An interview with Chris Yapp
Interview by Anna Torrance

Chris Yapp is Head of Public Sector Innovation at Microsoft. He has been in the IT industry for over two decades in a variety of roles related to the management of networked technologies.

He has specialized in the areas of lifelong learning, e-government, the creative industries and social exclusion in the emerging knowledge society. A frequent public speaker and writer on these matters, Chris is also a Director of the Internet Society of England. His speaking engagements have included the British Council, The World Bank and the UN Global Forum.

Chris has been involved in many government advisory groups in the UK and the EU. He is an associate of the Think Tank DEMOS and a graduate of Magdalen College Oxford.

What attracted you to working in this field?

Chris Yapp:

I joined Honeywell’s Computing division from the Financial Times back in 1980. I had been doing some work in high technology in the FT and had been getting quite interested in this area. Then, one of the people at Honeywell suggested I join the training department. When I told him I didn’t know anything about training he said that this would be a good way to learn! So I actually started in the computer industry in the training department knowing nothing about training – however at that time there were lots of people in a similar position. This is where I undertook my first big project as manager and pitched my first big bid.

After working at Honeywell for seven years, I moved to ICL Fujitsu where I was involved in a lot of standards work and big government think tanks. Fourteen years later I left for HP Compaq where I was involved with Health Service issues and finally I have been in my current role at Microsoft for the last 16 months. I enjoyed each role because they all brought different challenges in different areas.

What do you see as the biggest challenge in your current role?

Chris Yapp:

I need to keep abreast of the many issues that will have an impact on the business. I must be aware of all the policy issues that will impact upon Microsoft’s business in addition to the many developments in technology that we could use. Trying to fully understand and stay up to date with both of these areas is a never-ending journey.

What is the most influential book you have read and why?

Chris Yapp:

Good question. There is a book called The Deming Dimension by Henry Neave. I had the great pleasure of meeting Edward Deming, who is the father of the quality solution, when he was in his 80s. That had an enormous impact because it showed how it was possible to blend a scientific and analytical approach with a humane-centered method (which was the hallmark of what Deming’s work was in Japan and in his later life in the USA and elsewhere).

Also, The Change Masters by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (published in the 1980s) was probably what sparked my interest in innovation as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a technical or invention issue.

In your opinion what are the biggest obstacles to effective learning and development in organizations?

Chris Yapp:

The main difficulty is trying to engage in totally relevant formal learning. For example, if I want to discover something I can go onto Google and find it quite easily. However, when it comes to formal learning, I find that a lot of the courses are too big. Instead of spending ten minutes understanding the meaning of a particular term or
how something works and actually trying to get down to the nugget that you need, you will spend a whole day listening to some construct that somebody else has developed which is what they think you need to know. In other words, learning still tends to be supply side rather than user driven.

However, this is not the case at Microsoft where we have an intranet which is an incredibly rich resource. There are huge amounts of information there and our internal training system, Voyager, is also very effective.

Other than Deming, who else would you consider to be the key influencers in this field?

Chris Yapp:

Lord Michael Young (the person behind such fundamental creations as the welfare state, the UK’s National Health Service, and the move towards nationalization of major industries). He wrote the 1945 Labour manifesto and invented the Open University. I was the trustee until the end of last year for the School for Social Entrepreneurs which was the last thing he invented. He was not dissimilar to Deming as he was sometimes quite a prickly and difficult character but he had phenomenal insight.

Young invented the word “meritocracy”. He was an empirical sociologist and very interested in cultures and sustainability of organizations but was also a phenomenal inventor of institutions. The Open University is just one of his accomplishments! He was an amazing man who had a big influence on my thinking.

Where do you see development and learning in organizations in, say, ten years’ time?

Chris Yapp:

It is interesting to compare this area to the history of film making. When people started making films they simply left the camera still and filmed theatre because they thought that was all you could do with it. Then there was the famous train film, and then more advances which brings us to today where we have such incredible animation and other developments.

When it comes to training and development we are still in a similar phase of exploration. When we talk about real interactivity, we still tend to have a book with interactivity or a film with interactivity and there are still very few examples which are native to the media of e-learning. At present I have some really good examples of tools and learning materials that you just could not do in any other medium (other than e-learning) but I think at the moment we are still exploring and the range of skills that you need to create really innovative and compelling material has still not been bedded in long enough. We have glimpses of the future but are far from seeing the whole.

