



Rethinking Learning

A European Study Into How People
Like to Learn at Work

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The **only** constant is **change**,
continuing **change**, inevitable **change**,
that is the **dominant**
factor in society today.

No sensible **decision** can be made
any longer without taking into **account**
not only the **world as it is**,
but the **world as it will be**.

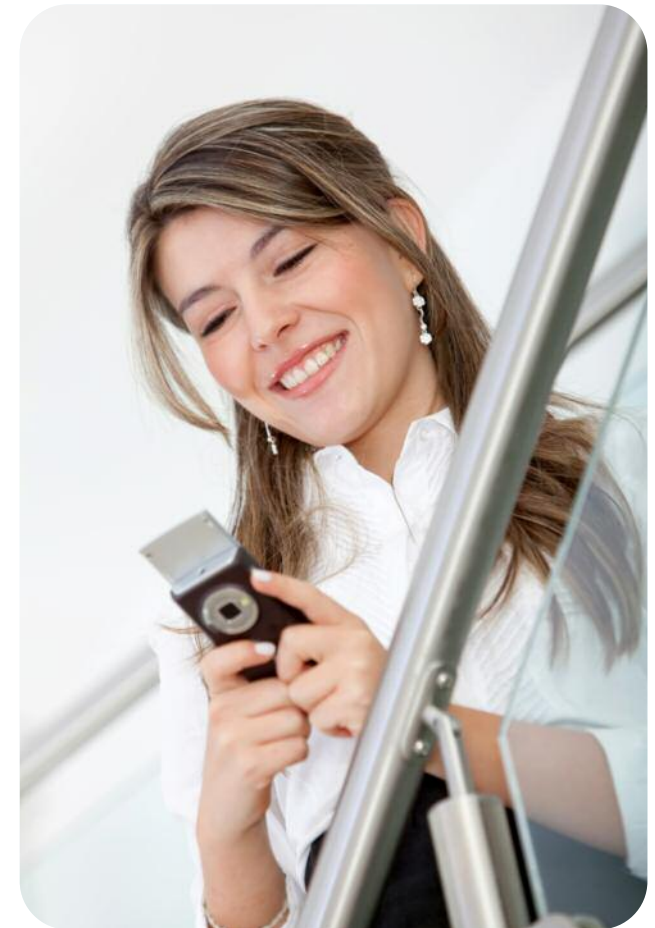
Isaac Asimov



Introduction

Change has always been a fact of life. However, these days the pace of change seems to be increasing all the time. Currently the world is facing a complex tangle of developments which, in turn, are transforming business as we know it. Strands most relevant to the learning and development community include, inevitably, the world economic crisis, but also such trends as the ageing workforce, growing globalisation and the growing digitalisation of society. Like almost every other aspect of business, learning and development is caught up in the upheaval. Nobody would question the value of traditional classroom or one-to-one training, but new demands mean this model alone is no longer viable. Increasingly businesses need to deliver more learning for less, and to do so across the entire global organisation.

However, as this survey shows, the reasons for change go far beyond economics. Employees are beginning to think differently; they too want more flexibility, more freedom and more autonomy over their own personal development than ever before. For a company to be successful and sustainable, it needs to keep producing positive results over a long term, despite what is happening outside its walls. It needs to work for continuity and plan succession to key roles. Training plays a key role in this strategy. But, it must also be agile, it must always be open to original ideas and new ways of doing things that, for example, technology can offer. The results of this survey suggest time is ripe for a rethink on the way training is delivered.





Summary and highlights

First the good news. Among our target medium to large companies, training is still taking place, despite alarmist reports suggesting it is often the “first thing to go” when times get tough. Overall, 82% said their employers still offer some training.

However, the key word here appears to be “some”. It seems that a large majority (67%) would like their employer to offer more opportunities for learning and 76% think they could be more effective and productive at work if these were offered. So keen are these employees to learn that well over half (61%) say that the offer of a training and/or personal development programme is an important or very important consideration when applying for a new job. Already, a picture is emerging of a workforce thirsty for knowledge and eager to learn. Yet, it appears that traditional training methods don’t quite hit the mark. Around half of the respondents say that the formal classroom training they had been given was only useful in parts, with an overwhelming majority (87%) preferring to learn at

their own pace. And the shortfall between learning offered and learning needed is reflected in the fact that a third say they are doing jobs they are not properly trained to do because of cutbacks.

