

# Democratising learning and development

## Case Study: Spark

The world of digital services is changing fast. For Spark this meant the rule book for learning and development was having to be rewritten at least once every six weeks.

As part of their move to becoming an Agile organisation, responsive to customer needs and emerging technologies, their solution was to throw out the rule book and democratise learning and development to help create a culture of performance.

## Learning, unlearning and relearning

Like many corporates, historically Spark had a traditional learning and development function that was seen as a necessary evil, requiring people to have time away from their jobs, which wasn't necessarily valued in the business. However, with the world of telecommunications and digital services changing so quickly, they recognised the old ways of delivering L&D wasn't able to support their people to cope with the scale of change and the level of learning, unlearning and relearning that comes with that. Kerry Peguero from Spark's Learning Enablement Team says the way they were delivering L&D was also creating bad habits. "Traditional L&D quite often has an unintended outcome

of institutionalising people where they believe they can only learn if training is provided to them, and we wanted to stop that in its tracks."

### What skills will be needed?

*The World Economic Forum surveyed top HR and strategy officers in global companies to produce the 'Future of Jobs' report. It reveals that by 2020 creativity will be one of the three most in demand skills, along with complex problem-solving and critical thinking.*

#### Top 10 skills

##### in 2020

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

##### in 2015

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Coordinating with Others
3. People Management
4. Critical Thinking
5. Negotiation
6. Quality Control
7. Service Orientation
8. Judgment and Decision Making
9. Active Listening
10. Creativity



Source: Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum

## Creating the Netflix of learning

When Spark decided to democratise learning and create a culture of user generated learning, they went to the market to look for

an off-the-shelf product to support this. Unable to find a learning management system that suited their needs, they decided to build their own.

Ako (short for akoranga which means to learn) was built in five weeks and went live in April 2018. Since then it has been updated to enhance, fix, and create functionality driven by feedback from their people.

Spark uses the Netflix analogy to describe Ako. Put simply, people create learning content using numerous methods (including Rise software) for others to consume, as opposed to traditional L&D content which is served up like a TV viewing schedule.

Content is tagged to key performance indicators (KPIs) giving people a direct correlation between the acquisition of knowledge, and the impact on performance, which helps them lift their performance. It's also personalised and gives recommendations on what content to consume to help them achieve their goals. This continues the Netflix analogy, the data behind the modules helps determine which ones are actually lifting performance outcomes.



**“There's a massive amount of talent within our people and they're the ones who are best positioned to explain to somebody else how they might go about something, rather**

**than somebody from L&D who doesn't understand that subject having to become upskilled to translate it into a form that other people can consume.”** Kerry Peguero, Spark

Practical examples of Ako content include a team member identifying a trend in consumer calls and then troubleshooting it. “They went and did a bit of digging into it. They found a solution, they built a module, they developed the comms to go with it and shared it with the rest of the channel. They've built their brand and they've solved a problem for the business at the same time,” Kerry says.

As people get more familiar with Ako and generating content, the L&D team has been less involved in content creation, with their role now focused more on enabling performance and providing peer review.

However, L&D still leads work on compliance matters like workplace health and safety and legislative requirements which don't naturally fit with user generated content.

18 months in, Ako has surpassed engagement rates from its previous platform, with more people using it more regularly and spending an average of 10 minutes in a piece of learning content as opposed to one. It has also helped to drive an increase in performance in KPIs, with some by as much as 500%, contributing to an overall rise in customer experience for Spark's customers.

## Orienteering approach to induction

Spark's democratisation of learning also extends to induction. Spark inducts up to 300



new people each year and prior to the changes it was taking up to 12 weeks before they were starting to contribute to the business.

Kerry says, just like the experience from other corporates, their old induction programme was also not the best introduction to life at Spark.

**“We'd spent a great deal of time recruiting for bright, shiny people who were going to be energetic and engaged, and our induction processes largely beat that out of them.”**

Kerry Peguero, Spark

By introducing an orienteering approach to learning, people are now onboarded in half the time and are usually in front of customers in their first week.

Instead of having people talk at you, their orienteering approach builds curiosity, resourcefulness and self-directed learning behaviours by asking new starters to answer a series of 'I can' questions like: 'I can talk to a customer about mobile products and services.'

Kerry explains how it works in practice, “We give them frames of references and ask them some questions, and they have to go and uncover that information and learn it for themselves. It's not prescribed. If somebody joins us from a similar field, they'll understand how a mobile network works, rather than forcing them through something that was designed for the lowest common denominator. At the end of the induction they don't need to know everything, but they need to know where to look for it.”

## Goodbye annual performance reviews

In early 2019 Spark launched an accreditation programme - a performance framework based on metrics driven entirely by hard data like the team member's net promoter score, digital activation rate, and repeat calls (for example). This has helped to align performance with salary expectations and career possibilities and create a clear, non-biased base-line that their customer-facing team members can measure their success off holistically and at an individual KPI level.

To support the framework, they introduced gold, silver and bronze badges for people to wear on their lanyards. This reinforces the full transparency of the accreditation programme and makes it clear who is performing to what standard. People performing at silver and gold levels are also encouraged to apply for more highly skilled roles in the company, as well as being expected to help lift the capability of their colleagues.

The accreditation system has helped create a transparent framework for performance and pay. “There's less of the 'somebody else got a promotion and I don't understand why'. People can actually see the performance of their colleagues, and they've got a chance to emulate that,” Kerry says.

## Doing themselves out of a job

Spark's democratisation of learning begs the questions, is their L&D team doing themselves out of a job? The answer is yes and no according to Liv Wilson who is Spark's Chapter Lead Learning Partners. “Traditional



L&D is sometimes a bit of roadblock. We need to get out of the way and let people do what people do. And I think it probably also goes to the point of L&D becoming more that trusted advisor and helping enable people, and providing the support and the frameworks that are required, as opposed to generating and saying how people consume the content to learn.”

Liv also believes that for L&D to become truly valuable to organisations they need to develop more business acumen. “Get curious about how your business works and what your measures of success are, outside of learning content. If you can get to that level of detail and that level of clarity, then that's your baseline for building your framework off.”

And finally, Liv’s advice for other organisations looking at creating their own Netflix of learning and a culture of performance – just do it. “If you want your

people to have a mindset where they really go hunting for information, are curious and hungry for more, and how they can be successful in a role, then curate that at the very beginning. Set them up for success as soon as they walk in the door.”



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### **About Spark**

Spark is New Zealand’s leading digital services company employing approximately 5,000 people. It has 80 retail stores, contact centres in NZ and offshore, and back of house and corporate offices in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

### **About the Sustainable Business Council**

SBC is a membership organisation, with a long-term aim to make sustainability mainstream within New Zealand businesses. They do this by inspiring businesses by creating a community of positive change, supporting members to go further and celebrating their leadership and success. SBC is part of the BusinessNZ family and is the New Zealand Global Network partner to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

