

What's Working and What's Not in Online Training

by Harold Jarche



What learning professionals need to implement
for effective learning and development
in the collaborative workplace



The new challenge for learning professionals

The novelist William Gibson said, “The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed.” What training and development professionals can expect in the next year is already here, but not yet visible to everyone. The near future will look like the near past, with more complex social and technological connections inside and outside organizations. The rapid pace of change is unlikely to abate in the near future.

One thing is obvious, however: Learning is becoming more collaborative. In just the past year, we have seen several advancements, introductions and evolutions in the world of learning, including:

Silicon Valley and Ivy League schools are opening up their courses for free online. Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs), as they're called, are initiatives hoping to disrupt higher education.

Learning management systems have become talent management or social collaboration systems as they try to increase their relevance beyond training. Last year I worked with a client that had reduced its corporate university staff by over half and outsourced all course development. Recently, McGill University management professor Karl Moore, in Forbes magazine, asked, “Is the traditional corporate university dead?”

From this, it's clear — traditional training structures, based on institutions, programs, courses and classes, are changing.

Probably the biggest change we are seeing in online training is that the content delivery model is being replaced by more social and collaborative frameworks. This is due to almost universal Internet connectivity, especially with mobile devices, as well as a growing familiarity with online social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn. What follows is a list of near-term trends that should be taken into consideration by learning professionals during the next year.

Traditional training is inadequate for complex work

We should consider that, for all intents and purposes, the industrial era, including the information age, is over. We have entered the network era, and work will never be the same. What were considered good, dependable jobs in the 20th century are now getting either automated or outsourced.

Automated tellers have replaced thousands of bank clerks, but even more advanced jobs are getting automated as we connect the world with computers. The *New York Times* reported in March of 2011 that armies of expensive lawyers, who once did “discovery” work, have been replaced by software programs that do the work at a fraction of the cost. This applies to computer chip designers, loan officers, tax accountants and others.

It's not just automation. Any work that can be outsourced is going to the place of cheapest labor, wherever in the world that may be. The Internet enables hyper-competition, destroying geographical barriers for anything that can be digitized. This includes any information and visual products, from creative writing, to photography and video, to radiological images. For knowledge workers, there is diminishing value in standardized work, as it will be either automated or outsourced over time. That leaves higher task-variety, non-standardized work, which is complex, creative or both.