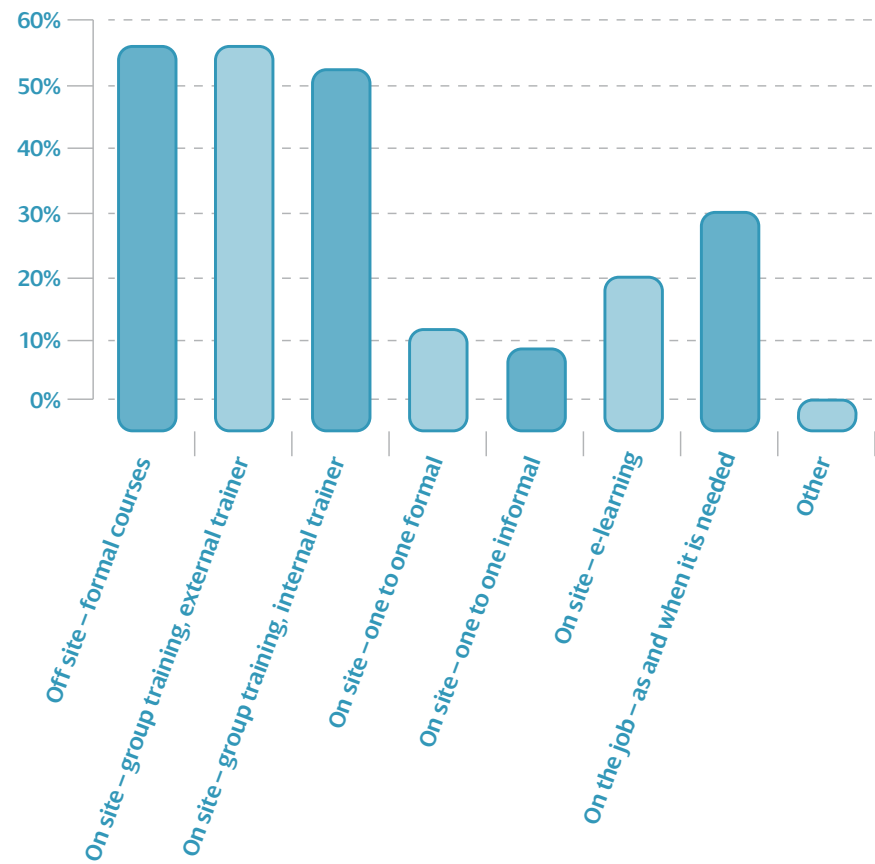
So, although the will and desire to learn are there, the methods are not – yet. However, there is a light ahead; of those who have only experienced conventional methods of teaching, the majority either definitely want to try e-learning, or want to try but think they don’t know enough about it.

Are employers dragging their heels on this? They may be making tough decisions on budget, but a paradigm shift in the way learning is delivered can satisfy the need for more flexible, compelling and relevant learning and do so in a far more cost-effective way.

