

DATAQUEST

We see technology as a key enabler for learning



The COVID-19 pandemic could be a big cue to develop responsive learning organisations, the right intersection of education and technology, and full-stack capabilities. Sapnesh Lalla, CEO and Executive Director, NIIT Ltd. tells us more about the new ABCs, especially the Cs, of learning as we battle, and move past, the crisis.

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What changes have you observed during the pandemic and which ones do you see continuing, and gathering traction, in your landscape as we move ahead?

In the learning and development (L&D) landscape, adaptability and agility have emerged as the most important qualities for a corporate learning organisation to have. Organisations that are able to respond nimbly to sudden disruptions display what we call the 4Cs of adaptability – one, capabilities: the need for specialised capability sets required to take advantage of the latest technologies and methodologies is exploding. Two, capacity: the ability to flex organisation capacity up and down in response to rapid changes in demand has become critical. Three, customer-centricity: a deep understanding of customer needs and commitment to delivering a world-class customer experience seamlessly are vital today, and four, cost-control. It's never been more important to not just reduce costs but also move fixed costs to variable.

I believe that this is also a great opportunity to define the future of L&D – the skills and competencies that organisations will need, what the future hybrid workplace looks like and how that defines the learning experience, how we can build a responsive learning organisation structure that can adapt to changing needs, and finally the technology we need to enable a digitally fluent learning ecosystem. At NIIT, we are focused on helping our customers navigate these uncertain times in an age of digital transformation. Digital is here to stay.

From students' interest to start-up activity, and investors, there is a lot of focus on edtech from across the sectors. What is the right way for a player to move forward here? How is NIIT realigning to this new set of market dynamics?

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These are truly interesting times for edtech, both globally and in India. Globally, it is on a high growth trajectory. HolonIQ, a global education market intelligence firm, has estimated that by 2025, education will be a USD7 trillion industry, out of which edtech alone will contribute more than USD400 billion. The research also found that globally, venture capital investment in edtech more than doubled from 2018 to 2020.

In India too, edtech is on a roll. Particularly, due to the pandemic, many edtech companies experienced a hockey stick growth, driven by the rapid adoption of digital delivery platforms. A national survey by advisory firm RBSA Advisors has reported that edtech in India is poised to become a USD30 billion industry in the next 10 years.

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Capital firms are also bullish on the Indian edtech companies and have invested more than USD2.5 billion in 2020 alone.

So yes, these are indeed exciting times to be in the edtech industry. But it is important for the players to constantly focus on 'learner-centricity' and continuously strive to deliver value for the learners.

So, what do we need to remember well to capture this trajectory?

A recent survey conducted in India by TeamLease Edtech suggests that 85% of the students say they failed to learn 40-60% of the course material. This is a worrying factor that reinforces our belief that the effective amalgamation of education and technology has a long way to go.

We, at NIIT, have always believed that we are not in the business of providing courses. Rather, we are in the business of transforming lives. We not only enable our learners with some discrete skillsets but also transform them into career-ready professionals. It is this principle that continues to drive us, as we adapt with the new market dynamics.

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For us, the last one year has been a year of disruption, a year of learning and, also a year of transformation. We transformed our business to NIIT digital, and all our programmes are delivered digitally. We also added quite a few programmes to our portfolio on data science, cloud DevOps, cybersecurity, game development and 5G technologies. We are in the process of exploring new products, new domains and new avenues.

You have been bringing out many interesting initiatives such as launching the Axis Bank–NIIT Digital Banking Academy, expanding the Digital Reality and Immersive Learning Solutions practice, and conducting research on adaptive learning organisations. What's the idea and ambition behind these?

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Our focus has always been to help customers realise the business value of learning through our efforts in running training like a business. Immersive learning is the future of learning – employees are now consumers of vast amounts of digital content and seamless high-quality digital experiences, whether they are watching Netflix or shopping on Amazon. We need to bring the same level of engagement to corporate learning. When it comes to immersive learning, it is not just the VR or AR technology that brings the experience to life for the learner, but also the deep science of learning behind the technology that helps the learner relate to the experience at a visceral level to change behavior. There are many innovations in this space, and we are keen on exploring these with our partners.

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As far as Adaptive Learning Research is concerned, I would say that it is an idea that was ahead of its time. We initiated this research before the pandemic in association with Josh Bersin Academy. We wanted to look at the characteristics of adaptive learning organizations and what makes them high performers. When we say adaptive, we mean that these organizations have aligned learning to the business and their L&D function is agile, innovative, effective, and efficient. We had conversations and surveys with learning leaders from more than 100 large, global companies. When we released the adaptive learning report in the middle of the pandemic, we realized how being adaptive enabled these organizations to be much more resilient in adverse times with their ability to sense, decide and evolve according to the changing landscape of the business. Interestingly, these high-performing organizations also spent 27% less than underperforming organizations.

Can virtual tools, robotics, gamification, cloud platforms, etc. really redefine the corporate training space in a major way? How does NIIT reckon these changes?

Absolutely. Technology is transforming every aspect of our lives and training is no different. We have learning experience platforms on the cloud that help employees learn in the flow of work. We have incorporated robotic process automation in learning administration, and have a number of bots who do everything from course scheduling to reporting. Our focus has always been to automate what we can to eliminate manual errors in learning operations. We see technology as a key enabler for learning.

What are your observations and game plans for concepts like blended learning?

We have been the pioneer of 'blended learning' in India, long before the term was coined. Before the pandemic, almost all our programmes used to contain a healthy blend of online and on-ground components. However, due to the pandemic, we have been compelled to migrate all our programmes to a completely online delivery mode. I think in the coming years, more and more training programmes will adopt a predominantly digital delivery mode, with minimal on-ground sessions. But, I wish to emphasise that completely digital does not mean that we have eliminated the instructors and mentors. We have always seen technology as a force multiplier and we continue to do so.

What about personalised learning and lifelong learning? Are you focusing on that as well?

Yes, that is also an intrinsic part of our custom content and curriculum design offering in the enterprise space. For example, we have created many onboarding programmes that involve e-learning pre-work, combined with virtual or face-to-face instructor-led training as well as performance support materials. We don't just stop there – we ensure that learning is applied through on-the-job training with managers and supervisors and learners can improve with continuous reinforcement and feedback.

Moreover, with rapid technological changes and emerging business models, the shelf life of skills has decreased exponentially. Therefore, it is imperative for each individual to commit to 'lifelong learning in order to adapt to the fast-changing realities and for personal growth.

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