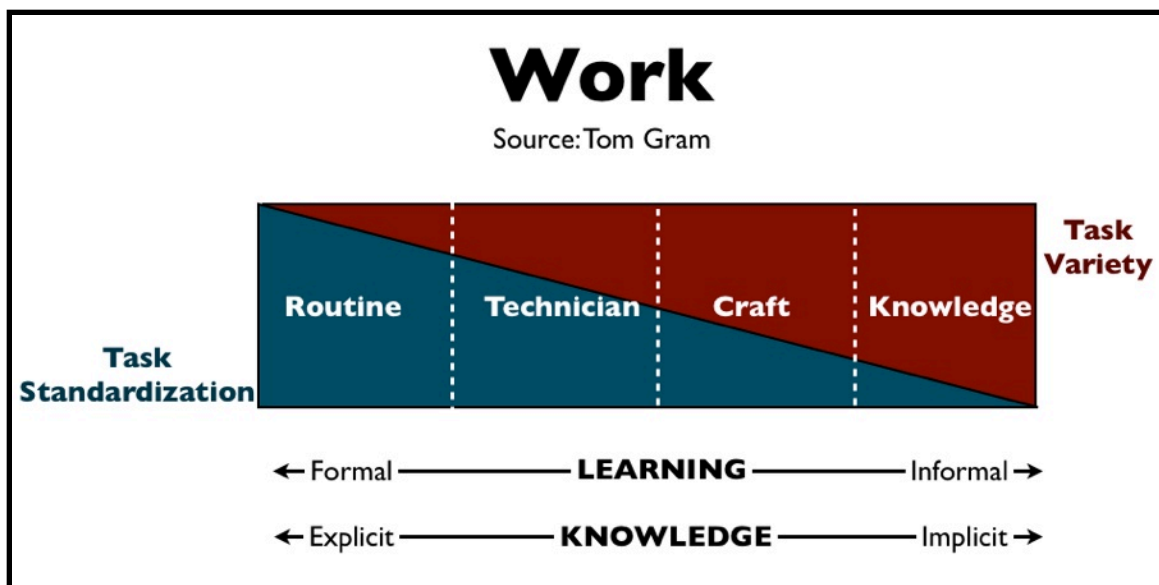


Figure 1: Valued Work is Shifting to Higher Task Variety

What's working and what's not in online training

How does complex work differ from complicated work, the mainstay of many workplaces for the past half-century? In complex work there are no best practices or even good practices, just emergent practices that have to be developed as the work gets done. Consider that in the network era workplace, neither training nor education will be able to completely prepare workers for doing complex work. Higher task variety means a growing use, and demand for, informal learning opportunities and a greater use of tacit (implicit) knowledge, which is difficult to share with others.

***“We always know more than we can say
and will always say more than we can write down.” — Dave Snowden***

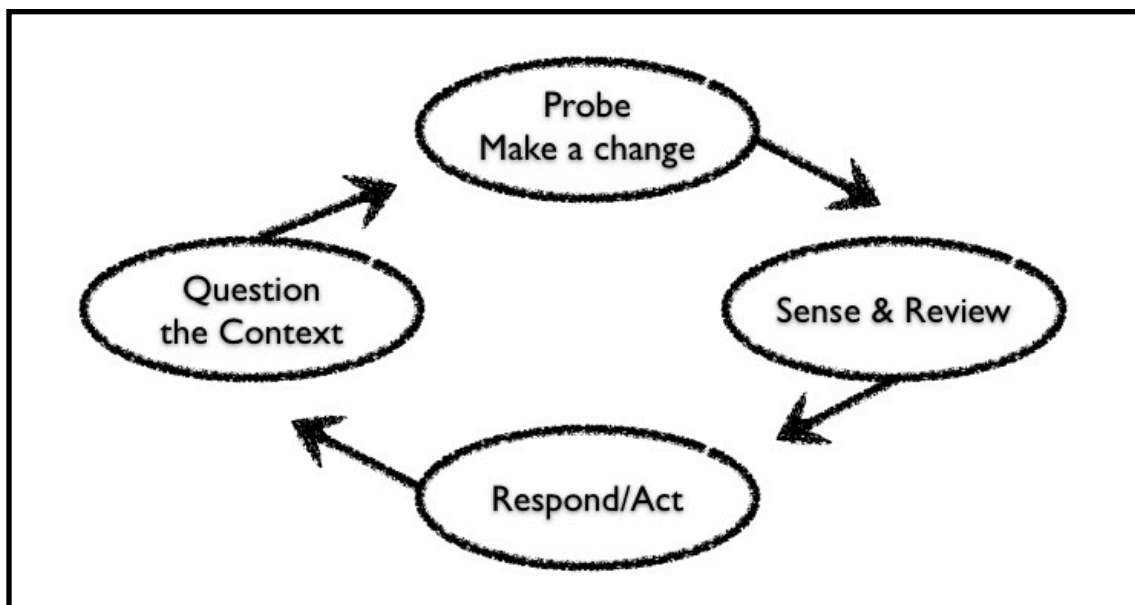


Figure 2: Learning & Working in Complexity — Probe, Sense, Respond

In complex environments, the relationship between cause and effect can only be perceived in retrospect, not in advance. It's like raising children. This is the situation more workers find themselves in today. In these complex environments, a “Probe-Sense-Respond” approach¹ is required, and this is something that training and education programs, designed in advance and directed by management, cannot address.

While people still need to be trained and educated, that alone will not prepare them for a networked workplace that requires more informal learning. They will need to learn

¹ As described by knowledge management expert Dave Snowden's Cynefin framework. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin>

while they are working, in a social, collaborative environment. One challenge for the training department is that the "Probe-Sense-Respond" framework throws the ADDIE course development model, which advocates design in advance, out the window.



Training Is Not Enough

The increasing complexity of our workplaces means we have to accept the limitations of training and education as we have practiced them.

We need to help people be more creative and solve complex problems, which are skills often outside of the training program scope.

Training departments need to add more thought and resources to enable people to learn socially, share cooperatively, and work collaboratively.

