



# Digital technology

in learning solutions



IMPACT

## Using digital technology to support organisational learning

### Let the Learning Lead

We have worked with our clients since 1980 helping them to respond effectively to the challenge of change.

During that time we have seen many new tools and techniques arrive in the marketplace to support organisational learning. We have always taken a pragmatic view of these shifts and placed our clients' needs at the centre of how we have responded and adapted.

As the pace of technological change has continued to grow so has our interest and expertise in understanding how to use the promise of digital tools effectively.

Our guiding principle has always been that **we let the learning lead.**

Our clients' objectives and the context that drives them has always been our starting point. Once we have a clear understanding of the need we are then in a position to use our experience to select the right tools for the job. Putting it simply, letting the learning lead means designing solutions that work by selecting the right approach from the huge variety of tools, techniques and methods that are available.

We are expert in designing virtual, face to face or a blend of both. We are entirely agnostic about using particular digital tools; we have used many and continue to learn and adapt to new entrants into the marketplace.

We also have our own internal digital design and development agency, **Zinco**, which helps us to build custom digital solutions to address clients' problems either as stand-alone tools or to help connect technologies together so that they talk to each other.

As you would expect our clients have come to trust our judgment in this area and we continue to win global awards for the effectiveness of our solutions.

Here are some of the things we are learning that are relevant to supporting clients in the design of digital learning strategies.

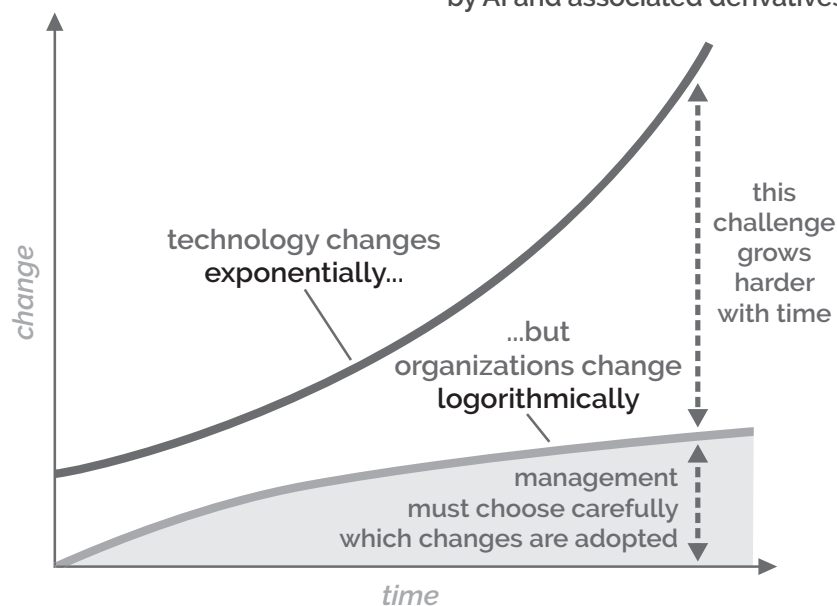
### Learning is the work

Technology is driving the arrival of what some call the Fourth Industrial Age<sup>i</sup>. This is the notion that we are moving through the Digital Age into a new Age when a wide range of new technologies are combining at unprecedented speed creating disruption and opportunity in equal measure. Given the nature of exponential change<sup>ii</sup> the future has never been more difficult to predict and is arriving more quickly than our organisations, institutions and governments are able to adapt.

As technology accelerates away we are collectively in danger of being left behind by not being able to adapt quickly enough. We often characterise this situation as a VUCA world (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous).

this model, training our future labour force for a market that increasingly no longer exists.

One of the powerful implications of accelerating technology is that all work that can be reduced to a flowchart will be replaced by AI and associated derivatives.



One of the consequences of these changes is that the distinction between learning and work is dissolving.

