Learning and Development for All: Making the Most of Your Modern Workforce

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skillsoft
Engaging employees in ongoing learning pays big dividends—including enhanced on-the-job performance and talent retention. But fostering such engagement isn't easy. How can organizations meet the engagement imperative?

- Design learning opportunities that meet all employee needs.
- Align online learning programs with what's known about brain science and the physiology of learning.
- Take advantage of digital-age learning technologies and platforms.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
ONGOING DISRUPTION CALLS FOR ONGOING LEARNING

How work gets done is undergoing massive change. The fact is, every disruptive innovation in business brings with it transformations in how organizations operate. And managers and employees need new skills and training to help their organizations operate in those new ways. To survive—never mind thrive—in the face of ongoing disruption, organizations must therefore master the art and science of ongoing learning for their workforce. Such learning delivers additional benefits as well—including enhancing employee engagement. Annual research confirms that career development—which hinges on ongoing learning—can be a powerful driver of engagement.

THE ENGAGEMENT IMPERATIVE

In many industries today, the defining characteristic is technology-enabled connectedness—not just between people, but also between people and machines, and between machines. For instance, imaging and artificial intelligence enable airport security cameras to identify thousands of objects in travelers’ bags, looking for threats. And smart tagging in imaging makes it possible for people to organize their photo libraries in precisely the way they want and to retrieve and share images easily and quickly.

Not surprisingly, connectedness has also transformed how people get work done in organizations and how they learn. Much work today is performed at or near an Internet-connected device. However, despite technological advances, employees on average only spend 1% of their work week on learning.¹

To capitalize on the little time that employees have available to learn, organizations must ensure that those who are taking part in online training programs are deeply engaged with the process. Why? Engagement in learning delivers big benefits—like enhanced profitability, productivity, and employee attendance and retention. Statistics show that keeping employees engaged in learning is serious business. 87% of millennials in one study said that development is important in a job.² And another study reveals that “40% of employees who receive poor training will leave their job within the first year.”³ According to research by Aberdeen, 76% of the best-in-class companies surveyed identified “learning and development” as a key factor leading to their most significant and lasting performance improvements.

among employees—second only to “performance management”—and one of the top reasons employees decide to join and stay with a company.4

Yet engaging employees remains challenging for all too many organizations. In one study, as much as 67% of the participating organizations identified user engagement as the top barrier to adoption of technology-enabled training.5

How can organizations boost online learners’ engagement? They need to meet three imperatives:

- Make sure online learning meets all learners’ needs—versus tailoring it to just one generation (millennials being the most-often-cited age cohort).
- Align online learning programs with what’s known about brain science and the physiology of learning.
- Take advantage of digital-age learning technologies and platforms.

Below, we take a closer look at each of these imperatives.

DESIGNING ONLINE LEARNING TO MEET ALL EMPLOYEES’ NEEDS

Many learning and development professionals believe that online learning programs should be tailored to specific demographics—particularly millennials. Their reasoning is understandable: They assume that members of this generation want something different from their employers than people in other generations do. And they know that millennials are fast becoming the largest segment of the workforce. Indeed, according to millennials expert Jason Dorsey, there are roughly 83 million people in North America alone who fit into this age cohort.6

Yes, millennials constitute a huge percentage of the workforce and the general population. But guess what: They and members of other generations have more in common than many people think. For instance, job pressures and widespread use of technology are causing today’s workers to feel overwhelmed, impatient, distracted—no matter what their age. At the same time, these forces are also enabling workers in all age cohorts to feel untethered to physical

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workspaces. And the forces are motivating and enabling them to collaborate and to weigh in on issues such as how they want to manage their own work/life balance. Meanwhile, leaders—again, no matter what their age—are striving to understand the dynamics of managing today’s geographically dispersed and often virtual teams.

