

From Trainer to Learning Solutionist: A Journey of Evolution in the Changing TAE Landscape

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1. INTRODUCTION

The forces of disruption have reshaped how businesses and individuals work and live in today's world. Continual reinvention is key to surviving a constantly changing environment. There exists a growing desire for accelerated, just-in-time learning with immediate application to business priorities. Accessible and affordable learning platforms have stepped up in response to this desire. Such changes have contributed to a gradual shift away from traditional classroom training. It is imperative that the TAE Professional expands beyond his role as content deliverer and create value for enterprises and individuals through a provision of holistic learning solutions. This paper sheds light on the evolutionary journey of a TAE Professional as she makes her transition from trainer to learning solutionist. It offers insight on challenges encountered in the process, valuable lessons learnt and possible strategies to adopt as one embarks on his own transformational journey.

2. BUSINESS NEEDS: A KEY DRIVER OF LEARNING AND PERFORMANCE

As TAE Professionals, the needs of client organisations have always a key determinant of our businesses and direction. The lifeblood of a business has always been its continued profitability and growth. Business owners desire learning solutions which are aligned with their current and future business needs through enhancing the performance of their internal systems and people. Provision of learning solutions requires being cognizant of the common business needs which drive learning and performance. Client conversations and engagements reveal needs in three focal areas; sustaining business profitability, gearing up for business expansion and initiating business transformation for sustained competitiveness.

2.1 Sustaining Business Profitability

An engagement for an acoustics consulting firm focused on a critical need to stem the loss of profits. The analysis conducted reveal several contributing factors for the loss, including errors and inaccuracies in material costing and specifications to clients. While the consultants are domain experts in acoustics and sound engineering, they are less savvy with business and client engagement processes as well as the crafting of client proposals. The firm required customised, bite-sized learning solutions geared towards an immediate mitigation and resolution of the errors.

2.2 Gearing Up for Business Expansion

A key ingredient in business expansion lies in strong fundamentals; both in business systems and its people. For one client in food manufacturing, a critical driver for expansion is the stability and performance of its workforce. The organisation has traditionally relied on unstructured training in task performance. While that had worked in the past, the need to drive productivity as well as minimise operational errors and bottlenecks for business expansion required a different set of solutions. The business needed learning solutions which enable the retention of workers, consistency in task performance and support the workforce's gradual movement towards higher value work.

2.3 Initiating Business Transformation for Sustained Competitiveness

The rapid evolution of technology has shaped and altered the ways people live and play. This shift required businesses to engage their customers in different ways and via a variety of platforms. For a traditional retail client, it meant that there is a need to redesign the way their people engage with their work and customers. The organisation has a strong blend of classroom, e-learning and workplace learning in place to support the development of its workforce for the achievement of business outcomes. There is recognition that business decisions will need to move in tandem with the pace of changing consumer behaviour and shift from top down approach to initiation by the independent retail teams. The learning solutions required must align themselves with the business's need for transformation to remain relevant to their customers in view of multi-platform competition.

3. THE NEED TO TRANSIT FROM TRAINER TO LEARNING SOLUTIONIST

The challenges facing businesses required holistic, customised solutions which make immediate impact on their businesses. While conventional training will continue to have its place in developing personal and professional capabilities, business owners are increasingly exploring how they can get better value out of their training dollars and seek solutions where learning leads directly to business outcomes and work performance in the shortest time possible.

Conversations with clients indicated that sending their people to formal training sessions allowed them to acquire related tacit knowledge. The application of this tacit knowledge to business after the training (transfer) proves to be the greatest challenge. A case in point: an appointed in-house trainer was sent for a course on developing On-the-Job (OJT) training programme so that he may lead the establishment of structured OJT to support plans of business expansion. Both the business owner and in-house trainer reflected obstacles in bridging knowledge gained from the course and actual implementation. Beyond training, the client needed guidance and advice with customised solutions where its business operates and allow envisioned structures to be built quickly.

What are the implications for the TAE professionals in response to such business needs? It is imperative that we evolve and move beyond the provision of training programmes in order to better aid client organisations and ensure our continued existence in the learning and development space.

3.1 Challenges in Transiting from Trainer and Learning Solutionist

The work of both trainer and learning solutionist falls within the space of learning and development. While both endeavour to aid the growth of individuals and the organisations they work for, learning solutioning extends beyond a pure delivery of content and learning outcomes. It demands an expanded set of skills and a shift in mindset. The transition from trainer to learning solutionist surfaced enlightening insights on the challenges faced as one embarks on this journey.

As a trainer who performs a training delivery role with various training organisations over the years, there is realisation that there are gaps which needed to be addressed in transiting to learning solutioning work. Clarity on these gaps came as a result of challenges encountered in the various learning solutioning projects completed over the years.