The current situation – a huge opportunity

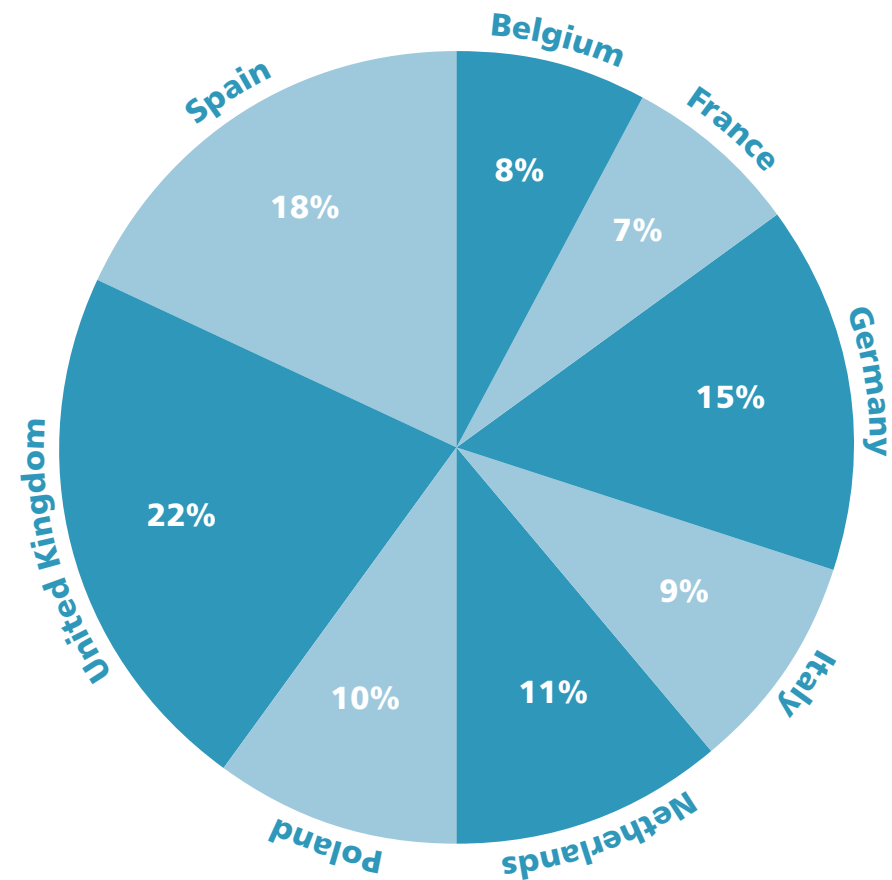
If 82% of employers across Europe are already offering training (an overwhelming 90% in the UK), how is this being delivered at the moment. It seems that already firms are opting for a blended programme of different types of learning. However, still formal teacher-led courses – either off or on site and with an internal or external trainer – are being provided by just over half the respondents. One to one sessions are not so popular (quite possibly for financial reasons) but almost one third enjoyed on the job training. When asked more specifically, respondents state their preference for more flexibility in learning. However, this does not diminish their mainly positive attitude to classroom learning. Some 38% find the formal training in a classroom setting extremely useful, yet almost one half find it only useful in parts. The rest find they cannot take everything in at once (8%), or courses are irrelevant (7%). However, only a brave 4% admitted that courses have a tendency to send them to sleep. But, on the whole, European workers are keen to learn.

How people learn



Overall 67% would like their employer to offer more training than they do already. However, when this figure is broken down it seems that attitudes vary enormously across Europe. While 90% of respondents in Poland want more training and 85% in Spain, in the Netherlands those canvassed weren't so enthusiastic. Under one half of Dutch employees asked want to be offered more and only just over half (54%) believe that training would make them more effective in their job. This figure contrasts with the overall figure of 76% who think that training can make them more effective and productive in their work. As for e-learning, current take-up across Europe varies. Respondents report it has been included as part of a blended programme for 36% of those in the UK, but only 11% in France, representing a huge opportunity for expansion across the board.

Take up e-Learning



How people like to learn

So, the story told by the headline figure of 82% of companies offering training is a little more complex than it first appears.

When the survey progresses to some more delving questions about, for example, what helps people to concentrate, we discover a real need for more flexibility. But first – what sort of training do people want? Not surprisingly, professional and technical courses are the most popular – with 39% keen to spend more time gaining certificates for their skills.

However, perhaps more telling is the fact that over half (56%) would like more time honing their “softer skills” – learning either how to enhance their communication or their dealings with people. Interestingly, there are some discrepancies on this topic throughout Europe – with Germans and Poles (68% and 70%) wanting far more tutoring on these skills than the French (43%).

But how do people actually like to learn? They do like to be left to progress at their own pace (87% overall) – not for them the worry of having to keep up with a uniform schedule. This was pinned down even further with the question, “What helps you to concentrate?” Exactly half say “the facility to go back and revisit parts you didn’t understand”. Other answers to this question show a desire for freedom and space for thinking not usually offered by classroom learning. For example, well over two thirds like to be able to snack and have a drink and/or get up and walk around when they want.

