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From Trainer to Agile Learning Facilitator

How Teaching and Learning Works in Digital Times

Springer

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With 35 illustrations

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Preface

"Is it time to fire trainers, instructors even professors??!?"—this was the provocative title of a lecture I heard in 2014 at a conference of ATD—the world's largest organization for talent management. The speaker, Allison Rossett, a well-known L&E expert (expert in learning & development) in the USA, gave a reassuring "No", but with the remark that this could be thought differently in the next five years. Because one thing is clear: The trainer's job is and must change.

After the lecture, I talked to Ben, an instructional designer, who designs leadership development programs for an energy company. His son wants to be a trainer. Ben: "I advised him against it. Trainer is 'old school'. What 'new school' is, I don't know either."

This remark has not let me go since then: What is "new school"? What does a modern version of the trainer[1] look like? And what does "modern" actually mean? Why is the trainer's job changing, it worked well in the last 20 years?

The answer is obvious: The profession of trainer, like learning in organizations in general, is sustainably affected by digitization. With great foresight, Herbert Keller formulated more than 10 years ago: "Whoever has not yet found the connection to the digital age will soon feel the consequences. In the world of training, the terms 'high tech' and 'high touch' have been used for some time[2]. Only those who can keep up with the technological revolution and are also an outstanding communicator and performance professional will survive" (Keller 2005, p. 150).

The requirements formulated by Keller are high. And yet, with this book, an outline is to be drawn of what a "new-school trainer" can look like. Our thesis: The trainer will change into an "agile learning companion". Admittedly, "learning companion" doesn't sound very "new". But the German language does not offer an adequate expression that could describe the new role more precisely. In English, however, the term "learning professional" is becoming increasingly common. No matter how you want to call it: With this book we want to answer the question of how a digital transformation of the trainer can look like. The transformation of the trainer into an (agile) learning companion is of course only a symptom of fundamental changes in the field of further education and organizational learning: "New Work" requires "New Learning"! Therefore, it should also be about the fundamental question of how learning opportunities can be designed in the age of digitization. Beyond all "buzzwords", we are convinced that such learning opportunities must be designed "agile" over long distances. The new world of work creates (learning) challenges that often cannot be solved with traditional strategies. Timely and individual offers that can cover the learning needs as quickly as possible are required. Also, some challenges are so new that no one knows a "solution" yet. There simply is no "expert" who knows the solution and can teach it to others. "Agility"

1 Of course, instead of trainer, lecturer, educator or personnel developer as well as their feminine form could be used. To reduce complexity, this is not done here.

2 The juxtaposition of the two terms is about the importance of interaction with people ("high touch") as opposed to interaction with technology ("high tech").

therefore not only refers to learning formats and methods, but also to content. We want to express both with the term "agile learning companion".

The models and concepts presented here are based on scientific foundations on the one hand. On the other hand, they are based on our—combined—25 years of experience in further education work with multinational corporations, medium-sized companies, SMEs and many other organizations from the healthcare, administration and non-profit sectors. In this respect, they have already proven themselves in practice many times. Nevertheless, the book should not be understood as a "cookbook", because there are no recipes in the field of learning. Teaching and learning remain "effectively uncertain" (Luhmann 1987, p. 61), but recommendations can be made.

We will show that the digital changes involve both: enormous opportunities, but also risks that should not be underestimated. Therefore, the book should give trainers an orientation and guidance on how to deal with the changes in the field of learning. In order to not lose sight of the focus of this book, we have not dealt with some aspects of the topic in more depth. This can be done elsewhere. Of course, trainers are not the only ones affected by the changes. There are specific challenges for HR departments as well as for HR and organizational development. However, this broader perspective can only be addressed on the margins in the present context. Likewise, the present book is not a collection of methods, so in the respective chapters only specific guidance and further sources are mentioned.