Knowledge artisans need social support systems

An artisan is a skilled manual worker in a particular craft, using specialized processes, tools and machinery. Artisans were the dominant producers of goods before the industrial era. Knowledge artisans of the post-industrial era are beginning to retrieve old world care and attention to detail, but they are using the latest tools and processes in an interconnected economy. Look at a web start-up company and you will see it is filled with knowledge artisans, using their own tools and connecting to outside social networks to get work done. They can be programmers, marketers, salespeople. They're distinguishing characteristic is seeking and sharing information to complete tasks.

Next generation knowledge artisans are amplified versions of their pre-industrial counterparts. Equipped with and augmented by technology, they rely on their networks and skills to solve complex problems and test new ideas. Small groups of highly productive knowledge artisans are capable of producing goods and services that used to take much larger teams and resources. In addition to redefining how work is done,

What's working and what's not in online training

knowledge artisans are creating new organizational structures and business models, such as virtual companies, crowd-sourced product development and alternative currencies.

Knowledge artisans not only design the work, but they can also do the work. It is not passed down an assembly line. Many integrate marketing, sales and customer service with their creations. To ensure that they stay current, they become members of various “guilds,” known today as “communities of practice” or “knowledge networks.” One of the earliest knowledge guilds was the open source community, which developed many of the communication tools and processes used by knowledge artisans today: distributed work; results-only work environments; blogs & wikis for sharing; agile programming; flattened hierarchies; and much more.



Knowledge Artisans

Companies will employ or work with more contractual, shorter-term artisanal workers, many who bring their own learning networks.

Training departments must be ready to adapt to knowledge artisans with a greater emphasis on collaborating and connecting with their external online networks.

Narrating work helps everyone learn

Networked learning is changing the training world. As with knowledge artisans, many learners now own their knowledge-sharing networks. What does it mean to own a knowledge-sharing network? Today, content capture and creation tools let people tell their own stories and weave these together to share in their networks. It's called “narrating your work” and has been done by coders and programmers for decades as they “learn out loud.” What started as forums and wikis quickly evolved into more robust networks and communities. Programmers who share their work process and solutions in public are building a resource for other programmers looking to do the same type of work. This makes the whole programming environment smarter. Organizations can do the same.

What's working and what's not in online training

The public narration of what we do, attempt and learn on a daily basis not only helps us help others, but also puts us in a position to get help from peers. When your co-workers know what you're working on and what problems you run into, they can offer their experience. Still, these days, few people work in the same room as all their co-workers, so they rely on the Internet to offer them a common space to find and offer work narration.

Narration helps everyone get smarter. John Stepper, managing director at Deutsche Bank, says that everyone should work and learn "out loud." If you're confused about what to write, Stepper suggests posting about what you're working on every day, who you're meeting with, the research you're doing, the articles you find relevant, lessons you learned and mistakes you made. These insights are valuable to people trying to train others how to do similar things. He also recommends creating short posts that are easy-to-skim; they make this kind of narration practical for both the author and the audience.

Narration is turning one's tacit knowledge — what you know — into explicit knowledge — what you can share. Developing good narration skills takes time and practice. Just adding finished reports to a knowledge base does not help others understand how that report was developed. This is where online activity streams and micro-blogging have helped organizational learning. People can see the flow of work in small bits of conversation that, over time, become patterns. Narration of work is the first step in integrating learning into the workflow.

Online learning can be looked at as either **stock** or **flow**. Stock is organized for reference and does not change frequently. Courses are stock. Flow is timely and engaging. Narration of work in social networks is flow. With access to more learning flow, via social technologies, highly networked workers can have a much broader, deeper and richer learning experience than any workplace learning professional could ever design in advance.

A worker today can ask questions to a worldwide support network on a platform like Twitter and get an answer in minutes. Deeper questions can be addressed on a service like Quora, where responses get voted on by the community. Many experts worldwide are now narrating their work and making it freely available on the Internet. A new form of distributed cognitive apprenticeship is now available, and knowledge workers are taking advantage of this.

“Chance favors the connected mind.” — Steven Berlin Johnson

Training departments should put a greater emphasis on learning flow. Stories are an excellent example of learning flow. For millennia, we have learned through stories. This is how gamers and hackers, the digital pioneers, have learned how to learn without curriculum, courses or instructors:

- **They share their stories.**
- **They know there is no user manual.**
- **They embrace the flow.**



Ensuring Knowledge Flow

Capture as much as possible and create digital artifacts.