As an aside, it’s interesting that the question of eating while you learn divides Europe. Surprisingly few (under 20%) in Spain, Italy and France think snacking helps them to concentrate – whereas, 58% of the Dutch and around one third of the Germans and British think that a bite to eat and a cup of tea helps the brain to function. And despite what teenagers are always telling us, only 15% think that listening to music helps them to focus.

Equally revealing was the question, “What time of day do you prefer to learn?” Overall, almost five times as many like to study early in the morning compared with late at night.

However, although overall 30% prefer to learn during working hours, in most countries only around one quarter ticked this box, except in the UK. Here 44% prefer learning only in working hours – although, to be fair, this could reflect the fact that the UK has a reputation for working the longest hours in Europe* rather than a lack of dedication. However, the mix of answers here show everyone learns best at a different time of the day

It’s one thing being able to concentrate – it’s another being able to keep the knowledge learnt in your head and access it when needed. Addressing the question: “What best helps you retain recently acquired knowledge?” there is steady support for continuous testing, visual prompts and interactive learning. However, by far the most important method (71%) is putting knowledge into practice as soon as possible.

*see http://www.tuc.org.uk/work_life/index.cfm?mins=474&minors=474

Access to information

Peer-group communication still appears to be the most important form of learning. Some 70% ask a colleague when they need advice about a work situation whereas only less than a half (43%) ask their boss. Less than half of employers offer a library of up-to-date reference books which means many (31%) rely on the internet – and if information isn't there, they are stuck. Worryingly, almost a half (46%) are taking between half an hour and two hours, to look up the answer on the internet or in a book, if nobody is available to ask. Even half an hour is too long if, say, a customer is waiting or if an employee is working to a tight deadline.

So what do these answers tell us about the way people like to learn and concentrate? It reveals that they like freedom and flexibility yes – but also that they want learning on demand, when it's needed. They can then carry out what they have learnt straight away – with the ability to go back over something again if they haven't quite comprehended the first time.

A paradigm shift in thinking

What this survey demonstrates is a mismatch between the training currently offered and how people like to learn. It underlines that classroom learning is still of great value – but learners still want to have information and teaching on demand and to put it into practice immediately – and to be able to go over what they have learnt again at point of use or if they don't understand.

Among the respondents, overall only 35% have tried e-learning. Of these, 65% would either like to try it or would like to try it but don't feel they know very much about it. It's worth noting that this figure rises to around 80% in Italy, Spain and Poland.

When asked who was responsible for their professional development – the most popular answer (62%) was a combination of employer and employee – with only 12% thinking it was the employer alone.

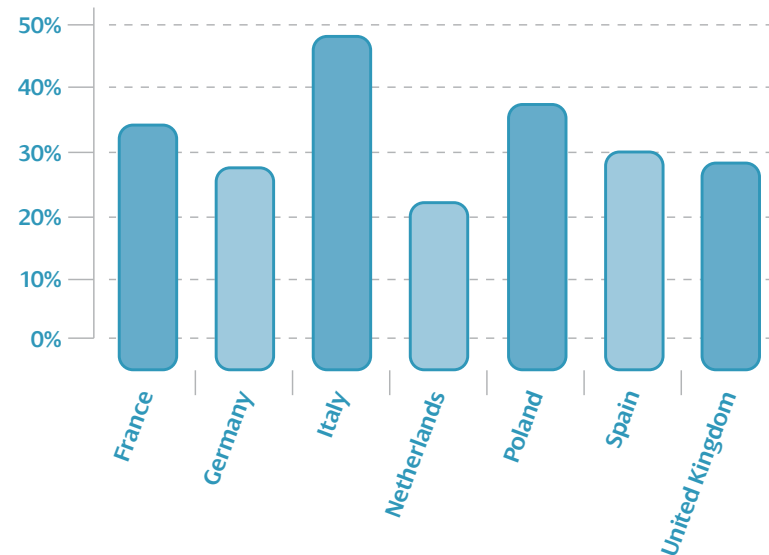
Businesses have, at the moment, a workforce eager to learn, willing to look at new ways of learning and keen to work together with employers to develop a programme that suits them. On the other hand they have less money to spend, a growing need to deliver learning across a wider geographic area, and the problem of capturing knowledge from a greying workforce before they retire.

