expert insights

Learning Audits Drive Quality Instruction

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A: I love learning audits, which are an integral part of the services I offer. A learning audit is a comprehensive review of a training or educational program to assess its effectiveness and alignment with current research and best practices.

In my upcoming book, "The CEO's Guide to Training, eLearning, and Work: Reshaping Learning into a Competitive Advantage," I explore the concept of a broader L&D (Learning and Development) audit. This involves examining how a learning team organizes and conducts itself to optimize learning outcomes.

During a typical learning audit, I engage in research benchmarking. This process involves observing various forms of training—whether in a classroom setting, eLearning modules, hybrid online courses, or recorded sessions—and evaluating them against the latest educational research. I identify what the organization is doing well, where it's misaligned with research findings, and areas that are satisfactory but could be improved. The benefits of a learning audit include:

Alignment with Research. Ensuring that training methods are in line with proven research enhances the likelihood of successful learning outcomes.

Recognition of Strengths. Highlighting what is working well helps reinforce effective practices.

Identification of Gaps. Pointing out misalignments or deficiencies allows organizations to make necessary adjustments.

Actionable Recommendations. Providing specific advice on how to improve training programs makes the audit a valuable tool for ongoing development.

In practice, a learning audit can extend beyond formal training to include on-the-job learning. For instance, at a meat manufacturing plant, I evaluated their safety training and observed the factory floor, conducted job shadowing, held focus groups, and performed structured interviews. This comprehensive approach revealed not just issues in the formal safety training but also operational habits that affected safety, such as ineffective manager meetings and lack of safety reminders in production areas.

Auditing the Navy Seals

In another notable project, I was asked by the U.S. Navy SEALs to evaluate their 65-week training program through a research-based lens. Although I couldn't observe the entire duration of their training, the goal was to provide insights that would help refine and enhance their already rigorous training regimen.

I facilitated a 3-day workshop for them, using what I termed the decisive dozen (research-based criteria) to evaluate how well aligned their program is to the science around practice, spaced repetition, retrieval—each of the decisive dozen. They examined each part of their program and classified it as aligned, unaligned or unclear. Then I asked them whether they wanted to make changes based on what they saw. They did.

The master of the base stayed with us and participated the entire three days. I was told he never does that. When I asked a hardened Navy Seal instructor what he thought, he said it was one of the hardest things he ever had to do—and it was great.

Learning audits are powerful tools that provide a detailed analysis of the educational landscape within an organization. They are instrumental in pinpointing strengths and areas for improvement, ultimately leading to more effective training strategies and safer, more productive work environments.

Q: When a company comes to you for a learning audit, what is their motivation? What's happening in their organization that makes them say it's time for a learning audit?

A: Companies typically seek out a learning audit for two main reasons:

1. Addressing a Breakdown

Often, an organization will experience some form of breakdown in their processes or receive consistent feedback indicating that something isn't working properly. This triggers a need to identify and address the root of the problem.

2. Striving for Excellence

In other cases, forward-thinking individuals within the company recognize the importance of continuous improvement. These change champions understand that despite receiving high satisfaction scores on feedback forms—like an average of 4.6 on 'smile sheets'—there is still room for growth. They are aware that these metrics can be misleading and are motivated to push beyond complacency to achieve excellence in their learning programs.

The learning audit, and particularly the learning audit workshops, serve a dual purpose. They provide specific, actionable feedback on the organization's learning strategies and are also an effective tool for team development. These workshops engage team members in a hands-on manner, prompting them to contribute their insights and apply new concepts to their work, which is far more effective than traditional, passive learning settings.

Additionally, learning audits can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement. When teams conduct

regular audits, they benefit from spaced repetition and deeper learning. It reinforces their auditing skills and simultaneously ingrains best practices into their day-to-day work.

While it's beneficial to have an external expert conduct a learning audit periodically, due to the associated costs, it's also advisable for organizations to develop the capability to perform internal audits regularly. I've even contributed to this process by authoring a research-to-practice report on conducting learning audits, which, although published some time ago, still provides valuable guidance on the topic.

Ultimately, whether driven by the need to correct a specific issue or the desire to excel, companies that invest in learning audits are taking proactive steps to enhance their learning environment and improve their overall effectiveness.

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Q: If you could speak to your younger self earlier in your career. What career guidance would you have given yourself?

I think I would do two things differently.

More Depth in Performance Sciences

We are in Golden Age of nonfiction, in the social sciences, and I would read a ton of scientific-based books on learning, memory instruction, but also some of the performance sciences like habit science, network science, you know, performance triggering, nudging, all of that. That's one thing, get a good basis of that.

Strategically Chose your Job Roles

I got lucky in a sense, because I worked for a company in the strategic management group and we built simulations which are a great learning tool. I would say don't just take any old instructional design job. Look for people who are doing good research-based work, or research-inspired work or evidence-inspired work. Get work that moves you forward and diversifies your experience.

There are trade-offs in choose to work as a consultant or as in-house staff. I started my work in vendor space and but I do think, in some ways, the vendor space gives you more exposure to different approaches because you're working with a bunch of different clients. On the other hand, what you're not learning is sort of the organizational politics in bigger companies. If you want to learn to be good at office politics to grow into Chief Learning Officer, then after a few years doing the vendor thing, but then getting into a company so you can learn how to play the inner game.