Historically organisations have functioned as machines, controlled through hierarchies with success measured narrowly, usually only in numbers (output, financial returns etc.). The learning system supporting such organisations was also mechanistic. Efficiency in learning mirroring in cost efficiency leading to an instrumentalising of learning, reducing it to the narrow demands of a specific job or task. We created markets in learning to serve our market economy. The economic imperatives demanded labour efficiency, so work was routinized, highly controlled and increasingly specialised. We can still recognise this world today in many organisations despite the imperatives for change. We also see many of our educational institutions continue to serve

We believe that all organisations are in transition as they move from being controlled by hierarchies to being enabled through networks. We are in transition from a market economy where value is rooted in scarcity and competition is based on efficiency/cost reduction to a world of increasing abundance<sup>iii</sup> where value is rooted in creativity and success is based on connectivity.

The nature and pace of this transition, driven by technology, is creating a world where organisations are subject to constant change that demands a response. The VUCA world is full of complex problems. As the Cynefin framework<sup>iv</sup> reminds us complex problems can't be addressed by established methods (for example, best practice is always out of date).

The speed of change means that problems are constantly shifting, are ambiguous, multi-dimensional, where there is no clear relationship between cause and effect (which can only be seen after the fact). All organisations are dealing with increased complexity.

It is in this context that we cannot continue to separate learning about the work from actually doing the work. In a deep and deepening sense **learning is the work**. We must learn while we work. Learning must be integral to the work.

There is an ever more compelling need to ensure that organisational learning, either informal or formal, structured or unstructured is happening as part of the everyday process of doing work. This places pressure on formal Learning & Development practice because it demands that the process of learning design is fully informed by an understanding of the work. This includes what the work is and how it is done, how it is being changed and how it will continue to change in response the arrival of technology to the wider VUCA forces impacting on the organisation.

How we use technology to support Learning & Development to respond to the challenges created by technology is the paradox at the heart of the problem. Our answer is to focus on the work, the outcomes and the value that is created by the organisation for the world.

### **Context not Content**

Complex problems demand more of our implicit or tacit knowledge given that explicit knowledge is now ubiquitous and instantly available. It is not what we know as much as how we apply what we know. There is also the

need to unlearn, to move on from half-baked ideas or ill-formed prejudices that drive our worldviews, biases and practices. How do we keep updating what it is that we know rather than simply succumbing to confirmation bias by Googling what we want to be true and receiving search results that reinforce our opinion? For example try googling “The Earth is Flat” for lots of proof that the world is, in fact, flat not round (ish).

Our connected, hypertext-enabled world allows us to access the worlds knowledge from devices we hold in our hands. To put this another way, there is no shortage of learning content. In fact there is rather the opposite problem, there is too much.

The challenge facing the modern learner/ employee is being able to use all of the knowledge that is out there effectively in service to their goals and their organisational responsibilities. It is how knowledge is applied, filtered, adapted and built-upon that is important. And if, as we have argued, that learning and work are becoming enmeshed into a single process then the only thing that matters in the acquiring and application of knowledge is context. The two central questions we must constantly and consistently ask are:

1. What is the work?
2. How do we know?

It is only through a clear-headed view of what it is that we are trying to do and why that we will have a viable filter through which to select and process relevant knowledge and information.

Who is the person best suited to answering the question 'what is the work?' It is the person trying to do the work, the person who is trying to adapt to the arrival of new tools, new thinking and new contexts. It is the team who are collectively and collaboratively responsible for delivering to their purpose, for results in a VUCA world. It is you and me.

And yet so much of the learning that is available to employee/learners is prescribed by others; by L&D Depts., by managers or C-suite leaders (rarely for themselves). And also by professional bodies keen to reinforce the market value of their 'credentials' whose qualifications act as gatekeepers to professional roles that are now dissolving and reshaping at speeds that are destabilising the very idea of what it means to be 'qualified'.

The forces of **context not content** are also undermining our wider education systems. Why should 18 year olds join expensive University degree and graduate programmes when they can use the internet to find lectures, resources and materials to help them learn the things that they want to learn how to do right now and forever?

Context is one way of explaining the process through which we prescribe meaning to what we are doing. Meaning is everything in learning otherwise we simply have lots of disconnected information, ideas, knowledge, opinion without a context within which to manifest its use or misuse. Meaning is central to building organisations worth working for, worth investing in, worth being a customer of. It is the constant framing and reframing of the question 'Why?'

