

# Supporting the Modern Learner

Creating great learning cultures for today's diverse, multi-faceted workforce



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## Executive Summary

Many of today's organizations suffer from poor learning cultures and inadequate learning and development (L&D) functions, according to new research conducted by HR.com in partnership with learning technology company, Skillsoft. This can be an enormous problem at a time when [most](#) executives believe there are skills gaps in today's workforce and that L&D programs can address such gaps.

Some companies, however, embrace a set of practices associated with learning success. This report highlights today's L&D trends and challenges, and it provides suggestions for how organizations may boost learning effectiveness.

This study also investigates how organizations adapt their learning programs based on the needs of specific groups of employees, such as people working at various levels of the organization. In short, the study results highlight how to help modern learners gain new skills in today's complex and diverse workplaces, which are often characterized by a dizzying variety of technologies and media.

Following are some key findings from the study:

- **Almost half describe their current L&D as mediocre or worse**, indicating that many firms have failed to master training and development at a time when employee skill sets are more crucial than ever.
- **Only a third have embedded learning in their cultures to a high extent**, while almost a quarter have done so to a small extent or not at all.
- **Most high-performing organizations use a mix of many training methods**, and some of these methods are more strongly associated with success than others.
- **High-performing organizations trend to use technology-enabled content more extensively** than their lower-performing peers. Video, simulations and online courses are more common parts of the blended learning among organizations reporting higher quality L&D.
- **Three of today's most widely discussed learning techniques are not yet widespread**. Only a minority of organizations have embraced microlearning, mobile learning or learning personalization.
- **Personalization of learning is an important differentiator** between high-performing organizations and their lower-performing peers.
- **Most organizations have adopted methods to reinforce the retention of learning**, although these methods vary considerably.
- **Learning professionals are most focused on managers and entry-level employees**, placing less focus on people at higher levels in the organization.

### About the Survey

*The Reaching the Modern Learner 2017* survey of HR professionals was conducted in June and July of 2017. Partnering with one of the world's foremost online learning companies, Skillsoft, HR.com gathered data from 722 HR and L&D professionals working in organizations of various sizes, from small to very large. Additionally, the participants came from virtually every industry vertical.

## The Quality of Today's Workplace Learning

Never before have organizations confronted the current level of complexity in trying to reach employees to deliver learning and development opportunities. Companies that need skilled employees—and the vendors that produce an array of supporting learning technologies, services and products—often scramble to stay abreast of changes. Some of these changes are rooted in new communication or learning technologies, such as mobile devices and apps, whereas others are based on emerging learning paradigms, such as micro learning. Additionally, some organizations use new technologies to personalize employee learning to a greater extent than ever before. What emerges is the daunting challenge of making increasingly effective and customized learning available anytime, anyplace, and on any device. Some organizations meet these challenges better than others, and they derive multiple learning advantages as a result.

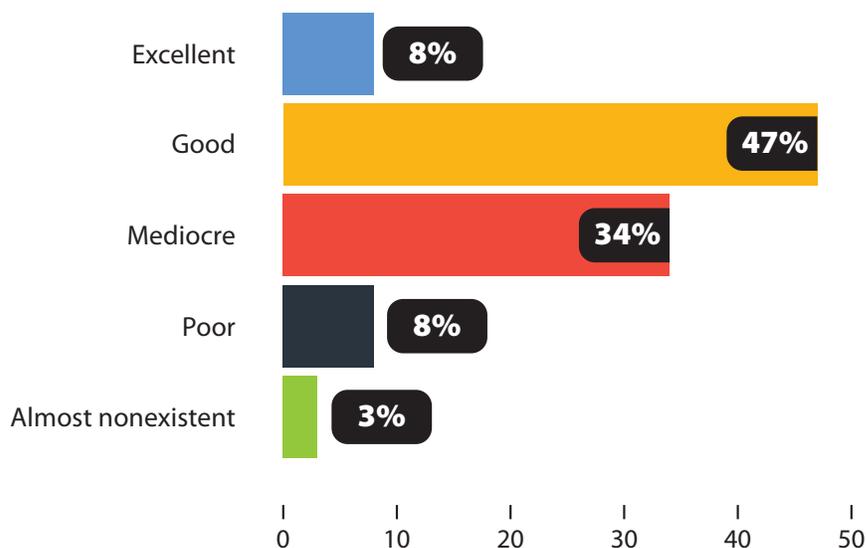
### **Finding One: Just 8% describe L&D in their organizations as excellent, while 45% label it as mediocre or worse.**

What is the state of L&D today? On one hand, a majority (55%) of the participants said their programs are excellent or good. Conversely, nearly half (45%) describe their efforts as mediocre or worse. This kind of data is subject to a “glass half full” analysis wherein both optimists and pessimists can make valid points.