It's a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. It means looking at learning, training and personal development in a different way, considering the options and rethinking their programmes.

Budget cuts

Understandably, when asked if their company is cutting training budgets high numbers of those asked, answered “don’t know”. Companies don’t tend to advertise their budget reductions among staff if they can help it. Even without these figures, the percentages make uncomfortable reading. Across Europe around one third (31%) know that their training budget is being reduced. This rockets up to a worrying 48% in Italy and 37% in Poland. Thankfully, exactly one half overall says that the economic downturn is having no obvious impact on their work. However, over one third (34%) say that they are having to do jobs they are not trained to do because of cutbacks. This hardly bodes well for the creation of sustainable businesses now – or in the future.

Cutting of Training Budget





In conclusion

Despite the fact that the internet has transformed the way many of us work, play and even think, its true potential as a learning tool is still being realised. This represents a big opportunity for companies who see training as a way out of the current downturn and a key factor in their recovery.

However, many firms across Europe are already ahead of the curve and have implemented e-learning either as a standalone solution or as part of a blended learning programme. They find that return on investment is fast – but return on talent is even more valuable, giving them the edge needed not just to survive in a tough market, but to prepare them for whatever the future may bring.

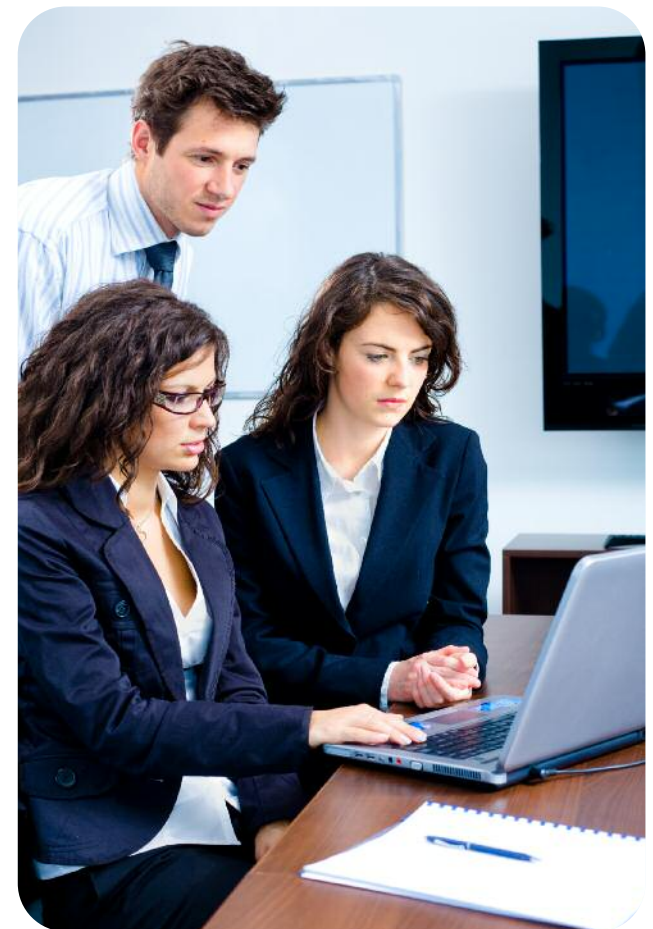
But, perhaps more relevant to this particular survey, it delivers learning in a way people like it, making them more likely to learn, to retain the knowledge and put it into practice for the good of the company. It makes personalised development

programmes viable, courses can be balanced with business demands and it helps HR departments plan more strategically for the future. It means those responsible for learning and development need to think – and then re-think about the way they deliver – but the rewards will be high both for employer and employee alike.

Who we asked

The survey canvassed 2019 employees of companies over 50 staff evenly divided across eight European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and the UK).

The male/female split was 50/50 and the majority (39%) of respondents were in the mid-range (31 – 45) age bracket with 28% younger (18 – 30) and 33% aged 46-plus. The most common primary job function was supervisory or junior managerial and those questioned represented a complete range of industries from accountancy to telecommunications. Just over half (52%) had been in their job for over five years.





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