Digital learning technology can tell us little about why? It is up to us, the human being who is in service (in some way through our organisations) to other human beings to provide the why, the context, the meaning. Perhaps we don't need yet more digital learning tools that are simply catalogues for structuring (curating?) content that make it easy to access. We have the internet and google and research tools and curation tools and more for that already.

To serve the modern organisational learner we must move beyond just providing another information resource, however well designed and mobile friendly it is. We must see context and meaning first; only then will we be able to make individual and collective sense of the wealth of knowledge available and apply it effectively.

### **Process not Platform**

Digital technology hasn't changed how human beings learn. It has fundamentally changed the range of tools we can use to assist our learning. The internet has brought a revolution in the accessibility of information and can assist in the transfer of knowledge and opinion. But access to all this stuff doesn't necessarily make us collectively smarter. And there is some neuroscience evidence that hyperlinks in particular are distracting our brains to such a degree that in some ways the internet is in danger of making us more stupid through promoting shallow thinking.<sup>vi</sup>

## Digital technology in learning solutions

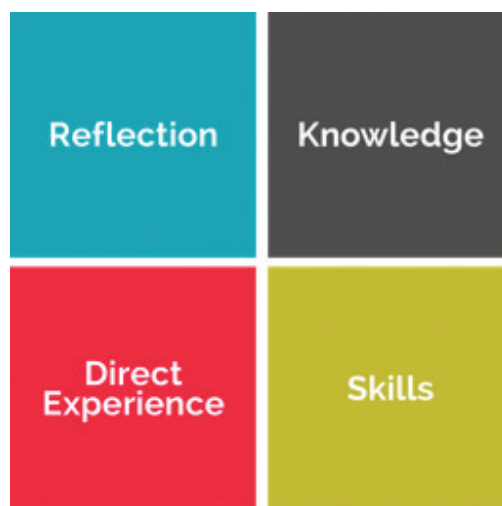
What remains true is that for anyone to learn anything they need a process through which to do so. The more sophisticated the learning needs the more sophisticated the process required.

Platforms present content libraries to learners with navigational aids, tags and maybe even recommendations from other colleagues who have used material and found it useful. But all content needs to be designed with an intentional learning process in mind.

Learning and Development professionals know a lot about designing effective learning processes. But it feels to us that the hype around scale and cost effectiveness of digital only solutions often means that we are not translating all the things we know about designing a face-to-face or social/network/group learning process into the design of digital material. We talk to many clients who have invested in platforms, developed or acquired content libraries only to find that they are under used by learners and not trusted by line-managers<sup>vii</sup> to deliver.

As learning technologies continue to grow and develop at pace we need to match that development with an ever deeper understanding about how we connect the right tools to the specific learning need. Any money spend on a scalable learning technology that doesn't meet the learning needs is still money wasted however 'cost effective' the cost to learner ratio is.

At Impact our commitment and expertise is in experiential learning using our own unique learning methodology.



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We apply 37 years worth of learning design experience to create learning journeys that work, delivering the learning need. Much of our work is connecting learning to context, activating social learning and embedding new behaviours and skills. The arrival of digital technology hasn't reduced the need for experiential learning. Indeed the increasing synthesis of learning and work – learning becomes the work – means that we need more and more effective learning opportunities to support 21st century organisations and their workforce needs. Experiential learning connects skills and knowledge with doing the work and the ability to 'reflect in action' to continue to learn and improve.

Our commitment will always be that we let the learning lead our learning designs, selecting tools, methods and resources that work. All learning objectives need to be met with a learning design, a process of learning, that is consistent with the need.

Let's start with the learner and the learning need, not the technology.

- i <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>
- ii <https://singularityhub.com/2016/03/22/technology-feels-like-its-accelerating-because-it-actually-is/>
- iii <https://singularityhub.com/2012/06/28/abundance-the-future-is-better-than-you-think/>
- iv [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin\\_framework](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin_framework)
- v <https://www.tfes.org/>
- vi <https://www.amazon.co.uk/The-Shallows-Internet-Doing-Brains/dp/0393339750?tag=skim1x144819-21>
- vii <http://www.goodpractice.com/ld-resources/learning-technologies-what-managers-really-think/>



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