

The Learning and Development Handbook

A Learning Practitioner's Toolkit

Michelle Parry-Slater



Recommendation

Learning's evolution away from the in-person, classroom and formal model toward a self-directed, blended, social and digital approach is well underway, learning consultant Michelle Parry-Slater writes in this comprehensive guide to the new world of workplace learning. While classroom learning remains the best approach in some circumstances, an organisation's overarching strategy should guide its approach to L&D. The author advocates for L&D to be more consultative than prescriptive; more inclined to curate content than create it; and more comfortable with analytics, AI and measurement.

Take-Aways

- Workplace learning has changed markedly since 2000, and since the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Learning should align with and link to organizational strategy.
- Executives, line managers and workers are responsible for learning.
- Steer stakeholders to consider a range of interventions.
- Start and end the process of learning design with evaluation.
- Encourage social learning.
- Embrace digital learning; make it relevant and engaging.
- Consider all forms of learning and blend the best mix for the learner and circumstances.
- Note six factors when putting learning into practice.
- Learning evolves in organisations.

Summary

Workplace learning has changed markedly since 2000, and since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work and workers have undergone revolutionary change since the dawn of the new century, making application of 20th-century teaching to the 21st-century workplace absurd. Workers – especially since the COVID-19 pandemic – demand new approaches, technology and a shift from classroom training to a broader blend of self-directed, online and bite-sized learning that better fits today’s faster, more dynamic work environment. Sadly, few organisations have embraced this shift.

“Face-to-face learning is no longer fit for purpose. It is not efficient, effective, enjoyable or engaging.”

Classroom training still has its place, just far less often. With portable and powerful smartphones, laptops and tablets, employees access and engage with learning content differently today. L&D professionals should rethink learning content delivery. With or without L&D, workers no longer have to wait for a course to learn what they need, or to stay productive. L&D professionals need to discover what workers want, what they need to do their jobs well and how they learn best, depending on requirements.

L&D professionals should enlist the aid of subject-matter experts across the organization to encourage peer learning and knowledge transfer. They should partner with line managers to emphasize the importance of learning, and to support each employee’s development. L&D professionals should stay on top of adult and workplace learning trends, technologies and approaches by building their own networks of external L&D experts and thought leaders. They should also attend conferences, watch presentations, and read journals and books.

Learning should align with and link to the organization’s strategy.

Beyond measuring the effects of learning programs against metrics that matter to the business, connect learning to business strategy and key objectives. Learning leaders should know their corporate strategy thoroughly and build L&D strategy in relation to that overarching business strategy to ensure that all learning interventions and initiatives support it.

“Learning solutions have to be aligned to your company strategy.”

Talk to Board level leaders about their strategic needs, and then to line leaders and other influencers. This approach helps you learn about specific needs, hot issues and constraints learners may face. It also provides an opportunity to help leaders understand the value L&D can deliver, and may earn you their support.

Executives, line managers and workers are responsible for learning.

L&D cannot succeed without the active engagement of stakeholders. List the people you need to engage across the organization. Earn their engagement by making learning relevant to organizational and learner needs. Prepare a two-sentence description of what learning has to offer. Enlist the support of influencers, managers and executives by listening to them frequently and mapping their needs to your efforts.

“L&D can advise, can support, can cajole, can encourage, but people have to be on board and involved for learning to happen.”

Even when you recognize gaps in business needs that learning likely resolves, resist offering your ideas right away. Stay curious. Listen, consult and ask open questions – such as “why?” – to understand all challenges.

Steer stakeholders to consider a range of interventions.

When talking with an L&D professional, leaders will bias their thoughts toward applying learning to their problems, even when it’s not appropriate. Get to the root of the issue before discussing solutions. Ask leaders about various financial and non-financial costs of doing nothing. This questioning helps identify what success looks like and how to measure it. Ask for data to allow you to gain a deeper understanding of any problem or opportunity. Once you possess a thorough knowledge of the issues and of the precise gaps you need to close, then you can discuss solutions – including learning solutions, if learning proves most appropriate.

Start and end the process of learning design with evaluation.

For too long, both L&D and corporate executives allowed learning evaluation to come after learning – and, even then, the focus remained, primarily, on attendance and learner reaction forms. Learner impressions of their training, as captured in post-training questionnaires, tend to reflect the quality of the food, the temperature of the room and the entertainment value delivered by the instructor. Know what defines success – ideally hard measures important to the business – before you design the intervention and use that knowledge to guide development and optimal delivery of the program. Wherever possible, link learning interventions to measurable improvements in key performance indicators (KPIs) for which your line leaders and executives are accountable.

“We have been getting evaluation wrong in L&D for years, and it is time to change.”

Evaluate learning with tools like Thalheimer’s Learning-Transfer Evaluation Method; Brinkerhoff’s Success Case Method, Phillips’s 6-Stage Model and Kirkpatrick’s Four Levels. If you use a methodology like ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation), put Evaluation at the beginning and the end (EADDIE).

