



Learning at the speed of global business

How can a firm bring its best knowledge rapidly to bear on business opportunities faster than the speed of global business?

Mobilizing a firm's best knowledge to seize business opportunities

Bringing a firm's best knowledge to bear *rapidly* on business opportunities at the speed of global business has become a competitive imperative for many leading firms. Executives seizing on new opportunities have to be able to act fast and confidently in an increasingly competitive environment. They need to know where the knowledge and knowhow is located in the organization, how good it is, how to access it, and how to rapidly mobilize it. How can organizations share knowledge at the speed of global business? How can rapid deployment be shortened from, say, six months to two months?

Traditional modes of sharing knowledge and learning, e.g. through an infrastructure of teaching modules, brick-and-mortar classroom, teachers and students, and transmission information may no longer suffice. If a firm enters a new business or a new region, anybody who has relevant data, information, knowledge, or know-how needs to be able to contribute. An executive can be teacher and learner at the same time, or facilitate the learning of other individuals and teams. What does it take to create such an organizational capability?

Required tools, skills, and processes

Web 2.0 technologies are often seen as the key to significantly speeding up this process and as such technologies become 'the new basic,' managers will need to master new competencies to use these new tools. However, while these technologies can help significantly, they are typically *not* the most critical link. The creation of a corporate culture that encourages fast and effective knowledge sharing, and that welcomes individuals with the skills to do so, can often determine the success of efforts to develop a technology-based *continuous* learning organization, able to learn *at* of the speed of global business, or *faster*.

Yet these processes can bedevil the best companies and CEOs increasingly identify it as a top priority for the coming year(s). For example, the CEO of one very large global firm has this topic on his business agenda in the coming year, and has created a new position in the firm to guide the effort to develop this organization-wide capability. The firm has identified three key related capabilities that need to be developed and intertwined to make "learning at the speed of business" possible:

1. **Technical capabilities** Collaborative Web 2.0 tools help navigate and communicate quickly. Managers often need to acquire technology skills and learn to use them effectively. This may be the easy part but it is a critical pre-requisite.

2. **Team capabilities** Managers pursuing rapidly new business opportunities operate in teams and need a set of individual skills to facilitate high speed and high quality learning in teams. While much can be gleaned from public sources about what are the critical skills, managers will need to actually obtain a skill set through a training.
3. **Cultural capabilities** Knowledge needs to be rapidly transferred between various parts of the organization in a collaborative fashion. By most accounts, this is the most difficult part of the problem—more than 50 percent of the problem!

In-house effort to increase the speed of learning

Developing a technology-enabled continuous learning organization, one that can learn at the speed of business, cannot be implemented by issuing a decree from the top. Instead, each organization will have to embark of *a systematic effort* to instill a learning-oriented culture enabled by individual skills to facilitate teams and use Web 2.0 technologies, and supported by a technology infrastructure. What does that effort look like? How can it be developed most effectively with the least resources?

For instance, the organization needs to determine if important knowledge or processes already exist in the organization in some form, and explore the organizational conditions, business imperatives, and individual skills sets that made this emerging practice possible. It will also need to conduct “pilots” in other parts of the organization to see if and how the practice can be carried over and scaled to fit other operations. It may start with a few projects that are aimed at low-hanging fruit to demonstrate the feasibility of cultural change. And last but not least, it needs to obtain buy-in from senior business leaders and enlist their help in driving changes to reward and incentive systems and the formation of a collaborative culture geared toward enhancing and measuring specific value in particular businesses.

Such a guided in-house transformational program can be difficult because initial funding for the project is usually limited, and the existing structure for knowledge transfer (e.g. traditional student-teacher and class-room based) cannot be build down until the new structure / culture is sufficiently build up (and only then in stages).

A Research Working Group to “compare notes” with peer firms

To leverage in-house programs, The Conference Board is developing a Research Working Group around the question—*how can a firm bring its best knowledge to bear rapidly on business opportunities faster than the speed of business? How can rapid deployment be significantly shortened, e.g. from six to two months?*

Starting early 2011, a group of some 10–15 peer companies will compare and contrast the conduct, progress, and outcomes of their programs, in particular firms active with branded products in the consumer market, and which significant manufacturing / operations. Working with thought leaders and presenters familiar with advanced practices, the intent is to significantly help participants develop a



robust, practice-based, and research-informed perspective that will lead to significantly better programs.