Share as much as possible. Make it the default action by offering entrance into social networks to everyone. [e.g. feed readers, social bookmarks, blogs, photos, videos, social networks, activity streams].

Keep everything open and transparent [do not create “walled gardens”]; the key to useful information is being able to find it.

Support easy-to-make connections; between people, and with digital resources.

Encourage collaboration to solve complex problems

“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a passion for something that they know how to do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better.”

— Etienne Wenger

Communities of practice should be thought of as networks, not cohesive groups. In a network, joint activities are cooperative and non-directive. No one is completely in charge. Communities and networks exemplify complexity, with fuzzy boundaries, shifting cultures and semi-autonomous members.

Networked communities are good structures for dealing with complexity, where emerging practices can be tested and loose social ties can help facilitate faster learning feedback loops without hierarchical constraints. Effective communities of practice can help solve problems, retain talent and develop new strategies. They are not bound by reporting lines, so knowledge can flow freely.

Supporting online communities of practice is a lot like dancing, there's constant give and take. Consider a community a dance space, where some people are skilled and others less so, while in fleeting but pervasive contact with partners of varying abilities. It's a constantly negotiated space, dependent on who shows up, who plays and who dances. Thriving in this community depends on getting introduced to the right people; some to dance with and others to talk to. This is the job of the community manager, a new and growing role for training and development.

What's working and what's not in online training

Here are some guidelines for community managers, based on several years of observing and being engaged in online communities.



Community Management

Communities often don't grow the way they are planned. Design communities for change, with flexible boundaries and structures.

Communities don't want to be "managed" — they want to be nurtured. Community managers must lead with a gentle hand.

Building community means giving up control. There is a constant dynamic tension in communities over control versus member empowerment.

Building community is not about collecting as many people as possible. Community managers should focus on improving the quality of conversations and knowledge-sharing, not the quantity.

Make all learning initiatives collaborative

Training professionals used to have it relatively easy. They only had to run courses and send people off to work. Online courses replicated the classroom. But online communities are not like classrooms. Now that we are all connected by networks, more of our work is dependent on others — and so is our learning. The future of online training is in improving collaboration.

Basically, most workers are only paid to do one thing — solve problems. But it is getting much more difficult to do this on our own, as author Robert Kelley at Carnegie Mellon University showed in research for his book, *How to be a Star at Work*. In interviewing knowledge workers, Kelley found that most people just don't have all the knowledge in their heads to do their work any more. Workers need to collaborate and share their knowledge. This is where learning professionals can help, by improving online collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