Challenge 1: Knowledge and Application of Solutioning Process

Analysis, design and development for the purpose of training delivery tends to be straightforward and scoped. It usually revolves around the learning outcomes to be met as well as delivery methods

and materials based on learners' profile and organisational context. In normal training engagements, a meeting with the Training, Learning and Development or Human Manager will prove suffice to gather the information needed for the delivery session.

Uncertainty and unfamiliarity in the solutioning process is one of the challenges experienced as a novice learning solutionist. In comparison with training delivery, there is a freer field of play in determining the interventions for the client.

What steps do I take to bring the client through the project? How does one gather sufficient data for analysis? What constitutes sufficient data? What are some tools which I can use in the solutioning process? What needs to be triangulated and validated? What interventions are possible for the business? How do these relate to business outcomes? How are the project touchpoints and deliverables determined? How can the interventions be implemented, evaluated and measured? What happens if the solutioning project hits a roadblock due to other business priorities?

Solutioning work required a higher level of cognitive processing, decision-making and project management skills beyond that for typical training delivery. There is a great need to think through and deliberate on each phase of the solutioning process as there are always implications downstream. For example, poor measurement indicators set in the earlier project phases can impact how you measure and evaluate the impact of project on business outcomes at the end.

For a learning solutionist who is just embarking on his journey, the initial steps can bring a sense of tentativeness and an increased level of stress; inexperience in learning solutioning work and process, coupled with being accountable to the client's faith and trust in your capabilities, does that to you.

Challenge 2: Stakeholder Engagement and Management

A key contributing factor to learning solutioning success is the engagement and quality of stakeholders in the organisation.

Commitment from the business owner or top management sets a strong tone to the rest of the project team. From experience, the best solutioning partners are organisations with business owners / top management who provide excellent support; they clear all access to the right resources and personnel, participate in key discussion and meetings such as project diagnosis reporting, are responsive to communication, open to ideas, suggestions and input, and respect the learning solutionist's time and effort. Business owners / top management who possess zero or little of such characteristics often result in delays in the solutioning process. This impacts the development of deliverables and the effectiveness of intervention implementation. In one of the solutioning projects done, a lack of commitment from a business owner resulted in a two-month delay. Crucial organisational information for analysis and creation were not provided fully and in a timely fashion as he launched multiple initiatives for his organisation and team in the same time period. This impacted the implementation timeline and reduced the effectiveness of the interventions developed.

The calibre of the organisation's project team is a second critical component in the success of learning solutioning. A solutioning project is a partnership and collaboration with the organisation. There have been instances where selected project leads required heavy guidance and additional coaching / mentoring in critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making. While capability building of these individuals augur well for the organisation in the long run, the learning solutionist is loaded with an additional layer of responsibility and effort beyond achieving agreed project deliverables.

Organisational culture, norms and undercurrents further influences projects undertaken by the learning solutionist. Since solutioning projects are completed in the organisations with the heavy involvement of individuals in them, an accurate reading and management of the undercurrents, conflicts and power play become an integral part of the solutioning process. The culture in one client organisation bears testament to this. The business owner is a big-picture thinker and possesses excellent persuasion skills. His team complements him with their orientation to detail and execution ability. Although the project deliverable of overall business process charting was completed, the individuals in the project team were hesitant in sharing their thoughts in resources they require to execute the business processes. The conversation was facilitated for both parties to reach common understanding before the creation of needed resources for sustained application.

Challenge 3: Business Skills and Considerations

Training delivery engagements are generally straightforward due to its scope and cost. The complexity and higher costs of learning solutioning projects require business skills beyond facilitation and instructional design skills. Solutioning projects can involve multiple contenders for the same project. For a novice learning solutionist whose focus is on training delivery, it can be disconcerting to pitch and persuade the potential client in project engagement amidst the competition. What is your unique proposition? How do you negotiate on the project fees, payment and deliverables? How are client proposals and agreements crafted and written? How do you secure further engagement with this client upon project completion?

It is important to recognise that the context of learning solutioning projects is business and real-world focused. Conversations with business owners and project members must centre around how the interventions can aid business profitability, expansion and transformation. This requires both recognition of the context and business considerations in order to move solutioning projects forward as well as forging trust and strong relationships with client organisations.

Challenge 4: Personal Preferences, Attributes and Bias

Operating in a specific space for a prolonged period can condition individuals to adopt certain mental models and set of behaviours. As trainers transiting to learning solutioning work, it is easy to propose our specialities as the solutions to our clients. Regardless of the domain (e.g. on-the-job training (OJT), action learning), we slip into the usual frame of thinking and behaviours effortlessly. This may limit possibilities of better solutions for a solutioning project in a real-world, dynamic business environment. There may a further tendency to develop complex learning solutions as learning and development specialists. Some client organisations require simple solutions (such business process charting) to solve their immediate pain points. The learning solutionist may experience feelings of decreased satisfaction from the simple solutions selected they form one small piece of what he is capable of.

