

“The Elephants and the Fleas”

In May last year at a leading HR conference, I was fortunate to attend a session given by Charles Handy, the well-known management guru. His presentation was delivered in his usual spell-binding meandering style, using the full power of modern presentation technology, i.e. some scribbled acetates and an OHP. The subject of the presentation was a story of elephants and fleas, with occasional references to Karl Marx and living part-time in East Anglia.

The key message, subsequently expanded in a similarly titled book later in 2001, that patterns of employment has changed. Corporates (the elephants) may provide opportunities for employment, but are no longer responsible for your employment – you (the flea) are! The fleas choose which elephant to ride, and don't think too much about hopping from one to another if it suits their own ends. The elephants need the fleas and must change the way they think about them to attract and keep them. But ultimately must accept that they will hop off when the benefits of being elsewhere outweigh the benefits of staying.

In management speak, individuals will take increasing ownership for their own careers as the companies that employ them increasingly struggle to do it or want to do it for them. The job for life has gone. This shift will be accompanied by changes in the structure and patterns of employment and the relationship between the employee and the employer. I recommend his book if you want to read more ... and by the way, the reference to Karl Marx related to the emerging reality that in the world of the elephants and fleas, the workers would own the means of production – themselves.

So what has this possibly got to do with training and learning?

Well, it seemed to me that Handy's argument about the relationship between and company and employee also affects the relationship between company and learner. A consistent theme at learning and e-learning conferences is about developing a learning culture and getting employees learning to learn.

We seem to have at least two basic agendas here. One is a desire on the part of companies to build a more structured, more coherent and more inclusive approach to learning across the organisation. This ultimately involves the need to provide more options for learners to engage with learning, and a shift in the responsibility for learning to the learner themselves.

But these initiatives are reliant on the learners performing their side of the deal – the second agenda. Learners have to be willing to take responsibility, and be willing to engage in the process of learning. In reality, this often proves to be more difficult than anticipated. Most learners don't behave like learners but behave like employees. Employees go on courses when their management sends them. Learning is something that has been done to them rather than they have done to themselves. It is also something they do when they are not doing “real work”. Creating self-service employee portals linking into personal development plans, learning catalogues and multiple modes of learning may sound a good idea, but only if learners engage with it. As I have said in a previous article, build it and will they come?

Coming back to Mr. Handy, learners don't behave, or more specifically, haven't behaved, like fleas. Fleas understand that they are responsible for their own career, and the need to develop that career. Fleas are motivated to learn, because they understand the value of learning. Fleas hop to elephants that increase their opportunities to learn because it increases their future ability to influence their own destiny.

And whilst, there have always been some fleas, in future most people will behave like fleas because they have to. Even talk of “human capital” and “people are our most important asset”, does not stop companies immediately cutting staff as soon as there is a downturn. In a world where knowledge and education is the key to employability, more people will behave like fleas and choose to take control of their career and their learning.

But this is a trend that presents many challenges. Elephants need to find synchronicity between their “learning objectives” and those of their fleas. They will need to increase opportunities to learn because it will attract employees, and help retain them, but ultimately it

ELEPHANTS & FLEAS

won't hold them. If most employees aren't yet fleas, how do they deal with the elephants? Do they wait to be tread upon or do they start to develop more flea-like behaviour, and take more control of their own learning and development? Maybe this is natural for a new graduate, not so for a long-term company employee.

Companies want and need employees to take more responsibility for their learning. Employees that behave like learners want more opportunities to learn and more responsibility for their own learning. They agree. We just need to make sure they each understand why they agree and therefore where the gain is mutual.

The Elephant and the Flea. Charles Handy. Hutchinson; ISBN: 0091793637