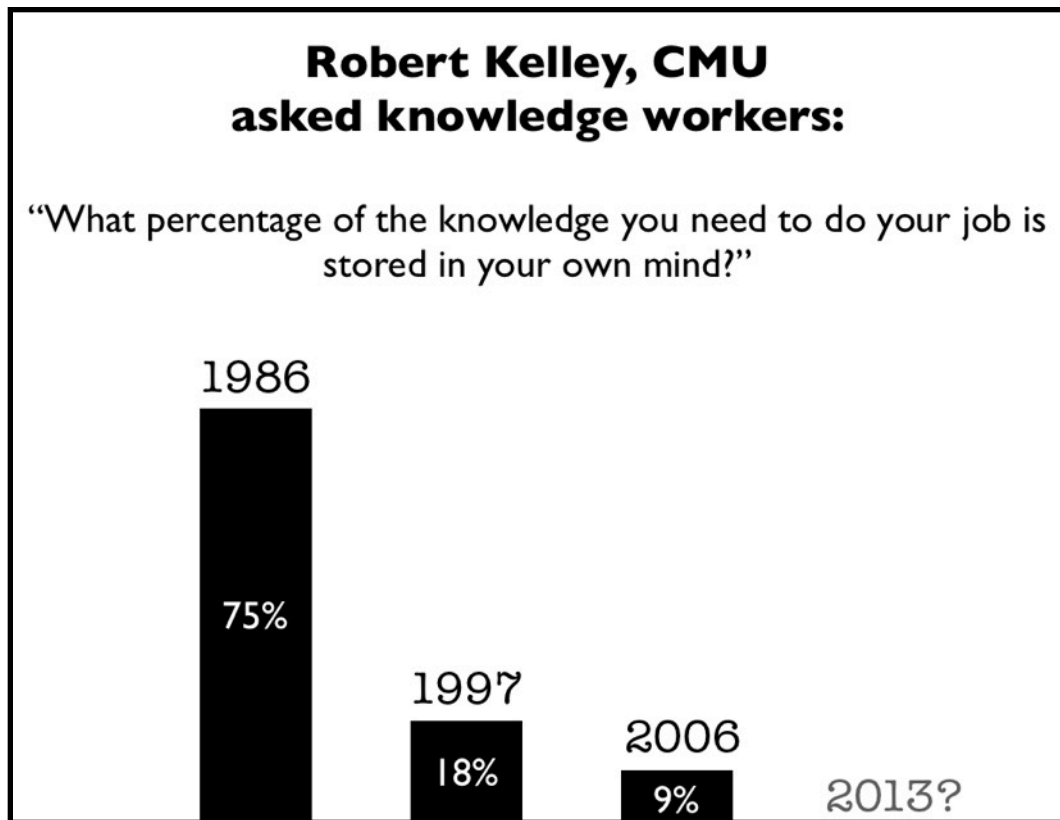


Figure 3: The Increasing Need to Share Knowledge

Shifting from an online content delivery to a collaboration focus enables the training department to concentrate on work performance — not learning, and not knowledge. “How can we help you work?” should be the mantra of all training departments. Helping people work together is the mission.

The primary function of learning professionals should be connecting and communicating, based on three core processes:

- 1. Facilitating collaborative work and learning amongst workers, especially as peers.**
- 2. Sensing patterns and helping to develop better shared-workplace learning practices.**
- 3. Working with management to fund and develop appropriate new tools and collaboration processes.**



How Online Collaboration Can Help

Use networked technologies to connect any “how-to” learning to the actual task. Show and tell only works if it can be put into practice. The forgetting curve is steep when there is no practice.

Start an on-going how-to video or paper series, in which you ask people to recap the learnings after they complete a project in order to share their experience with others.

Create online spaces to talk about things and capture what is passed on. Get these conversations in the open where they can be shared. Online networks are designed for sharing.

Break down artificial barriers. Establish transparency as the default mode, so that anyone can know what others are doing. Unblock knowledge-sharing bottlenecks.

Move formal training sessions online where they can be recorded and shared with a wider group.

After a project is completed, use web conferencing to host conversations to discuss the learnings from the project. Record the session for future review or turn these into a how-to video.

Open your knowledge networks

The world is becoming more transparent, with instantaneous knowledge of events around the world. In a transparent company, power shifts to include those working closest to the customer. After all, they have the best customer insights.

What's working and what's not in online training

Being transparent, as a general practice, is how organizations can work better and get things done faster in the networked economy. Transparency is an easy concept to understand but much more difficult to implement in an enterprise. It means switching the default mode to sharing. This can be enabled by social media, but social media also make the company culture transparent. Unfortunately, a dysfunctional organizational culture does not improve with transparency — it just gets exposed. But learning and development professionals are in an excellent position to help transform the organization's culture.

With complex work, failure has to be tolerated. Transparency can help the organization learn from mistakes, but only if the mistakes are shared through practices like the narration of work. Workers need to be able find information fast, and social media can increase the speed of access to knowledge. Training departments should find ways to increase the spread of knowledge on the job, not just in the classroom.

Shared power is enabled by trust. Power in knowledge-based organizations has to be distributed in order to nurture trust. But the challenge, as author John Hagel describes it, is that “unlike information or data flows, knowledge does not flow easily — as it relies on long-term trust-based relationships.”

