Executive Interview

with **Shalini Merugu**,
Director of Learning Solutions
CommLab India

How L&D and Business Can Align
to Conquer the Future of Work

About CommLab India

CommLab India has been ranked first among the top 10 rapid eLearning providers in the world since 2019. Started in 2000, the company has 100 International customers in 30+ countries.

With its formidable authoring tools expertise and decades of experience in corporate training and rapid eLearning solutions, CommLab India offers the following services to take online training to the next level.

- **ILT to eLearning Curriculums:** Convert Instructor-led Training (ILT) material into instructionally sound, visually appealing, engaging eLearning curriculums and digital formats such as microlearning, virtual classrooms, just-in-time job-aids and performance support tools.

- **Legacy Course Conversions:** Rejuvenate legacy courses (in Flash or any other authoring tool) and make them compatible with multiple devices and browsers by publishing them to HTML5.

- **eLearning Translations:** Translate English language master eLearning course into 35 international languages — both text and audio.

Recognition

CommLab India is a Brandon Hall Group™ Gold Preferred Provider.

The Brandon Hall Group™ Preferred Provider Program is specifically designed as a single source of truth that can validate your technology selection decisions.

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About Shalini Merugu

Shalini Merugu is a versatile learning design professional with more than 18 years of diverse experience in Instructional Design, Learner and User Assistance Solutions, and designing and delivering Customer Training.

She is passionate about working with customers in developing performance-enhancing learning experiences that achieve measurable business results. This includes analyzing customers' training needs, developing actionable roadmaps tailored to each client's unique requirements and creating creative strategies to maximize learning. She leverages the strengths of various modalities to design effective rapid eLearning, blended solutions and performance support materials.

Shalini conducts customer education workshops (both in-person and virtual) globally. Prior to CommLab India, she worked at various companies including General Electric and SumTotal Systems. Shalini has a master's degree in English Literature from the University of Hyderabad and a PG Diploma from The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad.

About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

Q RACHEL

How has the Training domain transitioned in the last two decades?

A SHALINI

If I was to sum it up in just one word, it would be "dramatically." It has changed beyond recognition. I started my career as a classroom trainer, eLearning as well as classroom training, but primarily classroom training. And I still remember those days when we would gather for a full-fledged three-day workshop to train our customers on a software; in this case, the LMS and our content authoring tools. Now in today's world, if we were to recommend a solution like this, I'm sure it would be met with disbelief because technology has changed the game completely.

In 2003, the primary delivery format was still the ILT. And over the next 10 years, it shifted to blended and there was a one-size-fits-all approach toward most training requirements. It's not that we were unaware of the diversity or we were unaware of different motivations and learner styles, but we didn't have the bandwidth to really cater too much to all of this. When eLearning hit the scene, it totally transformed the way we looked at training because of advancements in technology.

With eLearning, we have the platforms where not only was it possible to roll out training, but also capture very valuable data and metrics. As we saw the training domain transition, there was a corresponding impact on our function as L&D professionals and, of course, the shift from classroom to blended and then to virtual training, especially in the wake of the pandemic. The pandemic just accelerated change in a way that we didn't foresee at all. A lot of training now became virtual. Even trainings that were traditionally held only in classrooms, like behavioral trainings and soft skills, it was easy to see technical training moving online.

Q RACHEL

What are the various challenges confronting today's L&D professionals?

A SHALINI

Upskilling and reskilling continues to be one area of focus. With organizations looking at all kinds of trends like internal mobility, for instance, it's not just about promotions and a clear progression up the career ladder; it's to support various career paths.

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Technology also needs to support the hybrid work mode. Even during the pandemic, when a lot of us were working remotely, there were still some people who still were coming into work and we still had to communicate with our colleagues. We still had to communicate across these kinds of constraints. We found that we could actually manage to make hybrid work work. It was just natural that training would follow suit. It is challenging because it calls for a different skill set to be able to accommodate.

Now, even the term diversity can now be stretched to also mean people choosing a certain mode of work. It's no longer just all these different things that come to our mind when we think of diversity, but it's also accommodating this diverse learning environment where people are coming in for training. We have been experimenting a lot with doing training with a hybrid mode. I work from home. When there's training in our organization, I log in from home. But most of my colleagues are taking the training in person in a physical conference room. It is challenging and it's also exciting, but we are making it work.