Each participating firm will be able to send two executives responsible for developing their in-house program. This pair can include a business leader for whom this capability is critically important. Participating firms will be able to find out what peer firms are learning as they embark on similar programs. Research working group members will also benefit from presentations by thought leaders in the field—academic researchers, thoughtful consultants, and firms with advanced processes. As with all research working groups, a director will lead discussions during meetings and a lead researcher will investigate critical issues identified by the participants.

The outline of a joint research process could look as follows:

1. What has been tried before? The concept of a continuous learning organization goes back to the mid-1970s. What lessons can be gained from previous attempts?
2. How could new social technologies such as Web 2.0 and crowd-sourcing make this *different*? What is the promise? What are the limits?
3. What are firms participating in the research working group *currently* trying out? What experiments are they undertaking? What is working? How are these firms different? What are the underlying processes and dynamics?
4. How can the lessons from various firms be related to other firms?
5. What do thoughtful practitioners and practical researchers advocate to *create conditions* for a continuous learning organization going forward? How will technologies help? What are the significant barriers?
6. How does a firm manage the challenge of maintaining the old structures for sharing and learning while building up the new structure? How to break down and ramp up at the same time?
7. What do the *contours* of successful programs look like? What are realistic stretch expectations? What are the key issues to be aware of? What are signs of trouble and how should they be addressed?

Who should join?

Senior executives in charge of in-house efforts to speed up learning in large global corporations, particularly those with strong consumer brands and significant manufacturing / operations, as well as business leaders who want to act at the speed of global business. Firms can send two executives. Two executives, from different part of the organization and having to work together, get the most out of it.



The Conference Board Team

Kent A. Greenes will be the Research Working Group Director. Kent is founder and president of his own consulting firm and a globally recognized thought leader in the field of knowledge management. Previously, he served as head of knowledge management at BP, where he won the company its first Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise Award in 1998 — an award it has received ever since. He is on the faculty at California State University at Northridge and is executive in residence at George Washington University. He is also program director for The Conference Board Learning & Knowledge Management Council.

Research Working Group Lead Researcher to be determined

What is a Research Working Group?

A RWG is a rapid and targeted deep dive into an emerging issue critical to the C-Suite agenda. Peer companies will jointly explore the issue to come to a robust perspective that can inform C-Suite decision-making, shape organizational action, and help create a platform for organizational action. In the process they will work in a hands-on, confidential environment, with leading thinkers and thoughtful executives steeped in the topic and will be guided by The Conference Board RWG team.

A RWG is concluded with a confidential RWG Report for participants, and the publication of a Conference Board Research Report.

Program information

Web-based kick-off meeting: January 27, 12:30 PM – 2:00 PM (EST)

First In-Person Meeting: March 16, 17 or 18, 2011 (depending on availability of members) in New York City, at The Conference Board

Participation Fee: The cost of the RWGs will be \$20,000 with each participating firm sending two executives.



RWG Application: Learning @ the speed of global business

Yes, we would like to participate in this Research Working Group. We understand that in order to qualify for RWG membership, our company must be an Associate member of The Conference Board.

The fee for the Research Working Group is \$20,000.

Member Information:	Primary Member	Additional Member
Name:		
Nickname for Badge:		
Title:		
Company:		
Address:		
Email Address:		
Telephone:		
Cellular:		
Fax:		
Assistant's Name		
Assistant's Email:		
Assistant's Telephone:		
How did you learn about this Working Group?	<input type="checkbox"/> Mailing <input type="checkbox"/> TCB Website <input type="checkbox"/> Referral, if so by whom? <input type="checkbox"/> Email promotion <input type="checkbox"/> Email Express <input type="checkbox"/> Director of Associate Services <input type="checkbox"/> Other	

Please return this application to **Angie Hughes**, Telephone: **(212) 339-0463**; Fax: **(212) 836-9707**
 Email: angie.hughes@conferenceboard.org

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Membership Status: Associate -Non-Associate	Former Working Group Member: Yes/No	Name of Former WG:	Department Number: 160
Stars Verification: Yes/No	ID Number:	Project Number:	Working Group Leader Approval: Yes/No
Council Membership: Council Name:	Company ID: Invoice Mail Date/Method:	Invoice Request to Accounting:	