The [2016 Training Industry Report](#) found that training expenditures within the U.S. alone were \$70.65 billion in 2016. Given such spending, are organizations getting enough learning “bang for their buck”? Again, opinions will differ, but our view is that many companies fail to realize substantial benefits for the level of time, energy and money invested in their L&D efforts. Organizations should be able to do better.



**Survey Question:** Overall, how would you describe learning and development in your organization?



Nearly half describe their L&D as good

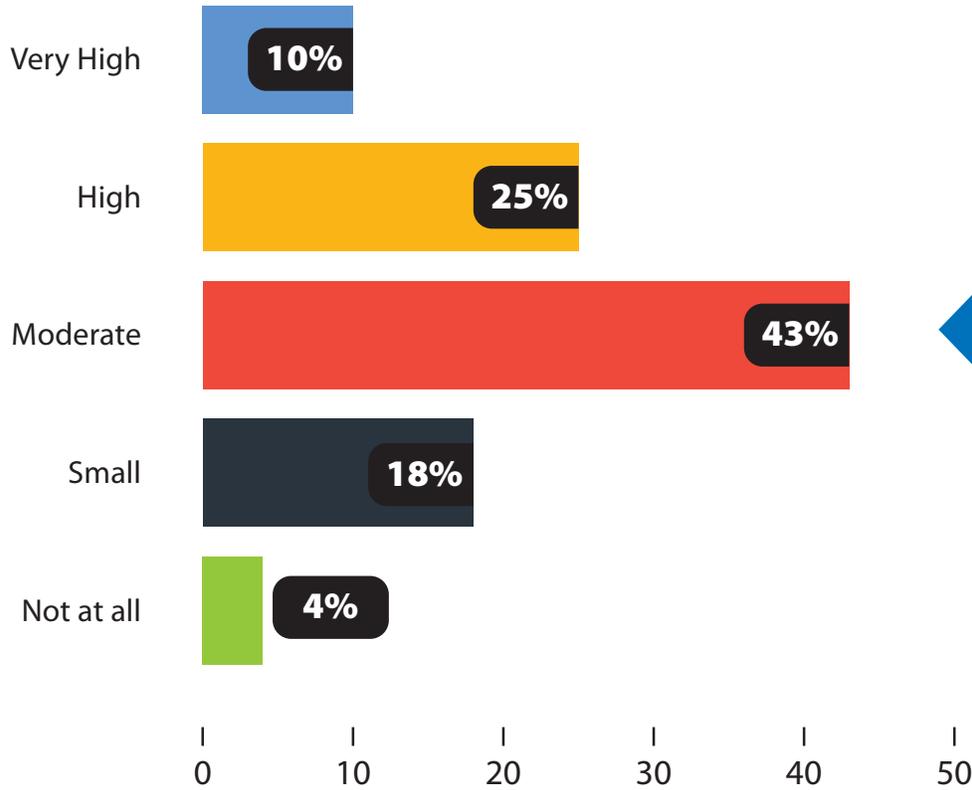
### Finding Two: Only about a third of organizations say learning is embedded in their cultures to a high or very high extent

It's one thing to have a good learning and development process, but it's another to have a culture in which learning is embedded. Organizations in which learning is embedded are rarer, and they could be labeled as 'learning organizations,' a term made popular by Peter Senge's influential book, *The Fifth Discipline*.

A learning organization is not only marked by high-quality L&D, it is characterized by employees who are generally eager to learn and skilled at transferring their newly acquired knowledge to others. In such organizations, people foster open discussion and think systemically, allowing them to adapt more easily and more quickly to change than their competitors.

Only 35% of our participants said that learning is a part of their company culture to very high or high extent. A culture of learning is thought to yield [significant business benefits](#) such as higher employee engagement, improved productivity and skills, and reduced turnover. Therefore, developing a learning culture should assume a prominent position as a central strategic goal for HR and learning professionals.