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1 Trailer

Trailer

In August 2017, Spiegel Online reported: "Amazon, Apple, Google, Facebook and Microsoft are the world's five most valuable companies." For comparison: In 2007, four companies from the oil and energy sector made it into the top 5, only Microsoft was already there (Spiegel, 2017). In the same month, the head of human resources of a German corporation announced that the proportion of face-to-face training in further education is to be reduced by 80% by 2019. The associated savings—in particular the travel expenses—are to be invested in digital learning opportunities.

When we ask our colleagues in training for their opinion on the relationship between these two messages, we still often receive the same reassuring answers with the core message: "This does not apply to our business." This is a bit reminiscent of the famous "ostrich tactic": Disruption only affects others!

Digitalization is one of, if not the, defining issue of the present. Almost every day, new reports are published on the often dramatic effects of digitalization: There is hardly any industry, profession or business model that is not affected by it. Admittedly, buzzwords are often mixed with serious reflection. But it is undisputed that almost all areas of society and economy are affected. In this context, the word "revolution" is often used (cf. Schwab, 2016). The philosopher Luciano Floridi even argues that digitalization will transform our entire human self-understanding: Life will become "onlife". "The digital-online world is spilling over into the analogue-offline world and merging with it" (Floridi, 2014, p. 43).

It is not possible here to even approximately describe the different phenomena, structures and challenges "of" digitalization (an overview is given by Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Schwab, 2016; Precht, 2018). Rather, it should be very specific about the effects on training and learning. Often in this context, the term "learning revolution" is used (see Cobb, 2013; Quinn, 2014; Dräger & Müller-Eiselt, 2015). The Learning Revolution (◘ Fig. 1.1) is characterized by two aspects: The "performance problem" and the expansion of the "learning formats", which will be explained in more detail in the following chapters.

1.1 The Performance Problem

The dynamics and changes triggered by digitization are making learning increasingly important. Because learning is primarily the adaptation of people and organizations to their

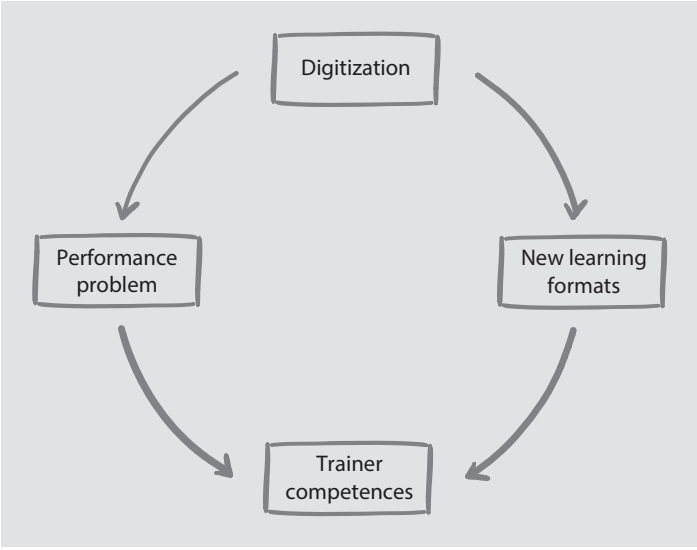

Fig. 1.1 What is the Learning Revolution?

environment. In times when this environment remains relatively stable, there is less to learn. In times when this environment is subject to great change, there is much to learn. The challenges posed by digitization for organizations are often summarized as "VUCA": volatile (volatility), uncertain (uncertainty), complex (complexity) and ambiguous (ambiguity). The ubiquitous call for "agility" is fueled by the desire to be able to cope with these challenges better. However, the term "agility" is in danger of becoming another meaningless buzzword under which anything can be subsumed. "Agile" in its original meaning always has something to do with "adaptability".