In addition, employees and leaders in all generations want many of the same things from life and work—and from their learning experiences. Skillsoft research shows that they want help with developing new skills and reinforcing those skills on the job. They want assistance in building credible and timely knowledge and expertise. Equally important, they want learning content that meets their diverse needs. That means the ability to learn anytime, anywhere; the freedom to watch, read, or listen to learning content depending on their preferences; and plenty of opportunities to practice using their new skills and knowledge, as the need arises, to tackle their toughest on-the-job challenges.

But that’s not all. Our research also reveals that employees want to be able to quickly and easily find learning content and to leave a learning session whenever they want and then readily resume the experience when they return to the session. What’s more, they wish to know how much time a learning activity will take and to quickly assess the progress they’re making as they learn.

The message is clear: Organizations must develop online learning programs that meet all workers’ needs—not just finely sliced demographic segments of the workforce. Those that tailor online learning programs to segments based on incorrect assumptions risk providing learning content and experiences that miss the mark. And they may end up disabling workers rather than enabling them to build the skills and expertise the organization needs to remain successful.

ALIGNING LEARNING WITH BRAIN SCIENCE AND PHYSIOLOGY

Thanks to technology, we now know a lot more about the brain science and physiology behind the process of learning. Studies using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and electroencephalography (EEG) technologies—particularly as subjects are watching videos—reveal important facts about how people’s brains work as they’re learning.7 To illustrate, the more activated certain areas of the brain are (as shown by brain scans), the more people can recall what they’ve learned from the content they’re consuming.

7 Skillsoft in partnership with Accenture and MIT’s Integrated Learning Initiative studied the neuroscience behind the use of video for learning purposes.
Testing learners’ knowledge at intervals during the learning process also leads to better outcomes. Additionally, presenting a simple preview of what’s to be learned boosts people’s interest in the experience to come. And finally, people engage more with learning content if it has relevance and meaning for them, and if they experience an emotional response during the learning process.

Studies reveal other important best practices for online learning as well:

**Microlearning.** Learning in shorter bursts is far more effective than “binge learning.” The hippocampus—a structure in the brain thought to be associated with emotion, memory, and the autonomic nervous system—retains just 20 minutes' worth of information before that information must be pushed into short-term memory. Spacing learning activity across time enables people to more effectively retrieve information, re-engage with the learning experience and store information for future recall.

**Storytelling.** The human brain doesn’t distinguish between hearing a story and experiencing it in real life. That makes stories potent tools for learning. The fact is, hearing stories helps learners to digest complex information quickly and easily as well as organize the information effectively in their brain. Well-constructed narratives have even been shown to change learners’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Finally, stories stimulate people's brains to use what they're learning to predict what's likely to happen next.

**Characters.** Pedagogical use of characters in a narrative can supercharge storytelling's effectiveness. Indeed, studies show that neural networks in the brain are wired to enable people to monitor characters’ behaviors, read emotions and thus empathize with characters and make judgments about what characters should do. Characters' body language, facial expressions, and gestures make a story more compelling. And with the right voice tone, inflection, and volume, characters come across as authentic—building trust among learners. Modulation of voice tone also helps to establish a mood for the story, and can enhance interest as well as foster enthusiasm and involvement from learners.
Scenarios. A scenario-based storytelling approach stimulates recall and helps to ground learning in people’s working memory. Use of scenarios also triggers emotional responses in learners essential for catalyzing engagement in the learning experience—particularly curiosity, surprise and excitement. The most effective scenarios in a story demonstrate an “arc”—whereby a character encounters a challenge, identifies abilities he or she will need to surmount that challenge, and then applies those abilities to succeed. When scenarios end on such a positive note, learners feel more optimism about their own ability to make positive changes and conquer their toughest obstacles.

Reinforcement. After 30 days following a learning experience, people retain only 21% of what they've learned. Early and ongoing reinforcement during the first month following a learning experience is vital for improving those retention rates. Ongoing reinforcement can take the form of quizzes and prompts for learners to explain to colleagues, in their own words, what they've learned.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF DIGITAL LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AND PLATFORMS

The best online learning programs help organizations offer learning experiences valuable for all employees and to make smart use of brain science. Such programs manage all this by excelling on two fronts: functionality and design. Let’s explore these in more detail.

