONS was the dismantling of its centralised Learning and Development functions with directorates now responsible for managing their own developmental activity.

By the time of the establishment of CSL by the UK Cabinet Office in 2011 ONS had already dismantled centralised learning structures and so CSL became the place to go for your 'traditional' learning offer and divisions were seeking what professional skill development they needed from either across the business or from external suppliers.

Section two

Optimising Organisational Structures

In 2011 the CIPD Learning and Development Annual Survey Report highlighted a trend across international businesses. Following the economic downturn of 2008/2009 and subsequent cost saving measures, senior leaders were recognising the need to reinvest in skill attraction and development following a fallow period of retrenchment. The report highlighted an increasing number of organisations recentralising their learning and development functions to tackle what was felt to be a more strategic attempt to rebuild skills and capability for the future, recognising that the economic upturn, no matter how fragile, would require reskilling of existing workers, retention strategies including development and career progression and reaching out to the emerging graduate markets where development was a higher motivator and attractor to business than pure remuneration packages.

The challenge facing business at this point, and UK government departments equally, was optimizing organisational structures. John Bersin is a leading author on Learning and Development's alignment with business strategy. In 2011 Deloitte published Bersin's four components of how to optimise organisational structures comprising the four themes:

Figure 2



Bersin argues that the alignment on the four key tenets of these elements of organisational structure will ensure that learning and development processes properly align with strategy and outcomes. So, if the Organisational Strategy contains the following elements:

- A vision
- A purpose
- A value proposition
- Clear priorities
- Dedicated financial resources

Plus the right organisational capability containing:

- Alignment with the business
- The right structures
- Excellent processes
- The right technology
- Quality monitoring
- Financial planning and demand management

With the right people competencies:

- Business acumen
- Performance improvement
- Management projects
- Enabling change
- Learning methods and design

And finally the methods to execute impactful learning:

- Quality assurance
- Social and informal learning
- Design
- Programming and prioritisation
- Technical developments
- Facilitation and delivery

Will lead to optimal performance and successfully deliver the strategic outcomes.

Only about 10 to 15% of companies internationally possess well developed learning and development programmes properly aligned with strategy and outcomes (Bersin, J, 2016). With this in mind it is understandable why organisations are looking at capability and structures of their learning and development functions given their role in delivering the organisational strategy.

Section three

Why is decentralised learning and development so attractive?

It is understandable why decentralised learning and development is popular within large organisations. What would a good internal learning and development team contain? It's probably going to include subject matter experts with insiders rather than outsiders ensuring that knowledge is rooted in their business areas. Teams have control and can see results (hopefully). Putting your resources in teams means that learning can react quickly and flexibly to service needs. Specialisms develop (ONS created a discrete statistical training team based within its Methodology unit) which provide a variety of delivery products which, if people talk to each other, can be shared across the business. It's also good to be close to your target audience – feedback is immediate helping to evaluate the effectiveness of any learning. Learning is bespoke so teams feel well supported by learning and development and this leads to good and ultimately trusting working relationships.

Looking at Bersin's model of an optimized organisational structure it is clear that aspects of decentralised learning and development falls short of an ideal model to drive the workforce requirements for an organisational wide strategy with measurable outcomes. A study by Hind and Sparrow (University of Leicester, 2012) set out the deficiencies in a decentralised model as follows;

- Non-standard methods may lead to inconsistent quality of learning content and delivery

- Collaboration is difficult because of silo working
- Learning becomes parochial – in other words it is relevant only to the team and not the organisation
- For trainers in teams, skill sharing and professional progression is restricted due to the closed nature of learning structures
- L&D Budgets may not be ring fenced and therefore either cut for savings or diverted for other projects
- Across the business duplication of learning is highly likely due to the lack of visibility of what's happening in each team
- Learners are not exposed to the 'big picture' of the organisations' strategic direction
- Local trainers go native and resist wider strategic initiatives in favour of only supporting local issues

Section four

Is centralising the right way to go?

As the driver for organisational performance tends to come from a single strategic approach it's easy to see from the previous discussion that decentralised learning and development may fail to support the 'big picture' approach to development.

In the case of ONS a new strategic direction "Better Statistics, Better Decisions" (ONS, 2015) was founded in order to modernise the United Kingdom Statistics Authority (incorporating ONS) as defined by the mission statement of a system that delivers "high quality statistics, analysis and advice to make Britain make better decisions" (BSBD, p4, 2015). The strategic leadership team recognised that this would require a transformational change in building capability and as such the current devolved model of learning wouldn't help to deliver this.