Replace typical training evaluation questionnaires with three main questions: “What went well, Even better if..., and What is next for them?” Focus on measuring performance outcomes – ideally, against KPIs – not the learning itself. Measure less tangible performance-related outcomes, such as the effects of training on employee engagement. Use data visualisation and storytelling techniques to report your findings.

Encourage social learning.

Recalibrate reward and recognition programmes to recognize those who share knowledge and help others. Connect employees, so they can share knowledge, and coach and mentor one another. Whether explicitly teaching one another, conversing, sharing ideas, or offering advice and help, social learning comes naturally to employees, so organisations should leverage it.

“Social learning is simply people learning from people. It is the glue that sticks us together and the oil that eases our journey through life and work.”

L&D should encourage and facilitate any social learning already taking place. It should, for example, identify and leverage legitimate internal expertise through “lunch and learn” sessions, communities of practice, and via internal social networks or platforms. L&D should implement an internal mentoring program for two-way knowledge transfer, and curate learning content from the internet and other sources to provide learning pathways for employees.

Embrace digital learning; make it relevant and engaging.

Workers today find their communities online as often as in person. User forums, professional networks, communities of interest and the like abound on the internet. People learn from each other in these spaces. Like social learning, employees online engage in digital learning with or without the involvement of L&D.

“Digital learning is happening on work premises, in work time, to enable people to do the work they are paid to do, whether L&D provide it or not.”

Throw away any e-learning programs that make learners click through slides and take a quiz at the end. Make the learning relevant; strive to give learners snippets that they can use in the flow of their work. Avoid one-size-fits-all solutions. Help each learner get what he or she needs from your digital learning. Blend e-learning with face-to-face and other forms of learning to keep pace with change and to transfer knowledge within the organization as efficiently as possible.

Consider all forms of learning and blend the best mix for the learner and circumstances.

Blend classroom courses, podcasts, books, social learning platforms, digital networking events, webinars, conference attendance, and e-learning chunks and classes, depending on circumstances and objectives. Consider “flipping the classroom” when including

in-person learning – classroom or digital. Ask learners to engage with digital learning, books and videos on their own, outside the classroom. In the classroom, focus on social learning and conversation, helping learners make sense of what they learned on their own.

The ICE framework can help you to determine where L&D should introduce learning solutions. ICE stands for Information, Communication and Education. People often need information, but information doesn't always require education. Depending on its complexity and purpose, other forms of transfer prove more efficient and appropriate.

“Never forget the primary reason L&D exists – to help people perform better at work.”

Consider digital snippets of information and learning that help workers learn in the flow of their work. For example, a person who needs to know how to use one feature in Excel should be able to access a brief video, rather than be forced to stop, find a formal Excel course – online or off – enrol, wait, and then attend the whole thing when all he or she needs is a specific piece of information. When you interrupt a person's flow, they become less productive. Encourage self-directed learning by helping employees assess quality content and by curating small items of high-quality learning. Structure self-directed learning chunks, so employees can easily search and find them, digest them and keep working.

Note six factors when putting learning into practice.

Consider the environment in terms of how learners will access the content; permission in the sense of what managers and leaders allow; and culture around how the work gets done and how people learn. In some cases, digital learning fails because the environment does not include access to computers and/or the internet for all workers. A blended learning course may fail because managers discourage watching videos, listening to podcasts or reading articles during work hours. Self-directed learning may never get off the ground because workers punch in and out and can't even visit the restroom without permission, let alone direct their own learning.

“When people don't know something, they just want to get the information and move on with their day.”

In addition, consider the “3Rs”:

- **Required** – The minimum a learner needs.
- **Resourced** – What else you can supply to the learner.
- **Referred** – What the learner can teach others.

By considering the bare minimum a learner wants and needs to get started, you set them on their path quickly. Layer in more learning later, if needed. This nurtures openness to more learning. Once this takes root, move toward getting people to share their learning, whether

a book, video, a presentation or otherwise. Through this process, you build a learning culture.

Learning evolves in organisations.

Abrupt advances in learning often require disruption. COVID-19 likely revolutionised learning in many firms, for example, by requiring them to move quickly to digital and social learning. Normally, you should move adaptations in learning along at the historical pace of change within your organisation, so that people feel comfortable with it. Learners might drive change, for example, by using their digital devices and the internet to learn, even if the firm has not yet caught up.

“Of all the gifts L&D can give to a learner, I believe it is the skill and habit of reflective practice which is the kindest of all.”

Build in time for learners to think about what they learn and to practice it on the job. This practice makes learning stick. Ask people how they might apply their learning in various work scenarios. Use case studies and virtual reality where possible. Work with managers to set expectations that learners will practice their new skills or apply their new knowledge when they return to their jobs.

Experiment, measure progress, adjust and repeat. Strive to make learning relevant and embrace multiple modes of learning. Exercise patience, learning change takes time and people may not appreciate your efforts at first. Celebrate every success and persevere.

About the Author

Michelle Parry-Slater runs Kairos Modern Learning in England and consults with organizations seeking modern, blended workplace learning.