To that extent, "learning" is an essential part of all agile approaches. Both the individual employees and the companies themselves are more than ever dependent on keeping their knowledge and skills up to date. Learning plays a decisive role today in order to not only secure competitiveness, but also to maintain it in the future. Numerous studies confirm this assessment: "Lifelong learning is increasingly becoming a key competitive factor for companies and the key to the individual employability of employees" (Vodafone Foundation, 2016, p. 15). In the research report of the Institute for Employment Research it says: "Against this background, one of the biggest challenges will be to keep knowledge and skills up to date with the latest technology. Therefore, (further) education will play a very special role in the future"

1

(Dengler & Matthes, 2015, p. 22). According to a study by TNS Infratest, 74% of the HR managers surveyed predict that the need for further education will increase sharply to extremely sharply due to the digitalization of the world of work (TNS Infratest, 2017, p. 5.). In the 2016 study, the question of employee skills was also asked: Here, with 62%, "willingness to learn" ranks as the most important competence in a digitalized world of work (TNS Infratest, 2016, p. 10.).

With this changed importance of learning, however, the requirements that learning has to meet today are also changing. Learning and working are getting closer and closer together. Learning is no longer detached from the rest of the work practice, but **learning becomes a significant part of the work** itself: Learning must be aligned with actual "performance".

Example

► "Old world and new world"

In her employee conversation, Petra agreed with her manager that she should do something "about conflicts". Petra picks a corresponding three-day face-to-face training from the further education catalogue, which will take place in four months. The trainer, Peter, is very experienced, after all, he has been working on the topic of "conflicts" in his seminars for many years. Therefore, he hardly prepares for his training anymore, because he knows which questions will come up.

Lars is facing a challenge: In one week the first feedback round of his newly founded "innovation team" will take place. As team leader, he has the task of moderating this round. However, he does not really know how to give good feedback. Therefore, he is happy when he comes across an online course on the subject of feedback on the Internet. He starts working on it immediately and can prepare for his task well. ◄

The first example shows the old world. The achievement of the agreed goal is not urgent, because there is no concrete, pending practical problem and it can be tackled by attending a face-to-face training during the year. In the second example, which stands for the new world, only short-term learning promises the solution to a concrete practical problem.

The examples should illustrate that the requirements for workplace learning are changing radically today. Learning is becoming more and more "performance support" and serves primarily to solve problems, rather than to accumulate knowledge. We also like to speak here of **learning and applying** in contrast to **learning and storing.** Because the actual purpose of workplace learning is that employees do their "job" well or better and can adapt to changed conditions. Under the conditions of digital transformation, learning

must increasingly follow the primacy of performance, of "applying". Offers that follow the primacy of "storing" will become obsolete sooner or later.

▶ Example

Example

A typical example of "learning and storing" are the "onboarding" trainings of many companies. Here, new employees are presented with a wealth of information in multi-day events that not only far exceeds the participants' intake capacity—the information (e.g. "How do I apply for maternity leave?") often has little or nothing to do with the current practice of the employees. Whether the employee can remember the information months later or whether it will ever be relevant may be questioned. Similar to many leadership development programs or sales trainings, because the actual application of what has been learned often only takes place—if at all—months later. ◀

Perhaps one or the other reader may now ask: "But of course learning is there to really apply and implement things." Yes, it is—on the one hand. On the other hand, it unfortunately happens all too often that learning opportunities—in particular training courses—are organized according to the **"bucket principle"** in organizations. For example, employees who "somehow" have something to do with the topic are sent to training courses, regardless of what they actually need for their practice. Such offers often follow the **"Nuremberg funnel principle"** by trying to convey as much as possible in as short a time as possible. The consequence is that not even a "storage" is possible, since the offers are hopelessly overloaded in content. The organization and design of such learning opportunities are more based on a professional, regulatory and/or economic logic. Learning theoretical aspects often play only a subordinate role. The question of the actual practical relevance of the conveyed content is also often neglected. This leads to high costs, dissatisfied participants and low sustainability.

Under the aspects of the "learning revolution", such offers are increasingly coming under pressure and are increasingly seen as a waste of time and money. Learning opportunities have "become autonomous" and have to be brought back to their actual purpose: **to improve performance.** Allison Rossett expresses this as follows: "The most compelling complaint I hear about L&D people is that we aren't realistic enough, aren't sufficiently practical about what is top of mind in the field. Clustering in headquarters does not lend itself to focus on the field and on the work, workers, and workplace" (Rosett, 2014, p. 140).