

Epic Managed Learning – Achieving Best Practice

Business Process Outsourcing in HR & Learning is not new. Many larger organisations have been outsourcing their learning functions to the larger specialist consulting firms for a number of years and outsourcing payroll, for example has been a common occurrence for even longer. The more recent trend for organisations to seek a partner to externally manage their learning function is certainly on the increase and with more and more training providers extending their offering to include “Managed Learning” we have to ask the question – is it for you?

In order to answer this, we need to examine a number of issues around why, what, how, and with whom, bearing in mind the diverse nature of today’s learning requirements and offerings.

So why would you look at this strategy in the first place:

As businesses surrender to the ever increasing pressure of global competition, they are having to become leaner and more focused than ever before. This usually translates to reducing costs whilst ensuring you create an effective environment for fostering, growing and retaining talent.

The struggle for the learning departments is they have to develop increasingly inventive ways to provide flexible, ‘just in time’ learning material, in a shorted timeframe, on a reducing budget. Therefore the benefits of looking for an expert to manage this on your behalf are becoming harder to ignore.

Typical benefits include:

- Allowing focus on core business & strategy
- Reducing costs
- Reducing headcount
- Exploiting technical expertise
- Ensuring compliance
- Demonstrating business value
- Implementing best practice

To ascertain whether these benefits can be achieved in your organisation is not necessarily straightforward. A thorough examination of existing processes, their effectiveness and subsequent return on investment would certainly aid the decision making process. This audit can be completed by the department themselves, although an unbiased approach may be advisable, especially where there is a threat of redeployment or redundancies. When aligned with future business objectives and strategy, the audit can then be used to ascertain if and what should be managed externally.

This initial approach could prove invaluable in the longer term. Some companies who made the decision to outsource in the past decade have now decided to take it back internally, where their circumstances have changed and the business benefits could no longer be realised. In the case of Cable and Wireless and Accenture, the vast reduction in the number of staff employed by Cable and Wireless over the 5 year contract term for its HR outsourcing model made it financially unviable towards the latter end of the contract. The same is true of Nortel when it decided to in source its HR back from PWC.

Epic Managed Learning – Achieving Best Practice

Once you have ascertained the question of why you are looking at managed services for learning, you can then look to define 'what'....

Within the arena of learning and development there are many different definitions as to what constitutes a Managed Learning Service. This largely depends on the length and breadth of the activities outsourced.

For many years, most organisations have looked to third party suppliers to develop and deliver training content, on a project basis. In a managed learning environment, this forms just one aspect of the functions performed by the learning partner.

Generally, the next function to be outsourced would be the training administration, where the booking of courses, venues and events are managed externally. The management of suppliers is the other key feature, underpinning the delivery capability of any managed learning service.

At a more strategic level, other functions to be outsourced can include:

- Training needs analysis
- Competence & performance management
- Management information & reporting
- Learning assessment
- Succession planning
- Knowledge & talent management
- Compliance monitoring and reporting

Be clear about which activities could be outsourced and which are best kept in house. The findings of the learning audit will define this, where a list of activities & specific training programmes and the relevant supplier relationships to remain in house can be identified. This must be clearly outlined so as not to cause confusion later on and to ensure that your business retains focus on its core competencies.

At this point, you should be in a position to define why and what to outsource. The next questions are who should you select to assist you and just how should you go about it.

Finding the right partner

The number of organisations offering a managed learning service is growing significantly, mainly from existing training providers who are now looking to enter the outsourcing market. There is no "one size fits all" solution, so be wary of organisations who cannot be flexible in their approach and only offer a standard "off the shelf" service.

Vendor Neutral?

It is also important to consider their objectivity in the choice of delivery partners for training content. If they supply training content themselves and are not vendor neutral, then care needs to be taken in ensuring that the course selected meets the learner's objectives and not the sales manager's objective of filling seats on their programmes! They can however offer greater cost savings on their own schedule. Both have their pros and cons, it's a decision based on what's right for you.

Epic Managed Learning – Achieving Best Practice

Do your research

Check the financial status of the learning partner and be realistic about the value of the business they will achieve. The very nature of the service where providers are purchasing training on your behalf can have major repercussions on their cash-flow and some smaller providers have been adversely affected by this. Increasing competition in the market has also pushed margins down significantly so you need to be sure that your partner will be around for the full contract duration.

