NEW CAREER PATHS AND SKILLS FOR ASPIRING CLOS

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Opportunities are blossoming at the top of the learning and development profession for people with a head for business, broad work experience, and the ability to integrate learning into everything important to a company.

At the learning function’s executive level, the focus is on business, but not business as usual. Today’s chief learning officers are a step ahead of the global, virtual, constantly renewing cultures of their organizations and their need for the right talent. These jobs can be richly rewarding, not just in terms of salaries, but also for the opportunities they provide to contribute to work that really matters to the organization.

But you don’t get a vice president or CLO title by taking a traditional route through a series of HR and training jobs. "Take positions outside the L&D function to get a new view of it and what the business wants from it," recommends Anne Schwartz, vice president of leadership and talent development at UPS.

Starting as a UPS truck driver, Schwartz’s career zigzagged through several business functions. Although she rotated through some HR jobs, she also worked as an on-road supervisor, the business manager of a package center, a district and then a regional manager, and a vice president for the Asia Pacific supply chain solutions business. She was part of the corporate strategy group for two years and is now in HR.

"These experiences gave me the long view—the storming, forming, and norming that companies cycle through and which is essential to understanding a business," says Schwartz.

More than training
The role of the CLO is continuing to evolve and has more to do with managing and developing talent than workforce training, says Tamar Elkeles, vice president of learning and organization development at Qualcomm. "To prepare for this role, it's critical to be a strong business leader who can create impactful solutions that solve business problems—not just learning solutions." She emphasizes that the role requires someone who can cross organizational boundaries and scale effectively with company growth.

"Ensuring there is a ready and qualified talent pipeline is a key focus for many corporate boards and executives today," says Elkeles. "CLOs today have to be prepared to manage various talent initiatives such as acquisition, succession, integration, rotation, globalization, and development."
While business acumen is an absolute requirement, managing organizational culture is another critical competency for CLOs today and in the future. "What differentiates companies today is the expertise of their employees as well as their unique company cultures," says Elkeles. "The most successful companies create and sustain a corporate culture that fosters breakthrough innovation and strong execution. The CLO's role is to manage, sustain, and evolve the company culture."

Companies seeking to hire or promote someone for a CLO position look for three characteristics, says Jeanette Harrison, vice president of enterprise learning and development at Pitney Bowes. "The first is business acumen, of course, but you must be able to apply it and show that you can represent the business."

The ability to lead workforce development is another key characteristic that companies seek in their CLOs, Harrison says. "You should be able to develop the skills needed to grow the company while continuing to develop current employees. You must also be able to rationalize the array of modalities that are new in the learning environment. Social and mobile learning are sexy, but what do you do with them? Learning leaders are being asked that question."

**Will more schooling help you?**

Some aspiring CLOs turn to academic degree programs in business or HR to build their skills, but are these programs keeping up with changes in the profession?

Dan Stotz, senior director and lecturer in the executive education program at the J. Mack Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University, says yes.

Academic programs reflect the need for aspiring CLOs "to develop expertise in change management, culture assessments, and business innovation." A growing number are attracted to executive education programs such as the one that Stotz directs. Five years ago, he saw that about 2 percent of the managers and leaders attending the university's executive education certificate programs were from the HR profession. Lately, the number has risen to between 15 percent and 20 percent.

"Individuals who are serious about becoming a VP of HR or [chief human resource officer] know that they need to continually improve their knowledge in the areas of strategy, innovation, operations, Lean Six Sigma, and even sales and marketing. The world-class HR leaders are seeking new business intelligence that allows them to clearly connect HR strategies with the company's mission-critical strategies," says Stotz.

**Under 30 and impatient?**

Young generations in the workplace are notoriously uninterested in treading the paths of their elders and are perceived as impatient for power. Must they take lengthy routes through various business functions to a CLO job?
Not necessarily. Alexandra Levit, HR and workforce consultant to the Fortune 500 and Obama administration, and author of the ASTD book *Success for Hire*, reminds us that demographic shifts will accelerate progress toward top jobs. "Boomers are retiring and there aren't enough Gen Xers to fill all the top jobs that will be vacated. So Generation Y—the under 30s—will be promoted sooner in their careers than earlier generations were, sometimes without long years of experience."

Levit recommends that employees younger than 30 prepare sooner rather than later to capitalize on the shortcuts that the demographic shifts will provide. For those seeking a learning leadership role, she advises: "Be a student of leadership and great leaders. Read the great leadership authors. Assess how leadership is changing, how it is becoming more collaborative and less command and control."

Levit encourages young people to get to know senior learning leaders in their organizations. "It's OK these days to ping a CLO and ask for a 30-minute meeting to learn how they got where they are. Build a relationship; circle back, and ask that person to be a mentor."

Looking to the future, Levit says, "Talent management will be more of an executive-level function, not isolated in HR." Like those currently in CLO roles, future learning leaders must have a broad view of business and a variety of operational perspectives as their foundation. Global competence—the ability to work effectively in a variety of cultures—also will be essential, she says.

Whatever your generation, if you aspire to a CLO role, keep these points in mind:

Learn the business of your organization and have something to say about it.

- Demonstrate judgment and the ability to apply business acumen.
- Diversify your experience and your expertise beyond HR and learning and development.
- Think globally and learn to lead virtually.
- Demonstrate competence in delivering results.
- Have an answer and a plan when you are asked how to use social and mobile learning.
- Start your journey now.

And when you get the CLO job, what then?

"Being a CLO is not for the faint of heart or for amateurs," says Harrison. "It requires courage and tenacity. Be agile. Dig in, and do it quickly."