The response was, in 2016, to form a newly centralised learning and development function. To again refer to the case studies undertaken by Hind and Sparrow in 2012 this was to meet a number of objectives:

- To understand and organise common skill requirements so that there was an overview of the whole strategic demand
 - Physically drawing teams together facilitates a single approach to professional competence
 - It's easier to share resources and prioritise
 - L&D staff are easier to cross train
 - Centralised L&D career pathways and professional progression
 - Consistency in delivery approach
 - Encourages specialisms within the team for design and commissioning v design and delivery
 - Professionalises the function

- To control learning and development costs for the benefit of the whole organisation
 - Controllable budgets for the benefit of the whole organisation
 - Reducing duplication for better management of public money
 - Ownership of commissioning learning
- To align the learning and development strategy with business goals
 - Driven by business strategy

Within ONS this was a ground up approach. A Deputy Director of Capability was appointed to establish two teams; one would focus on developing capability for the Government's Statistical Service across the UK and the other team would lead on the learning and development to support this, and the professional development of ONS staff.

The Learning and Development function, which became the Learning Academy, drew on small groups of people working in different ONS departments as decentralised learning and development functions. Broadly these were made up of:

- Statistical learning within the Methodology unit
- Leadership and Management with talent planning from within central Human Resources
- Workforce essentials from various sources across the business

The work to 'pull' teams in to work together took around six months, so by July 2016 the team was effectively established. Two things were lacking at this stage:

1. A clear vision of the team's purpose and priorities
2. Roles and responsibilities were unclear as were the skills and knowledge required to operate as a professional learning function

Nevertheless the function began to deliver a range of activities and there was some impact on branding and raising awareness of the function.

Challenges remained within the business due to the nature of how learning and development had been provided before. By centralising learning there was concern, perhaps legitimately, that a new team would lose sight of the more acute areas of learning needs and for some parts of ONS this was felt by entire workplace cultures. This led to a fragmented arrangement where some areas of capability building were retained in the business and different models existed:

- Some retained entire learning and development units
- Some released some staff yet retained the professional experts in their own teams
- Some passed responsibility for learning need requirements to their business support functions who had no background in learning analysis

This led to an unclear relationship between the Learning Academy and the business. Areas of specialism that could benefit the whole organisation were not shared. This was always to be expected given the

speed of implementation and lack of engagement from some parts of the business. The argument for efficiency and strategic alignment would also be tested in the coming months.

It would be safe to say that the Learning Academy had a troubled birth. As with many new teams there were challenges:

- Processes in each of the three teams were different, confusing customers
- There was no centralised place for the learning offer to be accessed
- Funding was extremely low
- The academy became an internal customer to the business by having to commission 'time' from subject matter experts to deliver learning causing tensions
- The lack of consistency in roles and structures had an impact on morale
- The 'storming' (Tuckman, B; 1970) phase carried on over many months with no signs of abating...

ONS made the decision to appoint a Head of Learning and Development to determine the strategic approach to learning and manage the Learning Academy. In 2017 the appointment was complete and resulted in a range of new initiatives:

- An organisation wide learning needs analysis built from existing strategy documents and business plans
- A directory of learning
- A management pathway programme
- A team review that led to a single customer relationship process and a new support team
- A learning and development strategy aligned to business needs
- An increased corporate L&D budget
- A team performing at an acceptable level

The fundamental change has been around perception by the business of the purpose of the Learning Academy. Much more learning is funnelled through the centralised function, and it is closely aligned with strategic project activity from across the organisation. With this though comes a downside. In effect the Learning Academy is now a victim of its own success. Whilst being described at a senior leadership level as 'punching above its weight' there remain reservations both from strategic leaders and from business areas:

- "we don't get what we need so we go elsewhere"
- "I ask for information and it goes into a black hole"
- "all of the spaces are fully booked"
- "our training budgets were capped and centralised but what are we getting for this?"
- "they do good stuff, but it's still stuff"

These comments are all valid. For an organisation of over 4000 people the Learning Academy employs 20 people, a third of whom are part-time workers. The skills within the team remain diverse, with only

around 50% of the workforce being recognised as Learning and Development professionals. Demand far outstrips supply and expectations of what can be delivered at a local level remains a point of contention when the purpose of the service is to raise organisational capability in line with ONS strategic objectives.

ONS and the Learning Academy face a larger challenge still, and that is that the organisation doesn't have an integrated single learning management system, but relies on third party systems such as EventBrite and Smart Survey to manage learning activity and evaluation and a simple online eLearning tool called Training Tracker to present corporate L&D learning modules. This remains a significant weakness as we shall see in the next section.

Part six

The federated structure

There will continue to be ongoing pressures and demands on learning and development to meet multiple needs within ONS. Some of these are realistic and achievable within budgetary and competence constraints. Some are not. As such the organisation is at a tipping point in terms of what it does, moving forward, to address the following learning and development priorities:

- Upskilling and developing the multiple professions within ONS and the analytical professions across government
- Building a cadre of capable and competent leaders with a sustainable talent pool
- Supporting the transformation agenda through specific skill and knowledge attainment by focusing on digital capability
- Ensuring compliance with regulation and policy in line with best practice models
- Addressing issues such as long term sickness absences associated with mental health conditions (the largest single cause of sickness absence)
- Building digital and data science capability

There are therefore two options facing ONS in respect of the future of its learning and development provision.