The degree of control over the pace of solutioning project is another area to grapple with. The arena which a learning solutioning project operates in is dynamic with multiple competing priorities. Momentum may be lost due to a month-long overseas posting of a key project lead. Commencement of external audits and peak sales periods can cause the learning solutionist to experience increased frustration from delays. There is a need for the budding learning solutionist to recognise the degree of control he has over such events and learn to work with unexpected situations.

A final piece of adjustment for the trainer-turn-learning solutionist is the difference in payment terms for solutioning projects. Engagement fees for training delivery can be completed between fourteen to forty-five days. Payment structure for solutioning projects can take the form of payment in

tranches or upon completion of the project. It can take anything from one and a half months to three months or more for project payment. A novice learning solutionist will need to manage his own preference and financial obligations as he embarks on his journey.

3.2 Possible Strategies to Adopt in Transiting from Trainer to Learning Solutionist

The journey of transition to learning solutionist can create a sense of discomfort and appear daunting for the individual involved. Strategies to ease these feelings can be adopted to facilitate a smoother transition process.

Strategy 1: Have Clarity on Your Purpose

What is it important for you making the journey towards learning solutioning? Your reasons can be noble (e.g. making a difference) or pragmatic (e.g. ensuring longevity in the learning and development space). Clarity on your purpose serves as an important motivator in times of frustration during the learning solutioning process and as you seek project engagements.

Strategy 2: Perform a Skills Inventory Stocktake

Trainers possess a ready depository of skills for learning solutioning. Facilitating conversations, designing learning and development of materials to name a few. It will be ideal to determine the set of skills which can be used in learning solutioning (e.g. process facilitation techniques; useful for facilitating data gathering through focus group discussions). Beyond providing you with a sense of assurance and confidence, the skills inventory stocktake can bring clarity on the niche of learning solutioning to offer client organisations. Further insight is gained on skills to acquire in your transition.

Strategy 3: Seek Advice from Seniors and Peers

Fellow learning solutionists can become your teachers and provide a budding learning solutionist valuable advice and support. Seniors and peers can be extremely generous in their sharing on ways to get connected with businesses and ideas on managing a solutioning project. Be genuine and humble in seeking advice. Reciprocate and pay it forward when you can!

Strategy 4: Maintain a Learning Mindset

Take the initiative to converse with business owners, top management and project leads about the changes and trends in their field and space. The insights which you derive from them will allow you to create better learning solutions and explore ways which you can continue to contribute towards achievement of their business goals. Use these insights as you embark on future learning solutioning projects.

Resources such as books and videos are golden and a treasure trove of knowledge. Read up on the latest trends of solving business issues (e.g. AGILE, data analytics, design thinking) so that they can inform your solutioning work and conversations with clients.

Strategy 5: Determine Ways to Obtain Knowledge of Learning Solutioning Process

Institutions like the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) provide specialised programmes to equip budding learning solutionists with fundamentals in learning solutioning. These programmes are designed to develop practitioners and can be an excellent way to kickstart your own journey.

Strategy 6: Explore and Market Yourself

Make organisations and individuals aware of your new role as a budding learning solutionist. If you are already engaged for training delivery, discuss the possibility of learning solutioning with these clients. Talk about ways which your learning solutions can resolve business issues and pain points with your trainees. Seek out institutions which support businesses on building capability and aiding business for potential solutioning work.

Strategy 7: Deliver Quality Work and Remember to Go Beyond

Client organisations place their faith in you as a learning solutionist through their engagement. Quality work and delivery of agreed deliverables and outcomes are non-negotiables. If you desire to establish a relationship of trust and secure sustained engagements with client organisations, make it a point to share insights about their businesses as part of your solutioning. Take time to develop your partners in the organisation's project team. Their personal or professional transformation is a testament of your capabilities and commitment to the organisation and an incentive for them to continue this partnership with you.

Strategy 8: Start Practicing Regardless of Project Scale

The best way to make the transition from trainer to learning solutionist is to get started. It is fine to start with projects of a smaller scale to acquire experience for more complex projects.

You will want to assess your financial obligations and determine the number of training delivery engagements to meet those obligations. Embarking and working on learning solutioning projects require a commitment of time. The assessment exercise will provide you with information on time allocation and potential trade-off as you make your transition from trainer to learning solutionist.

4. CONCLUSION

Learning solutions for organisation continue to change they move in tandem with the business environment. As TAE Professionals, we will need to adapt and reinvent ourselves to better provide the support they need in navigating this new terrain. It is imperative that we begin our own evolutionary journey so that we may continue to deliver what we do best; aiding the achievement of business and individual goals through a customised design of learning systems and facilitation of growth.