



Staying on top in challenging times: training & development in the pharmaceutical industry



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Chapter 1

Introduction

The pharmaceutical sector is a fast-paced and ever-changing landscape. Not only does it fall under heavy scrutiny from governments and regulators, but also faces increasingly well-informed and vocal consumers; with both high demands and a low tolerance for errors.

For Learning & Development (L&D) teams and professionals, the discipline has become vital for strong governance and accountability in all pharmaceutical organizations of any size. However, as the pace of change remains constant and the scrutiny unrelenting, the challenges for L&D when delivering pharmaceutical training courses continue to grow.

This paper will outline some of the key challenges facing many pharmaceutical companies; discuss some important case studies from pharmaceutical leaders, and take an in-depth examination of how innovative pharmaceutical training delivery methods can meet these challenges.

Chapter 2

Training & development challenges in the pharmaceutical industry: Challenge 1: Regulations

In the United States, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) have made it clear that companies must maintain ethical standards and practices. The FDA regulates a market value of over \$1 trillion, of which \$275 billion relates to the pharmaceutical sector alone. In this context, pharmaceutical companies must train staff to navigate these ever-changing and updating regulations.

No one is likely to question the importance of the European Union's Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP). However, these standards create challenges that link directly to L&D in the pharmaceutical industry.

The FDA and the GMP standards apply to the whole production chain; from the sourcing of raw materials to finished products. For big pharmaceutical companies sourcing semi-finished products from markets like China and India, this creates an increased L&D burden as suppliers must be trained to meet standards and compliance.

Between 2010 to 2017, companies in the life sciences sector paid out over \$22 billion in the federal government in the US to settle legal matters of non-compliance. Of this figure almost 80% came directly from the pharmaceutical industry. The potential financial impact alone makes the pressure significant and the challenge enormous for L&D. Therefore, the necessity to keep staff up-to-speed and fully trained cannot be understated.

Chapter 3

Challenge 2: Modernizing pharmaceutical sales

Traditionally, pharmaceutical companies would provide doctors with information about a new drug through their medical representatives and sales teams. In return, the doctors would determine the benefits and impact of a drug before deciding to prescribe it to their patients. This created a clear supply chain for drugs to reach patients. However, this model no longer exists. Not only have doctors become busier, but there are also more guidelines that challenge the ability to sell directly.

Patients are also increasingly smarter and well informed, harnessing their own purchasing power as individual medical consumers. In this context, the challenge for L&D is to equip pharmaceutical representatives with the right knowledge so they can be creative and engaging in their sales communications. These communications are also increasingly localized to strike the right tone with different audiences.

As the demand within the pharmaceutical sector has started to stabilize in recent years, competition has also increased as companies seek to maintain their market share. In this competitive landscape, the skills and efficiency of sales staff are absolutely imperative. This has increased front-loaded pharmaceutical training courses for new sales staff, which typically lasts six months, increasing the pressure for L&D to deliver tangible results when new sales staff members are working in the field.

Challenge 3: The communication and localization agenda

Pharmaceuticals are in global demand. In practice, this means there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to pharmaceutical communications. Considering language barriers and cultural differences – let alone individual consumers – this is incredibly challenging.

Multinational pharmaceutical companies increasingly need to tailor their product descriptions to fit their different audiences. This ensures a product and its packaging are understood by a consumer. It also serves to mitigate risks and dangers that could result from translation errors. This need for thorough localization requires significant support from L&D – both centrally, in respect to understanding a market, and for the localization employees that need training for their day-to-day roles.

Communication and localization also tie into the first challenge relating to regulatory matters. Thorough training courses must be in place to ensure compliance with localized advertising and promotions standards. These requirements vary across jurisdictions but dictate many issues, like how advertising conveys the benefits of a drug, setting out side-effects associated with it, and how standards should be followed through the supply and distribution chain.

Challenge 4: Meeting the training demands of a wide-ranging audience

In the U.S., the FDA has set clear expectations around the education, training, and experience of professionals in the pharmaceutical sector. To deliver this, the L&D function needs to ensure training courses are properly tailored and targeted across the entire organization. However, this is in the context of a hugely varied workforce, undertaking a range of diverse functions and staff with very different knowledge levels.

Companies must ensure they have established rigorous procedures for identifying training needs. Furthermore, the trainers themselves need to be appropriately qualified in the subject matter.

It's also vital that no organization views training as a one-time event. Instead, pharmaceutical training and development must be continuous, documented, and auditable. This thinking and structure will help the pharmaceutical industry meet regulatory requirements.

It's not enough to simply develop an e-learning course and assume that the learners will be equipped with the knowledge intended from the learning objectives. L&D services should be delivered in a continuous feedback loop to make room for improvements. Training should be monitored, feedback should always be sought, and outcomes tracked.

All this information can be fed back into the process to ensure ongoing and continuous improvement of L&D in meeting the needs of wide-ranging audiences. The big challenge for L&D professionals is the mammoth task of gathering this information and the resource-intensive process needed to update content.

Chapter 6

Challenge 5: Learners need rapid upskilling

More and more, new drugs are improvements or refinements of those that are already available to the consumer. And though there will always be significant scientific breakthroughs, they aren't common. For pharmaceutical companies to stay competitive, they must seek to maximize revenues from refinement drugs.

L&D has to respond accordingly in this context and ensure learning is fast and easily applicable. Learners often require rapid upskilling or a knowledge upgrade as new products become available to consumers. L&D has to meet this demand and ensure that training can be immediately applied in the field. Often this requires quickly updating or developing content.

To meet the rapid demand for skills, we recommend de-centralizing the content creation process and enabling subject matter experts (SME) throughout the organization to share their knowledge directly with peers. This is a home-grown approach known as Employee-Generated Learning, where SMEs have access to a user-friendly authoring tool to be able to create engaging and effective content whenever they identify a learning need in the business.

EGL speeds up the content creation process significantly by eliminating the need to rely on an instructional designer, and ensuring that content is coming directly from those with first-hand understanding of the business. At the same time, this allows L&D to take on a more supervisory role, providing course creation guidance only when needed. It also frees up L&D's backlog to focus on other high-priority tasks that can't be handed off.

Additionally, knowledge of how to create Microlearning content is vital. This refers to the ability to create short and specific learning content that's easy for learners to consume. Examples include 2-minute videos and one-pager guides. When the content you create is easy for learners to consume on the job, meeting your organization's rapid learning needs becomes more manageable.

Key takeaways

- The L&D challenges facing pharmaceutical organizations aren't entirely company-specific. Many of the big players are grappling with similar issues.
- The broad theme of keeping up-to-date in an ever-changing landscape can be identified in all the challenges.
- The longtime norm of lengthy, classroom-based learning is no longer sufficient to meet these challenges. Online learning – or e-learning – offers a timely and cost-effective approach that can help organizations keep up with the learning needs of today's employees.
- Knowledge of Employee-Generated Learning and Microlearning will become increasingly relevant to keeping up with the fast-pace of the business, and therefore, fast-emerging learning needs.