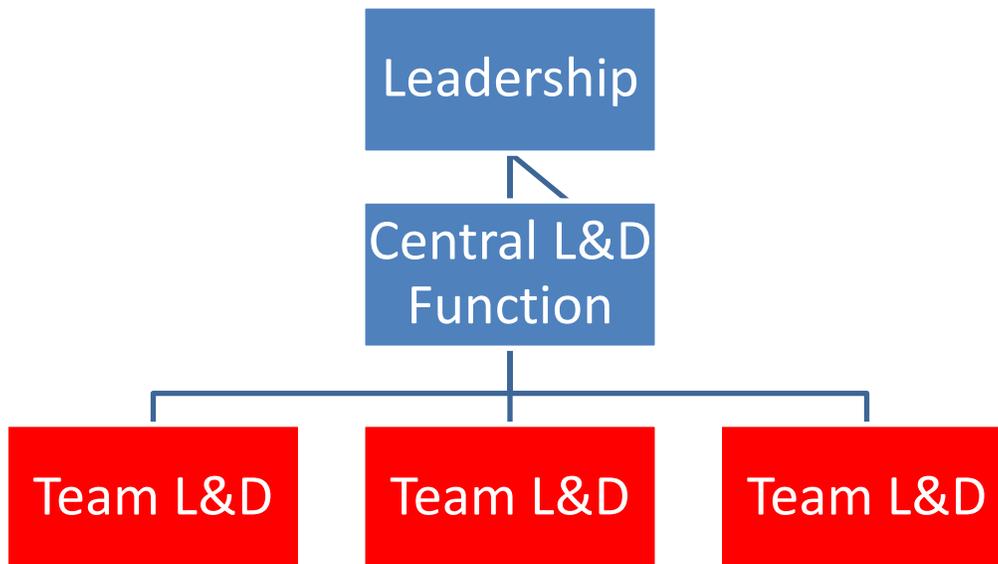
The first is to further centralise the pockets of learning and development that exist within the business; drawing in professional expertise to design and deliver the required professional development needed to sustain business growth and expertise.

As identified in parts four and five of this paper there will be significant resistance to this approach, namely:

- Departments with their own L&D functions will argue that only they are able to respond quickly and effectively to business demands unlike a centralised team
- The centralised team is only focused on 'big picture' issues which don't relate to their subject matter expertise

The second option is for senior leaders to consider adopting what is termed a 'federated structure' or 'federated training organisation model' (trainingindustry.org, 2018). During the economic downturn from 2008 onwards businesses retrenched their L&D functions, often leading to models of a centralised L&D team responsible for technologies, administration processes, leadership and management development in a centralised team whilst allowing business units to manage the content development, delivery and evaluation of learning to meet their specific needs (Todd, 2009).

Figure 3



For this type of structure to work effectively requires very strong collaborative relationships:

- A clear understanding of roles and responsibilities of all parties
- Robust evaluation procedures that stay within strict, common parameters to ensure consistency of data
- Excellent and frequent communication channels in order to prevent duplication and to share information
- Mutual respect of professional skills and requirements

One of the key components of an effective federated structure is a single Learning Management System (LMS). The LMS will ideally sit as the central technological hub for all people working in learning. Having one system provides a number of benefits:

- A single point for hosting elearning
- Materials are accessible by all members of staff, including remote team workers
- Tracks progress and performance of learners
- Better integrates social learning experiences (via social media networks)
- Aligns users with corporate activity, specialist activity and personal development plans in one place

- Manages talent pools and tracks succession roles

As identified in section five, ONS operates loosely aligned third party systems. The current Human Resources Management system provided by Oracle has some capacity to host an integrated LMS, yet the business hasn't adopted this particular element of the system, instead focusing on its workforce planning and budgetary capabilities.

Section seven

Reflections and next steps

It is clear that the Learning Academy's role within ONS is now established and relatively successful. The centralising of a range of functions to create a single developmental and capability unit has been an occasionally fraught and difficult affair with many challenges overcome and more to address.

The next steps for ONS are to consider the options to adopt a stronger centralised function within the Learning Academy, or to proceed towards a robust federated model. The current activity to procure a LMS in partnership with various areas of the business suggests that a federated structure seems likely, and likely to succeed too, making the next chapter in the development of learning across ONS an interesting one. Making this model a success will no doubt require significant investment of time and effort to standardise processes but the benefits seem to meet the broader needs of the business whilst delivering the strategic intentions of the whole organisation.

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