

Learning For The Sustainable Enterprise

How investment in learning drives long term competitive advantage

Sustainability is now a hot trend, and often it is associated with environmental responsibility. However, the environmental benefit is just one of the positive outcomes of a sustainable approach. Sustainability is a strong business principle that simply means to sustain positive results over a longer period, for more stakeholders, while continuously reducing cost and negative impact of various kinds. Seen in this light, sustainability is not such a revolutionary idea. It is simply an expansion of the time-honored approach of doing more with less: producing more beneficial business outcomes (productivity, revenue, customer satisfaction, employee engagement, etc.) for less cost and less negative impact (money, resources, energy waste, etc.).

While this may seem a bit idealistic, the recent economic crisis illustrates why it is important to look beyond short-term results and narrow interests. A global recession now looms as a result of an over reliance on short-term strategies and a failure to recognize the interconnectedness of various systems within a global economy. Now that we have seen the domino effect that can occur, there is a new urgency within many organizations to understand their interconnectedness, and how their risks and responsibilities intertwine.

Intense global competition is another reason that sustainability has become such an important trend. Competition for resources, natural and human, is intensifying on a global scale. With the rise of developing nations there are expanded market opportunities and also expanded sources of competition. The only way that an organization can achieve sustained competitive advantage is to have a long term strategy. This has spurred many companies recently to develop long term talent management strategies, to ensure that they will have a work force with the right mix of skills to support future growth.

Another important by-product of competition in a global economy is the need to constantly innovate. Innovation is essential in a world where unpredictable changes come at us from every direction. Innovation can take the form of small improvements that reduce costs or improve processes in small degrees, or in the form of breakthrough ideas that transform entire markets. In either case, it is people that make the difference. People are the source of innovation; and people are the key to sustainability.

It is not surprising then that learning plays an important role in a sustainable strategy and it is very often mentioned in the same breath with “sustainable competitive advantage.”



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The idea of learning as key support for sustained competitive advantage is not new; Jack Welch is one of the many leading figures who has been espousing the need for a strong learning culture for a number of years. The sustainability trend has simply helped to clarify the role that learning plays in producing sustained competitive advantage.

Supporting the sustainable enterprise

There are three main ways that learning, especially technology-enabled learning, supports the sustainable enterprise.

Learning maximizes 'people value'

People are the ultimate renewable resource, and organizations that provide learning to more employees, at all levels, are better positioned to compete in a global economy. Learning fuels creativity, which in turn drives innovation. Learning also drives higher levels of productivity and engagement. The value of learning is multiplied when properly aligned with critical roles by embedding relevant learning content into existing corporate systems such as portals, KnowledgeCenters and talent management systems. Learning also helps companies attract the best people and retain them longer.

Learning helps organizations prepare for the unexpected

Technology and global markets are increasing the pace of change. Having a learning culture fosters the agility and critical thinking skills that are needed to compete in this fast-paced world. A robust supply of learning resources helps organizations adapt to competitive changes, technology developments and new customer demands. On-demand learning resources can be used to solve unexpected problems as they arise.

With technology enabled-learning, organizations can do more for less

Technology and the Internet have liberated learning from traditional bounds, making it feasible to train more employees wherever they are, at a much lower cost. Online learning can be used alone to ensure basic skills and compliance, and it can be used as part of more complex learning blends to address a wide variety of enterprise needs. Technology is also the key to delivering on-demand learning resources to employees in the flow of work, allowing them to solve problems quickly and efficiently.

In short, e-learning, in all its forms, increases the efficiency and effectiveness of enterprise learning, and allows learning to be delivered to many more employees, even in times of budgetary constraint.

Summary

Sustainability is a broad concept that is becoming mainstream in the business world. It is no longer associated solely with environmental benefit, as many organizations are realizing that people are the ultimate renewable resource. An investment in employees pays long term dividends, literally and figuratively. Bringing learning to all levels of the organization, on a broad range of topics, truly unlocks organizational potential. It fosters the agility and critical thinking skills that are essential to competing in a global marketplace. And with the use of technology-enabled learning, organizations can afford to train more employees at lower cost.