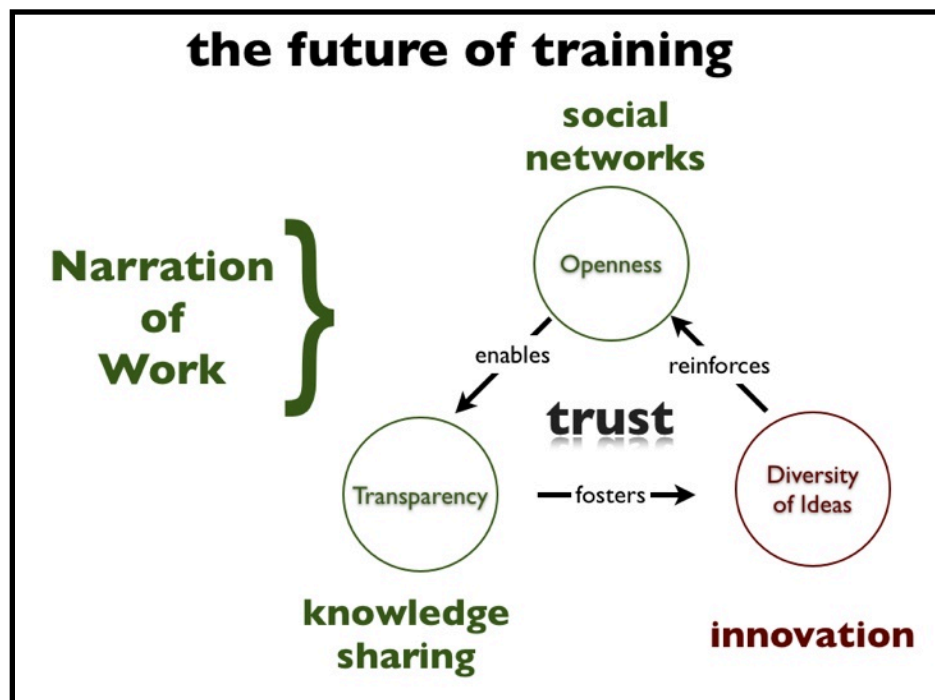


Figure 4: Knowledge Sharing Needs Trust

What's working and what's not in online training

Research shows that effective knowledge networks are open. Trust emerges through transparency and the acceptance of diverse ideas. Trust enables tacit knowledge to flow quicker and facilitates the distribution of organizational knowledge. Learning professionals will have to branch out from course delivery and program planning to help ensure that effective online knowledge networks are supported in the enterprise.



How to expand online training in the networked enterprise

Create and support social networks (communities of practice).

Promote transparency through knowledge-sharing.

Model and coach the narration of work.

What to expect in the next year

Jon Husband, independent consultant at wirearchy.com, describes a design framework to inform the networked enterprise. Wirearchy is “**a dynamic two-way flow of power and authority based on information, knowledge, trust and credibility enabled by interconnected people and technology.**” While this was developed in 1999, it is only now that a growing body of management and network experts agree that the time is right for such a framework.

What's working and what's not in online training

As work becomes more networked and complex, the social aspects of knowledge-sharing and collaboration are becoming more important. Learning professionals can be part of that change. Work is learning, and learning is the work.



What to expect in 2013 and beyond

The increasing complexity of work is a result of our global interconnectedness.

Simple work will continue to be automated (e.g. bank tellers), and complicated work (e.g. accounting) will keep getting outsourced.

Complex and creative work will increasingly give organizations their unique business advantages.

However, complex and creative work is difficult to replicate, constantly changes, and requires greater tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge is best developed through conversations and social relationships.

As work becomes more dispersed and complex, training courses should at a minimum be more collaborative and accessible online. Recording course material makes it shareable.

In addition, social learning networks enable better and faster knowledge feedback loops. But hierarchies constrain social interactions, so traditional management models will also have to change.

Learning amongst ourselves is the real work in social businesses and training development professionals must support social learning.

About the Author



Harold Jarche helps organizations create the environment necessary to foster innovation. He has been described as “a keen subversive of the last century’s management and education models.” People have connected with Harold over the past decade, through his blog (jarche.com) and professional services, for innovative ideas on leadership, social business, learning and collaboration. He also distills heady topics like complexity theory into practical advice.

A graduate of the Royal Military College, Harold served over 20 years with the Canadian Forces in leadership and training roles. Harold has held senior positions at the Centre for Learning Technologies and e-Com Inc. He is a co-author of *The Working Smarter Fieldbook* with his colleagues at the Internet Time Alliance, where he serves as Chairman.

About the Internet Time Alliance



The Internet Time Alliance, an international think-tank and consultancy, helps organizations work smarter by embedding learning and collaboration into workflow. These five experienced professionals have over 100 years’ experience and provide organizations across the globe with advice, guidance, workshops, keynote addresses and in-house events.

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