A **SHALINI**

Before designing or delivering a solution, step back and make sure that the learning is mapped to the outcomes that the business is expecting, to the business objectives, and to the corporate strategy. It's not enough just to say training was on scale, on budget and it achieved the desired learning outcomes. What if you're working on the wrong thing?

In the latest LinkedIn workplace survey, mapping learning to business goals is the number-one priority for L&D professionals in 2023. Once we have this fundamental basic piece in place, it becomes easier because then we are making sure that we are aligning our learning outcomes with the KPIs, with trying to improve the KPIs. These are metrics that can be measured, so it's easy to connect everything together. When we eventually reach the phase in the project where it's time to measure the effectiveness of training, there is tangible, visible data.

Q **RACHEL**

How can L&D professionals deliver business impact?

Q **RACHEL**

What is the biggest competitive advantage of any organization and the role of L&D in enhancing it?

A **SHALINI**

The people — and that's always the case. As for the role of L&D, upskilling continues to be one of the main areas; it's both a challenge and an opportunity. L&D is playing a more central, strategic and cross-functional role. We are partnering with HR, we are partnering with executive leadership and we have the responsibility to put people and their skill sets right at the center of our organization's success. Once we are aware of the strategic direction our organization is taking, we can make sure that we are building skill sets that are aligned with our desired organizational outcomes. It's not a shot in the dark, it's tightly aligned and we are hitting the mark.

Upskilling is creating a culture of learning. This is one of the most exciting areas because we are partnering with HR now. A lot of people are joining new places of work, basing their decision on this one criterion: "Will this place allow me to develop and acquire new skill sets? Is there a culture of learning there?" This is where L&D has an integral role to play because not only are we just designing and developing trainings, but we are also changing the culture of the organization.

Most organizations still worry about attrition. A primary way in which we can retain employees is to make learning a priority. When people stop learning, they just leave. One of the fears could be that "Oh no, we can't afford to spend so much time on people learning." But here's the thing, top performers are the top learners.

Q **RACHEL**

What should L&D leaders do to grow in their careers and make an impact?

A **SHALINI**

One of the best things we could do is invest in strengthening our cross-functional relationships. We really need to work more collaboratively and demonstrate our value to our internal stakeholders, whether it's HR or executive leadership. We also need to become more data-savvy, data literate, be more insightful about analytics and upskill ourselves in those areas. The biggest challenge for us is to prioritize our own learning. Unless we prioritize our own learning, we will not be in a strong position to be able to give sound solutions to our business.

Since technology is changing at the speed of business, it's now no longer a luxury to be informed about various things. It's a sheer necessity. We need to be a little bit more tech-savvy, aware of the tools and the trends, and especially the tools that will help us do our job more efficiently or in a better way. It would be very useful for us to have a roadmap. Obviously, we can't all suddenly start upskilling ourselves across 37 skill sets, so it's very important to zero in on the skill sets that are aligned with the kind of results that the organization is looking at.

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What are the business objectives of the organization and pick up those skills? In the forefront are things like business acumen, change management, ideation and even things like storytelling.

It's no longer just the presentation of bare facts and figures. Your metrics should tell a story. I was just recently talking to a customer who wanted the xAPI to pull in data, which would tell a beautiful story and paint a complete picture. I was just thinking about the way even the language has changed. We are using the word storytelling in the context of business metrics, data just drawn into xAPI. All these are things that we would do well to be aware of and strengthen ourselves in, have a roadmap, take charge of your own learning and be responsible for your own learning. No matter how well-intentioned the organization is, at the end of the day, unless we invest in ourselves in our own learning, nobody else is going to do it for us.

Here are some ways to listen to the interview on Brandon Hall Group's Excellence at Work Podcast:

iTunes   Spotify   YouTube

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EXCELLENCE AT WORK

About Brandon Hall Group

With more than 10,000 clients globally and 30 years of delivering world-class research and advisory services, Brandon Hall Group is focused on developing research that drives performance in emerging and large organizations, and provides strategic insights for executives and practitioners responsible for growth and business results.

Professional Certifications
Self-paced certification programs. Virtual group sessions for companies. In-person conferences and summits.

Membership
Individual and Enterprise Membership Options: Includes research assets, advisory support, a client success plan and more.

SOME WAYS WE CAN HELP

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Two annual programs recognize the best organizations that have successfully deployed programs to achieve measurable results.

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recognizes world-class HCM programs that transform their organization and achieve breakthrough results. This designation is the next step beyond the HCM Excellence Awards, which focus on a single program, and looks at the department as a whole.

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