Partnership

A truly effective partnership exists when openness, trust and respect underpin the relationship. Clear communication channels must be established where these attributes can flourish and enable expectations to not only be met, but exceeded in the longer term. Defining the roles and responsibilities on each side of the partnership is crucial, then by integrating the decision making for learning, and including the partner in management level meetings, the partner has the opportunity to contribute to the strategic level requirements and understand any constraints pertained by the learning requirements. A highly skilled workforce is vital for business success therefore developing the learning infrastructure should begin at board-level.

This kind of high-level interaction is also an opportunity to discuss the overall objectives of the outsourcing project. What are they and how will we know when they have been met?

Implementation

Once you have selected a partner, they should walk you through the next stages of implementing the service. To give you an idea of what to expect from your partner we have highlighted a few key issues to be aware of.

Suppliers

Supplier Transition: When first implementing the service, it is critical to understand the nature of the existing supplier relationships, especially in areas of niche and product specific training, e.g. Regulatory & Compliance Training. These should be respected and the managed learning partner should work with you to communicate the new supply arrangements to ensure a smooth transition. Occasionally, some existing training suppliers maybe wary of working with the learning partner, seeing them as an obstacle between them and their customer. This can be easily overcome with consistent communication from both yourselves and the managed learning partner.

Assessment of New Suppliers: To maintain the high quality of the service and training delivery, the managed learning partner must have a clear procedure in place for the assessment and benchmarking of new and existing suppliers. This must then be carried forward to assess the performance of suppliers and the quality of training delivered on an ongoing basis.

Epic Managed Learning – Achieving Best Practice

Communication

One reason for choosing to implement a managed learning service is to reduce costs, and this invariably includes a reduction in headcount. By communicating effectively to the staff any potential changes, many can be redeployed into other areas, re-skilled or transferred under TUPE to work for the managed learning partner, thus easing the uncertainty of the change.

Once the service has been set up, the new processes and procedures need to be communicated to all staff so they can utilise the service to its maximum potential and reduce any organisational resistance. This should be tailored to suit the organisational culture and can include holding a launch event or road shows, an email marketing campaign or sending out briefing packs to line managers.

Also, integrate communication infrastructures. This can be as simple as assigning internal email addresses and extension numbers or as complex as handing over the administration of your learning management system (or LMS) to the learning partner.

Technology

Most providers have a technology based system for managing the administration and management reporting. Ensure that their system is compatible with your LMS or internal system and if it contains live dates and availability for training, find out how this is updated to ensure that the information presented is correct at all times. You should also be able to deploy e-learning modules from the same system to reduce the click count for learners accessing 'just in time' content and performance support tools.

Ongoing Success:

Performance Evaluation

After the initial implementation stages have been completed, the quality of the partnership needs to be monitored. The ongoing success of the learning service is largely dependant on the quality of the service itself and of the training delivered. In order to clearly define what quality of service actually means, time should be taken when establishing the service level agreement, to include specific key performance indicators and quality benchmarks, both on the service and the effectiveness of the learning delivered.

Delegate satisfaction should be monitored. Electronic evaluation tools collect and collate feedback on the quality of the training and the level of service. This information should be available to you via a secure web portal.

Application of the learning outcomes to the workplace also needs to be monitored, both as a way to ensure the effectiveness of the learning delivered and the impact on the business as a whole. Thus some form of pre and post assessment needs to be incorporated into the evaluation system.

Whilst the measurement of the return on investment is required in most organisations, there are many other factors that are harder to measure and even harder to quantify into a bottom line figure; stress levels in the working environment and the general well being of staff, for example.

Epic Managed Learning – Achieving Best Practice

It is clear that when done well, working with a partner to manage learning has considerable benefits for both the organisation, in terms of its bottom line and for its people, where more sophisticated learning methodologies can be adopted.

As the market evolves with the increased use of technology and a greater appreciation of the importance of developing and retaining talent, it is easy to understand why the number of organisations seeking to realise the benefits of engaging a partner to manage their learning is on the increase.

To find out more about how Epic can work with you in managing your learning more effectively, please contact:

Gabrielle Gardner
Epic
52 Old Steine
Brighton
BN1 1NH

Tel: 01273 728686
Fax: 01273 821567

Email: managedlearning@epic.co.uk