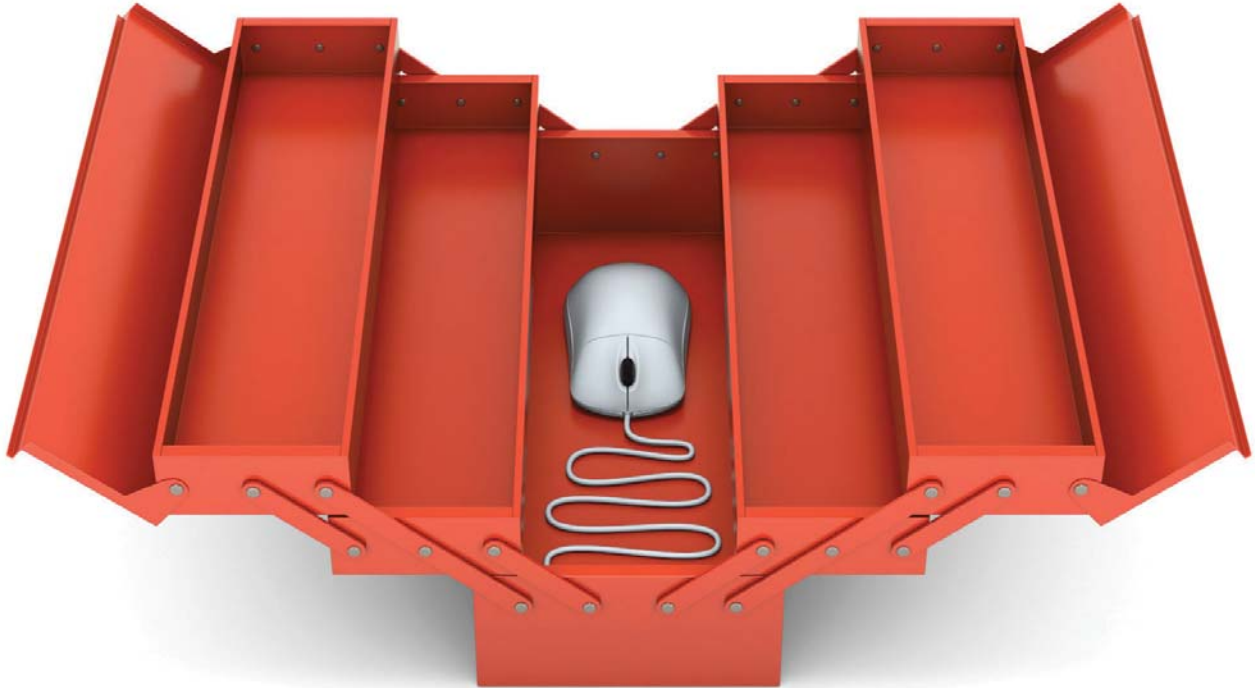Contrary to what the Chinese zodiac tells us, it isn't the year of the horse – it's the year of the Corporate MOOC. Sam Burrough and Martin Couzins explain.

MAKE YOUR OWN MOOC

This year you'll hear the term 'MOOC' in one out of every three conference sessions you attend. You'll discover that an enormous range of products on the exhibition floor suddenly have all the tools you need to start a MOOC. You may even hear that products you already own have everything required to run your own MOOC.

HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?

Firstly, nobody today really agrees what a MOOC is. When the movement began it was relatively simple, George Siemens and Stephen Downes ran an open online course to explore connectivism. Several thousand people from around the world joined in and at the time that seemed like a lot. The format represented an evolution of both distance learning and e-learning that made sense in our social, digital world. The term Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) was born. Soon after that, Sebastian Thrun and

Peter Norvig opened up access to their Stanford Artificial Intelligence course and attracted over 160,000 students. All of a sudden 'massive' changed it's meaning and the xMOOC format was born.

What constitutes a MOOC is changing all the time as providers experiment with different formats, pedagogies and approaches. Now the MOOC movement has reached the corporate world, it's going to evolve in other directions. Let's be clear; we're not just talking about how the big MOOC providers, like Coursera, Udacity, or edX are adapting their offerings to be more relevant to workplace learning, or how learning professionals can curate 'off the shelf' MOOC content to suit the needs of their organisations. What's really exciting is how MOOCs are changing our approach to e-learning as a whole.

You may be cynical about vendors jumping on the bandwagon, but if you deconstruct

a MOOC, most of us have the basic features somewhere in our toolkit. So, if MOOCs aren't really offering anything new and shiny, what's all the fuss about?

Look at the MOOC experience through the eyes of the learner (i.e., sign-up and do some yourself); you may notice a subtle, but powerful change. MOOCs create digital learning experiences that are more like everyday web experiences, than any type of e-learning we have ever seen before:

• Credible content from experts

• Communities rich with conversations and networking opportunities

• Available any time, anywhere by default

• Learning pathways that give control back to the learner

• Dip in, dip out, or complete a whole course for a certification at the end

Here comes the hard part. MOOCs are learner centric, (most) workplace learning isn't.