**Survey Question:** To what extent is learning embedded in your company culture?



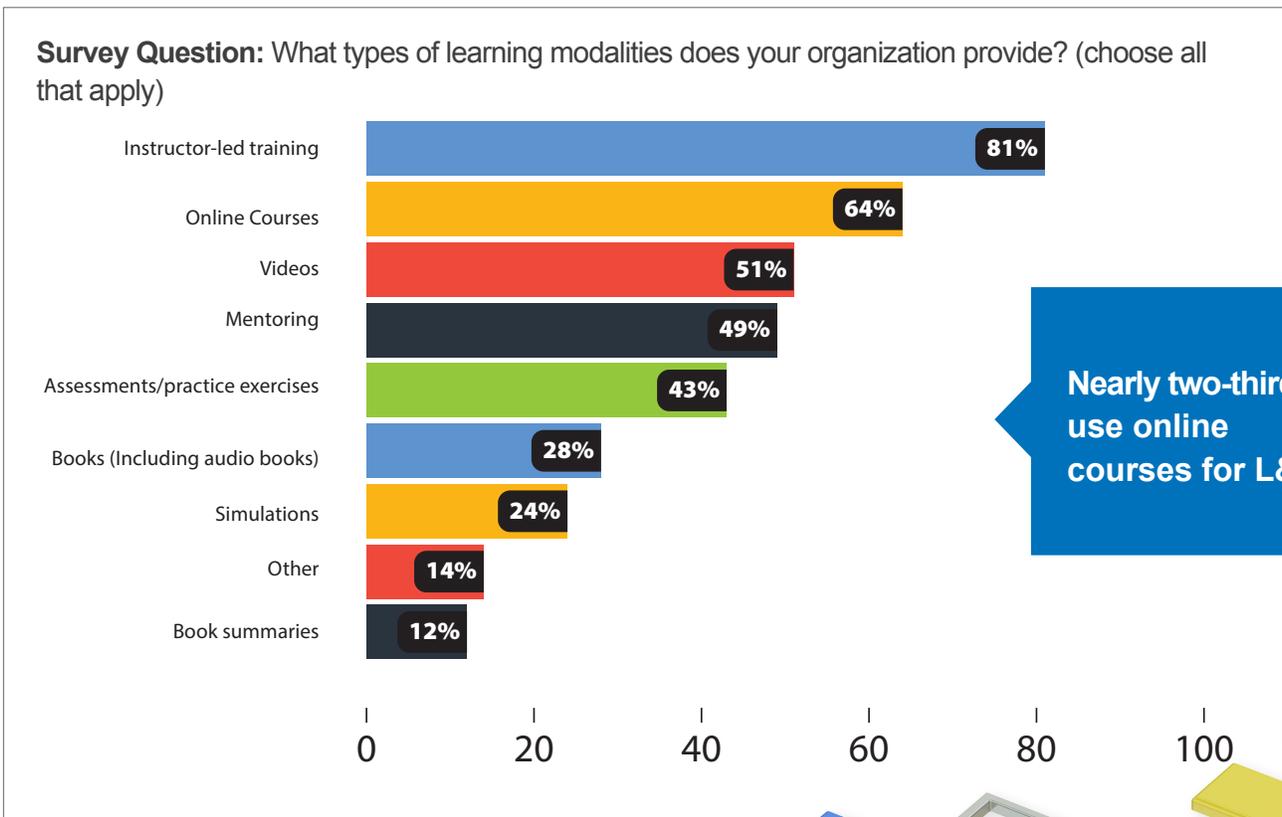
About two-fifths say that learning is embedded to a moderate extent