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I’m not sure I know what the future will hold but am looking forward to finding out. I think that the biggest change will be in the role of the teacher and if I could go forward ten years I would be keen to see how the teaching and learning professions are organized.

What would you say to those who criticize e-learning?

Chris Yapp:

I would tell them to look at the so-called Internet boom and bust. You get the hype cycle and the over-inflated expectations and then it is punctured a bit, just as has happened with e-commerce. But the point is that 70 per cent of people use the Internet to shop over Christmas – it’s no longer e-commerce, it is just commerce. E-learning will only be successful when it is just learning. In a sense, in order for it to become embedded, it has to go away.

Are these issues attracting the attention they deserve in organizations today?

Chris Yapp:
Like a lot of things that are really important in life, learning is very difficult to quantify or get metrics that work. In learning in particular we have a lot of proxies. For example, you cannot definitively say what a 5 per cent increase in GCSEs plays in terms of an increased GNP. However we all know skills make a difference to the economy.

Trying to translate school grades or university grades into a productive, cohesive economy is very fraught and I think that similarly a lot of organizations struggle with. They know skills are important but how do they decide whether to spend, for example, $1 million or $2? What can it be spent on? And how do they know that what they are getting back works? It’s a perennial problem and can be likened to the advertising dilemma – we know that 50 per cent of it is a waste of time but we just don’t know which bit!

**Which company/organization do you most admire in relation to development and learning?**

**Chris Yapp:**

Rather than praising particular companies, there are a lot of individual things that are to be admired. Just to give you an idea of the sorts of areas which are very effective, I have seen some really creative training for insurance salesmen. This is a regulated industry and just being able to keep up the records and ensure everybody is up to date with the most recent set of rules requires real effort. There has been some really clever integration between the learning materials and the administration system in some of the examples I have seen.

There are also good examples in the media itself. I am a great fan of the Nesta Future Lab in Bristol which is researching the future of learning in technology. I also admire the Ultra Lab in Colchester which was set up by Stephen Heppell who is probably the most influential person now in this area. He has been working on learning and technology for around 20 years and this lab has probably done some of the most innovative work in this field.

We are developing centres of excellence that are helping people to create better training and learning in various departments and streams of some organizations and we also have an increasing body of research and practice. But we are not yet at the stage where we can say that Reuters have cracked it or BT have cracked it.

**What is your biggest achievement to date in the learning and development field?**

**Chris Yapp:**

Eleven years ago I heard David Puttnam lecture for the first time on his idea of the “Hollywood of education” – a vision that Britain would become the world’s largest exporter of learning material. At the time I had this idea about a national grid for learning and was trying to work out what to do with this concept. When I hear David’s lecture I realized that this was actually possible. Consequently I went to the think tanks and other such groups and the national grid for learning is now one of the largest schools based programmes.

I have also been involved in work that helped make sure every public library is connected to the Internet and have been generally trying to contribute generally to tackling education and training systems in the UK. I am interested in trying to understand how you can scale technology to have a systemic impact rather than trying to do it on an individual basis.

**What is the key corporate event in your calendar this year?**

**Chris Yapp:**

There is a session at Harvard at which they are setting up a global network for innovators in public sector services, which looks like one of the most interesting things this year.

But it’s often the events that I do not go to with high expectations that produce the really exciting ideas. Because of the nature of my work I often tend to be sitting at the periphery and usually it’s those sort of places where the really good ideas occur. If you go to a conference that is on the mainstream of e-learning then it will be the same faces and the same sort of debates. On the other hand, going to conferences on gaming technology can provide some really interesting insights into the nature of e-learning.

**What do you see as the key differences (if any) between management development and leadership development?**

**Chris Yapp:**

If you are in an organization where the pace at which the organization changes is faster than the environment that you live in, essentially it’s a management task. The problem occurs when the world outside your organization changes faster than you can manage. Then you have turbulence.

However in the past (at least up until the early 1990s) we have trained managers in the public and the private sector as if the world was stable. In reality, this is a terrible time to be in charge in of anything other than a think tank!
If you are a manager you have to look as if you know what you are doing, know how to get there, show results and do all of those monthly, quarterly and annual reports as if you were in charge when actually the world is simply changing too fast for those sorts of things. This is why it is a great time to be a leader and a terrible time to be a manager!