Your LMS may have the required features to run a MOOC, but have you got the mindset to create, or allow, a learner centric experience in your organisation?

How might existing tools and features be used to create digital learning experiences that feel just like the web?

THE MOOC MVP

Let's consider the Minimum Viable Product (MVP) of a MOOC. If you're not familiar with Eric Ries and the Lean Startup movement, the MVP is the simplest product you need to test a hypothesis with your customers. The idea is to learn what works and what doesn't as quickly as possible by going through a cycle of Build - Measure - Learn. If we adopt this mindset when looking at how we can adapt MOOCs to an organisational context, we can free ourselves from some of the usual corporate baggage, like fear of failure, or "that won't work round here" syndrome. So, what features would the MOOC MVP need to have? We think there are three:

1. A central hub

2. Quality content

3. A discussion space

Before we take a closer look at these three features, let's consider the audience, their interests and needs. If we're going to keep the corporate MOOC experience learner centric, we must keep sight of this at all times.

Here are three categories of audience for which you could create a MOOC:

1. Internal only

How might we use a MOOC to break down internal silos, or help build international relationships in multinational companies? Perhaps you've recently introduced an Enterprise Social Network (ESN) like Yammer, or Chatter. If so, you could use a MOOC as a scaffold to encourage take up and demonstrate value. Or you could simply use the approach to run a course for a generic development need like productivity skills.

2. Educate your distributors or supply chain

A MOOC could be an excellent way to support a new product launch, to help your distribution partners understand the new features and position in the market. You could use gamification elements to encourage knowledge-sharing between non-competitive sales territories. You could

look at providing compliance training to your business partners, to manage risk and build trust in your market.

3. Run a public MOOC as a PR, marketing or recruitment campaign

Content marketing has established itself as an effective way to build connections with customers and to understand their needs more effectively. Could MOOCs be the next evolution of Content Marketing? MOOCs have already established themselves as effective talent identification tools; they could well be the future of graduate recruitment.

Whichever audience you design for, you need to choose a subject with broad appeal and a strong pull. A MOOC demands high levels of learner motivation and, if you are going to spend time working on it, you clearly need some kind of business benefit at the end.

Let's take a closer look at the features you need to create a basic MOOC:

1. A central hub

How are you going to get people signed up to your MOOC? How, when and where are they going to access it? Are they internal employees, or are they outside your firewall?

You may be able to use existing LMS, or ESN. Some ESNs even allow limited access to external audiences. If you don't think you can create the right experience with what's available, you could look at cloud tools like Curatr, which allows you to run MOOC style courses for a monthly fee.

2. Quality content

Whether you create it or curate it, content is obviously very important. How you frame that content matters too. How will you structure it? Will it be linear...will there be different routes through the content...how will you signpost these routes, if at all?

3. A discussion space

Discussion forums are a standard feature of most MOOCs. They can allow learners to reflect openly and support each other through the course. However, where you position the forum can have a big impact. Encouraging people to have reflective conversations around the content can be an effective way to create meaningful interaction between participants.

This will also be where you get your most direct feedback on what is – and isn't – working. So, you need to pay close attention and respond openly and quickly to your audience.

THE LEARNER'S EXPERIENCE

Whichever elements you use to create your MOOC, you need to focus on the experience you are creating. This is every bit as important as content quality, or assessment. If you don't pay attention to this at every step of the learner journey, you will lose your audience. Ask yourself:

· What's in it for them?

· How easy is it to participate?

· What nudges can I use to keep people coming back?

EVALUATION

The best MOOCs have outputs. Not just assessments to test recall, they get learners to do something challenging and meaningful. This is one way you can create clear business value from a MOOC. Whatever kind of output you challenge your learners to produce, you need a way to review and give feedback. How do you cope with the scale of responses required for even a modest MOOC?

Peer-to-peer assessment doesn't have to be complicated, simply prompt learners to review other people's assignments and leave comments. It's a simple and effective method.

Another area in which MOOCs excel is generating data. When anyone mentions MOOC metrics, they always point to low completion rates. This may be harder to stomach in a corporate environment, so you need to know when people are pulling out and why. Maybe it's because they learned all they needed. More likely they were just too busy in the day job. With the right data you can answer that question and do something about it.

FROM COURSES TO RESOURCES

When Martin and I designed a MOOC on 'How to be an effective digital curator' earlier this year, we began with a fixed start and end date. But since then it's become something else. Over 200 people took part in the 'live' course experience, but when we stopped facilitating, people carried on signing-up and using the course.

The course has now become a valuable resource, without any extra work from us. This in itself should be interesting to anyone working in corporate L&D.

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