FUNCTIONALITY

Organizations can benefit from using a Netflix-like platform for online learning that has functionality supporting personalization and ease of learning. Such functionality can show results from learners’ content searches expressed in language reflecting topics they want to learn about and goals they want to reach. To illustrate, search results phrased in terms such as “project management” or “Six Sigma” are far more useful to learners than phrases such as “books,” “courses” and “videos.”

Functionality should also enable learners to connect quickly and easily to the content they need, based on their interests and objectives. And it should help them engage in learning whenever and wherever they are in their day, on whatever Internet-connected device they prefer to use at the moment or want to switch to later—including mobile phones, tablets or laptop computers. Tellingly, according to one study, people spend more than four hours a day on
their mobile phones. This suggests that such devices can serve as useful canvasses for engaging learners.

Effective online learning platforms also allow employees to speed up or slow down delivery of content depending on the rate at which they’re learning and synthesizing the assets they’re exploring. What’s more, such platforms let them create playlist-like structures of assets they’re interested in consuming. They can also rate these assets and connect with peers, in a safe forum, to discuss what they’re learning and to collaboratively learn together, through arenas such as blogs and wikis. Equally important, the right functionality lets employees easily see (for example, through simple graphics and dashboards) how they’re progressing in their learning—that is, what they’ve accomplished so far and what they still need to accomplish.

DESIGN
The right design can augment the power of effective functionality in an online learning program. Specifically, exceptional programs have designs that exhibit a modern interface, including bandwidth and quality that adjust to the devices and types of connection that learners are using. The design characterizing platforms such as Netflix and YouTube come to mind as apt examples.

Such programs also provide rich imagery to teach concepts that may be difficult for learners to grasp only by reading text or listening to audio—such as what artificial intelligence or big data is, and how these technologies work. Thoughtfully designed imagery not only conveys meaning, it can also evoke emotion in learners.

In addition, good design tailors the formats of learning assets to the topics at hand. Take, for example, a module that’s teaching about workplace safety. The module’s design may use high-motion iconography or animated images accompanied by text and audio to portray a job-site accident and to show what “good” safety practices look like. In addition, the module may feature characters with whom learners can identify, and who can act as coaches to help focus participants’ attention. Such

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characters can also take the form of personable, relatable emcees who guide learners through the entirety of a course. By contrast, to teach skills related to interpersonal interaction—such as how to coach another individual—an online course may use live video to show what effective coaching looks like in action. Use of video to show what “good” looks like in real life is far more effective than the traditional approach: telling learners through lecturing.

**STAYING COMPETITIVE IN THE FACE OF INNOVATION**

To stay competitive in the face of disruptive innovation, organizations must provide their workforces with opportunities for ongoing growth and development. Continuous learning can help employers in every industry to meet this imperative. But to get the most from their online learning programs, organizations need to design these programs to meet all—not just some—employees’ needs. They have to make sure that the programs reflect key findings from brain science and the physiology of learning. And they must make smart use of digital-age learning technology.

All of this constitutes a tall order. But working to excel on these three fronts pays big dividends. For one thing, employees and leaders will become deeply engaged in the learning experiences offered to them. Even more vital, they’ll stand a better chance of acquiring the skills essential for helping their organizations succeed not just today, but also in a future that may look nothing like today.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Benny is an expert on digital content for developing business skills and leadership in organizations by providing strategic recommendations to prospects, and representing client feedback for product development. Benny currently partners with organizations in Western Canada, the U.S., and Asia in India, Australia and New Zealand to help them understand how to best utilize learning technology to drive performance, and support talent management strategies by consulting on strategy, marketing and measurement. Previously Benny he lead a team of Customer Success Managers supporting Western North America. He brings 17 years of experience in roles supporting learning, including leadership development & consulting, and 10 years driving strategy around learning technologies.

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