70:20:10 – a model approach for learning?

Every so often a new “flavour of the month” comes along in learning and development (L&D) – and one of the hottest topics among training professionals at the moment is the concept of 70:20:10. Jo Faragher reports.

Popularised by consultant and former chief learning officer Charles Jennings, director of the 70:20:10 Forum, the 70:20:10 concept centres around the idea that the majority (or around 70%) of learning comes through experience, around 20% comes from social learning with colleagues and just 10% through formal learning such as classroom training or online courses.

While Jennings himself concedes that this should be “a reference model and not a formula”, the concept continues to generate a lot of debate among L&D professionals, with many claiming to have embraced the model but few actually demonstrating it in practice.

“They are so immersed in the training model, or at least a content delivery model, that they struggle to figure out ways to promote and harness informal learning, especially experiential learning,” comments Paul Matthews, managing director and founder of People Alchemy, on Personnel Today’s Discuss L&D LinkedIn forum.

For some, he adds, the concept is alien because they have spent much of their careers delivering portfolios of courses and learning content, so moving to a mindset where they are focusing on experiences instead can be unsettling.

Where to start?

A good place to start with 70:20:10 is to “find the hook into the workplace” for the formal learning you already offer, according to Ray Pendleton, CEO of training company Thirsty Horses: “It should be about individuals’ needs and training requirements, rather than a spreadsheet full of courses.”

In the past, L&D teams were more like “restaurant owners setting a five-course meal and then sitting at a table all night to work through their meal”, he says, adding: “The modern 70:20:10 principles mean L&D people must behave and think differently, perhaps more like the host of the party. You’re putting things in front of them [so they can] help themselves.”
This is an approach learndirect adopted when it merged with fellow skills, training and employability provider JHP in 2012. Employees from across the business were engaged in creating four new organisational values in the form of PACE: passionate, agile, courage and empowering. Enabling employees to access their own learning when they needed it, and to learn collaboratively while in their role, slotted in nicely with the newly merged companies’ core values of empowering staff.

“Empowerment was a real area of focus that came through from our people when engaging staff in the creation of our learndirect values, and on-the-job, experiential learning is a huge part of that,” explains leadership development specialist Claire Pedley.

**Letting learners self-direct**

One example of this is a management development programme designed to help managers embed the new company values, called “Managing with PACE”. While a large element of the programme is workshop based, there are also self-directed learning elements (managers are provided with a copy of Dan Pink’s book ‘Drive’, for example), and an emphasis on social learning through discussions on Yammer or virtual workshops.

The introduction of action learning sets, which relate directly to managers’ day jobs and current issues, has also been particularly helpful.

“Any face-to-face workshops are complemented by the social element, so we’re mixing the 20 and the 10. The social learning applies directly to what managers are actually doing as part of their roles on a day-to-day basis, so bringing together the 70 and the 20 as well. Giving managers the opportunity to learn from each other through their experience in a social way has been a real success,” explains Pedley.

For many organisations, however, moving to this sort of training model will involve a significant cultural shift. Jennings says that employers must commit to an “informal learning first” mindset if they are to succeed.

“What 70:20:10 tells us is that learning is a continuous act that never stops. That it takes place in different arenas, some that we set up, some that we just happen to work in,” says David Robertson, vice president for EMEA at global learning consultancy The Forum Corporation. “If you think about it this way, you can help to move your culture away from a situation where people just turn up to a training event not knowing what they’re doing or why they’re there.”
Achieving a balance

One of the misconceptions around 70:20:10 is that L&D teams slavishly work to get those proportions exactly right. Andrew Parkinson, academy development manager at Tata Steel Europe, says: “I believe many companies use the model, but whether they manage it or could demonstrate it is another matter.”

He argues that in industries such as manufacturing and engineering, where “formal” on-the-job learning happens through apprenticeships, for example, it is more natural to log experiential learning and tasks that have been completed.

Apprenticeships are, however, now commonplace among a variety of sectors – from IT and financial services to hospitality and customer service. With most of the learning coming from on-the-job experience, complemented by learning and guidance from tutor assessors and more formal elements, they are a good example of where the 70:20:10 model works in practice.

On a simpler level, putting the systems in place so that formal learning is more relevant to what employees do on a day-to-day basis and for sharing knowledge with peers can make a difference to return on investment and engagement with learning. This could be asking a learning cohort to tune into a pre-course launch webinar or do some background reading, or providing the tools to set up self-managed networks where staff can discuss problems and share solutions.

Place for technology

Technology also has a role to play, and not just in managing content for learners or recording who has attended a course. More and more learning management systems now link training interventions directly to someone’s role and encourage interaction through social-media-style interfaces and links to internal networking platforms such as Yammer. In this way, employers can send out prompts to course cohorts to see whether or not learning has been observed, or facilitate group discussion by hosting a virtual workshop.

Measuring the 70% experiential learning component is rarely black and white, however. We see the outcomes of tasks that people perform, but it is almost impossible to work out how they got there and how they acquired the knowledge to do so.

Rosemary Bailey, co-founder and director of L&D specialists OnTrack International, says simply recognising that someone can handle something that previously had been out of their comfort zone can provide tangible evidence of success: “It’s about how you connect any training initiative with what’s happening at work and show how that person has moved on – so maybe they lacked confidence to deal with a certain type of conversation before, but they can now.”
Introducing 70:20:10 to your organisation

For 70:20:10 to be really effective, there will often need to be a change in the culture of learning at the organisation. Some L&D professionals choose to introduce the concept explicitly to employees, such as Laura Creak, who at a former employer created a video around the 70:20:10 concept to highlight to employees that “learning comes in all forms, not just sitting in a classroom”.

“We found that individuals did start responding to categorising and thinking about their learning differently,” she says. “Of course, this happened in pockets across the organisation and there was undoubtedly room for improvement, but it was a good start to getting individuals to think about learning differently.”

What is clear is that finding success with the 70:20:10 model involves so much more than blending e-learning with classroom learning, or improving how you record performance in relation to training. It is a massive change of mindset for L&D professionals that will take them far away from content and courses, to stepping into learners’ shoes and handing employees the tools to acquire the skills they need in a way that they choose.

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