Learning and development is constantly evolving. New philosophies develop new approaches. Technology allows for learning to be done anywhere at any time. Streamlined processes reduce downtime, letting executives and line-level employees learn and return to the job with knowledge gained in less and less time. While learning has existed in the workplace as long as there has been work, the learning function as an organizational objective looks very different today than in years past.

In 2011, Chief Learning Officer magazine editors and members of the LearningElite Advisory Board developed a sustainable benchmarking program that examines the L&D function across industries worldwide. Applications are submitted each fall and reviewed by a field of practitioner judges. Aspiring LearningElite organizations are benchmarked on their internal learning function across five dimensions, representing L&D performance areas that contribute significant value to the organization. The final ranking is publicized online and in print to recognize those organizations that have made great L&D advancements, both within and outside their own organizations.

L&D has a specific value chain model, which examines how learning delivers return on investment for businesses (Figure 1). The value chain has evolved over time and been refined to address the needs of today’s online learner. To provide a company with full value, learning leaders must involve those elements of the value chain they control. Leaders should also use the L&D function to create shared value (a combination of economic and societal value) within the organization. Shared value examines and expands upon the original value-chain theory and aligns to the LearningElite model, which establishes five key dimensions to assess the most critical characteristics of learning organizations.

Dimension 1 – learning strategy
Dimension 2 – leadership commitment
Dimension 3 – learning execution
Dimension 4 – learning impact
Dimension 5 – business performance results

Organizations employing the L&D value chain will naturally align to the LearningElite dimensions of learning impact (societal value) and business performance results (economic value). For the learning function to create shared value, programs needed to address societal (workforce) needs and challenges while simultaneously creating economic value (business performance results).

FIGURE 3 LEARNINGELITE VALUE CHAIN
Learning strategy, the first dimensional pillar, both informs and directs organizational learning, driving organizational growth intentionally and by design. At its most basic, the learning strategy must be integrated with organizational strategy and directly linked to business goals. The L&D function cannot — and should not — be siloed. A comprehensive learning strategy clearly defines employee abilities, business needs, learning goals and evaluation methods, with key performance indicators that relate to business outcomes. Such a comprehensive approach is the best way to achieve measurable results. A strategic learning approach provides insights and innovations that otherwise may not materialize. Viewing learning as a strategic function improves the ability to position L&D as an innovation driver and point of competitive advantage.
Leadership commitment demonstrates executive buy-in for the learning function and creates an active, healthy learning culture organization-wide. Leadership is uniquely positioned to empower positive organizational change by championing learning and working together with L&D. When leadership understands the needs and learning requirements of the workforce, they can foster the organizational learning culture as both champions and active participants. By giving the L&D department a seat at the table and engaging the workforce in learning activities, leaders can observe benefits firsthand and champion the positive outcomes of the L&D function to others both within and without. Engaged leaders can help demonstrate how learning achieves organizational goals while being a strategic tool for growth at the same time. Successful leadership commitment involves leaders up and down the chain of command, from line-level managers to the CEO.
Learning execution is critical to learning strategy success. Learning leaders must deliver an action plan that accounts for the logistical necessities of training, fulfills target objectives and supports the business strategy of the organization. At its most basic, organizations work with one or more learning management systems to deliver content and gather metrics. When learning initiatives are executed well, they create avenues for future improvement and enhance business goals. When executing the learning strategy, L&D teams should be aware of the following key points, as set forth by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan in 2002:

» Execution is a discipline that cannot be separated from strategy.
» Execution is the primary job of business leaders.
» Execution must be at the core of an organization’s culture.

Technology helps support learning execution, especially as organizations use new modalities to address the needs of their busy, mobile workforce. Technology supports learning’s development as a business process, increases efficiency and reduces cost. Successful technological programs can be used to deliver effective learning regardless of scale.
**LEARNING IMPACT**

Learning impact describes the value of organizational learning, examining how defined learning metrics provide leadership with concrete evidence of learning strategy’s effectiveness. To have a discernible impact on the organization, the L&D function must do more than deliver quality learning programs; the learning function must have a clear idea of the specific and measurable impact of organizational learning. This requires the ability to think about the value of the L&D function, identify specific metrics that will show the efficiency of the organization’s L&D strategy and communicate learning’s impact and effectiveness to leadership. Quantifying impact comes from answering the following questions, outlined by Michael Echols in a 2009 article for *Chief Learning Officer*:

» What do you want to achieve?
» How do you isolate the impact of learning from other variables?
» What will it cost to achieve your evaluation goals?

Used as stepping stones, these questions help the L&D function understand where impact will be assessed as programs develop. Learning impact is associated with plenty of acronyms: ADDIE methodology, KPIs, SMART goals and SWOT analysis. Having a plan for measuring impact at the beginning of a project makes it easier for L&D to show exactly where learning affects the organization. Communicating that information reduces leaders’ decision-making risk, allowing for better-informed decisions that align with both the learning and business strategy.
**BUSINESS PERFORMANCE RESULTS**

**Business performance results** contribute directly to the organization’s business goals. When learning goals and business goals are the same, organizations can look at measurement that proves the power of learning as a business driver and strategic enabler for organizational health and performance.

Organizations wishing to demonstrate the best possible return on investment use advanced metrics, such as customer satisfaction or increased market share, which demonstrates results beyond learner satisfaction. Organizations may also examine HR data around onboarding, retention and pipeline development. These measurement avenues can also demonstrate strong business impact from the L&D function.

The ability to demonstrate business performance results is one of the greatest attributes of LearningElite organizations. While not always easy, LearningElite organizations have demonstrated that the effort to express business performance results achieved by the learning function greatly enhanced their credibility inside of the organization. The more the learning industry can do to demonstrate the bottom-line business value of learning, the easier it is for learning leaders to make the business case to senior leaders. Organizations demonstrating business impact have more long-term opportunities to continue making an impact on the organization through L&D.
In 2010, the HCM Advisory Group (now the Research and Advisory Group) established a rigorous, research-based evaluation model to identify the world’s elite learning organizations. *Chief Learning Officer* editors and researchers recruited academics, government officials and L&D executives to take a survey, participate in a focus group and join a think-tank session to build out the five-dimension LearningElite model and application. Subject matter expert feedback and empirical research helped establish benchmark scores for the five dimensions.

The LearningElite model employs Robert Brinkerhoff’s 2003 Success Case Method evaluation technique. Applicants describe, document and explain their L&D organizational efforts. This approach allows for results and accomplishments to be uncovered and to identify elite practices that otherwise may never be revealed to the L&D field.

Applications are entered into an online system, easing the process for the applicants and providing a smoother workflow. The Research and Advisory group vets all completed applications to ensure they meet the program’s standards and criteria. Disqualified applications are removed from the benchmarking. Once applications have been judged, Research and Advisory group members review and assess the results. Initial rankings are established once final scores are calculated. At that time, the vice president of the Research and Advisory group personally notifies organizations in the top five so they can prepare a capstone presentation. Final ranking is determined once the capstone presentation takes place. Rankings are revealed at the annual LearningElite Gala, as part of the *Chief Learning Officer* Spring Symposium. Their successes are also spotlighted in *Chief Learning Officer* magazine. LearningElite organizations receive logos to use for internal and external marketing purposes.

For more information on the LearningElite program, visit www.learningelite.clomedia.com.
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