Interview with Andrew Kilshaw, Chief Learning Officer at Nike Inc.

Interview by William Strange

Andrew Kilshaw

Andrew Kilshaw is Chief Learning Officer at Nike Inc., responsible for overseeing the development needs of over 37,000 employees in Nike's global work-force. His varied background led from studies at Manchester University and Coventry Business School, to IMD, Lausanne, where Andrew received an MBA with distinction. Andrew has since worked with numerous top-tier global companies, and specializes in leadership development and talent management.

Your professional background has been quite diverse, focusing around areas such as talent management, leadership development, business strategy and change management to name a few. What is it that attracted you to this particular role?

Many factors made this a really attractive opportunity. Obviously there's the power of the Nike brand – one of the most iconic in the world, with its mission statement of bringing inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world (''If you have a body, you are an athlete'' – Bill Bowerman). This was a new global centralized learning function to shape, which hadn't been done before – I'm a builder and I thrive on global opportunities. It'sbeen an intellectual and pragmatic challenge to work out how to align a global function that serves the professional, functional and leadership/management development needs of over 37,000 global Nike Inc employees in one of the most highly matrixed structured companies in the world. We've made great progress in the past 18 months, and now have a very solid foundation on which to delivery great learning experiences to all Nike Inc's employees.

How do you align your own L&D strategy to support the Nike business?

At the portfolio level, we mirror and align with the corporate strategic planning process. During each annual cycle, we look at business strategy from a vertical functional perspective (for example, global sales, global finance etc) then six months later, from a horizontal market perspective (cross-functionally within a geography, category, brand). We support the same process – looking at three year talent development strategies in support of functional strategies (to build global curricula that drive functional excellence), then looking at creating geographic assortments from the global curricula to support specific business unit targets. This minimizes duplication of effort, while allowing for tailored offerings within markets. We

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use this process to focus on those priorities which will drive our businesses forwards – while we can do anything, we realize we cannot do everything.

As Nike matures as a business, what strategies do you see need to be employed to maintain the energy and innovation of its early years?

The tension that the matrix structure of Nike provides is a natural promoter of energy and innovation – being able to navigate and succeed in this ambiguity is definitely a common trait that is needed in all employees in order to be successful. Due to the matrix, there are always many fingerprints on any decision that is made, or product or service that is created. That environment, coupled with a real free market for good ideas (that transcends hierarchy), means that we leverage the power of the team.

Our culture helps too. We have 11 corporate values which we call our maxims. Many of these reflect the ''Just Do It'' mentality – such as ''simplify and go'' and ''evolve immediately''. The values aren't just words on a page but really describe and guide how we work.

Lastly, Mark Parker (our CEO) describes that the distance between us and our potential is far greater than that between us and our competition. Our strong sporting heritage drives us to better ourselves, set personal records and be the best we can.

What trends do you see emerging in the L&D field and where do you see the profession heading over the next five to ten years?

The biggest trend I see (continuing) is the democratization of learning – social technology is disaggregating ownership of knowledge. What that means for learning functions is that rather than being the font of all knowledge (the hub (instructor) and spoke (learners) model), we need to become brokers and matchmakers – connecting teachers with learners by providing virtual and real platforms where we maximize the value of interactions between the two. At Nike, we're betting on this right now by building peer to peer learning in to several of our programs – one of our function's brand truths reflects this – ''we are catalysts for learning, not just providers of learning''.

Another significant trend is akin to Moore's law in computing. The world is moving exponentially faster (search for ''Did You Know? 3.0'' on YouTube for a quick lesson!) and is also currently increasingly volatile. I believe the effect on learning organizations means that we are more effective if we can increasingly make learning (either knowledge or skill transfer) accessible at the point and time of need, rather than ''sign up for the course we're running in three months time'' – although there will always be a place for developing long term capabilities.

What are some of the strategies that employers can adopt to retain and engage talented staff?

I think the timeless classics still very much apply. Two I adhere to are:

1. Delegate and empower people. Not only is it a great development opportunity, when you give people power, they generally are respectful of it – to the point they will ask for your advice anyway.
2. Provide broad direction, but let employees navigate their own route.

Not only does this encourage diversity (and each of us will leverage our differing strengths in achieving the same outcome), the ownership this provides to the employee helps with change adoption – people generally don't fight their own ideas.

Have you seen a noticeable difference in the type of career expectations that the ''.net generation'' have of the workplace, compared with previous generations?

I do not think it is as stark as often described, however in some aspects, yes – one well documented difference is around what is called ''delay of gratification''. Millennials are typically not as willing to wait for what they want – be it a promotion, a pay rise or a new challenge. What concerns me in the long term is how this expectation combines with what is referred to as the lost generation – the fact that Gen Y'ers have been badly hit by the job crisis. Two implications of this will likely be a skills shortage once the economy does eventually recover, and secondly a significant gap between the haves and have nots in this generation.

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