## Learning Methods and Their Distribution

### Finding Three: Instructor-led-training remains the most frequently used method

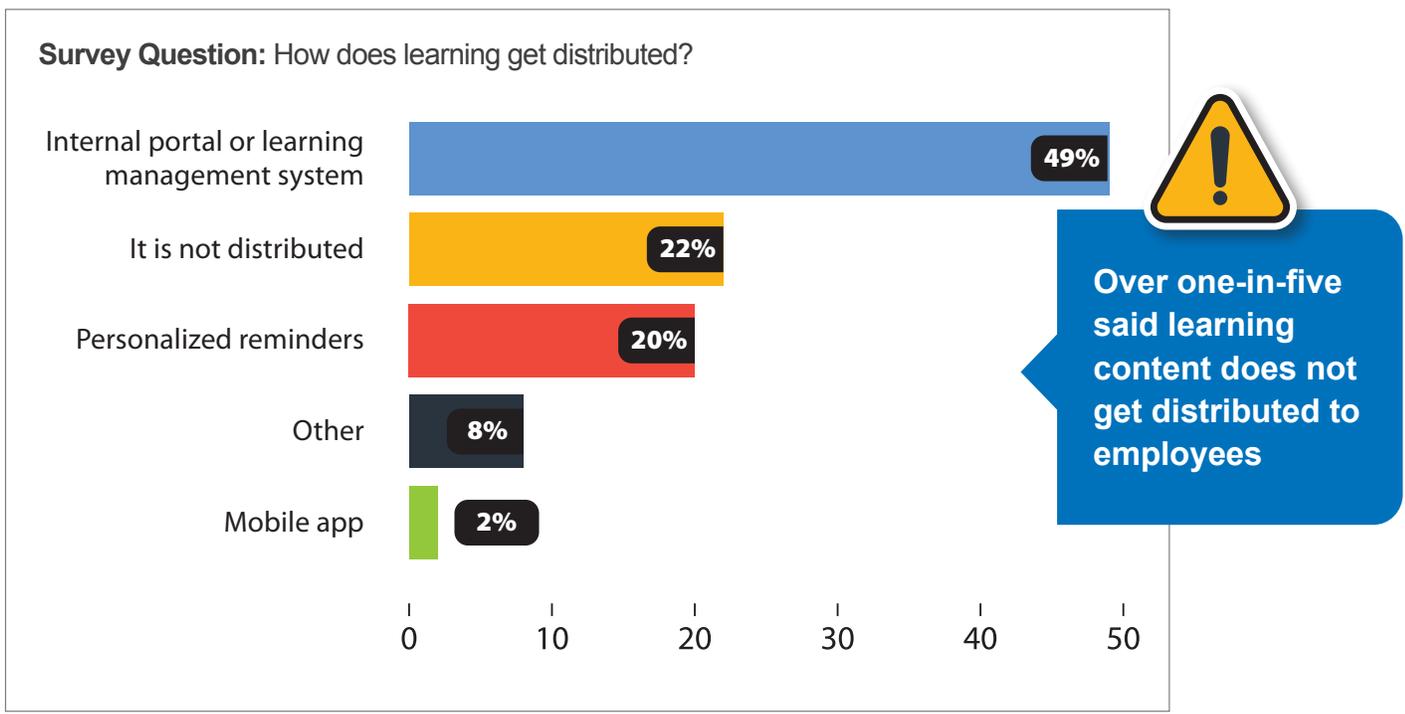
Although there are an almost infinite variety of ways to teach employees, the basic methods are well established. Instructor-led training remains the most commonly used learning modality, but our study indicates that no single training method works very well as a “stand-alone” approach. Today, blended learning dominates L&D efforts, and technology-based learning such as online courses and videos are also used by more than half of survey respondents.



### Finding Four: Most organization have ways of distributing learning, primarily via portals or LMS

Four-fifths of respondents said their organizations have some way of distributing learning, and this is most often done via internal portals or LMS. Of course, companies often have multiple ways of distributing learning, but this question only allowed respondents to choose one primary method. A fifth said they distribute learning via personalized reminders, whereas just 2% rely on mobile apps.

Only a fifth said they do not distribute learning, and that strategic decision appears to influence the perceived quality of learning and the existence of a learning culture in a negative way.



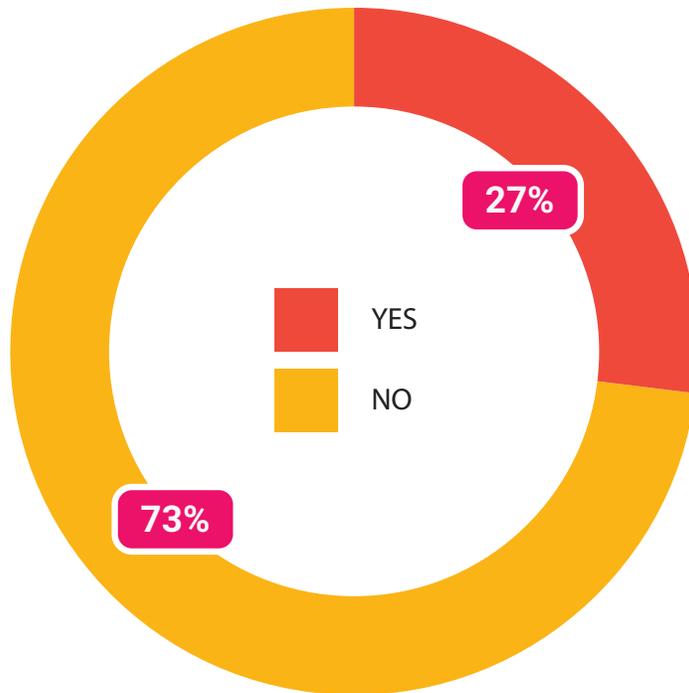
## Finding Five: Microlearning remains outside the mainstream of learning methods

Although the term has become more popular in recent years, “micro learning” is not entirely new to the training and education professions. The idea began to circulate as early as 2005, and it has since become broadly used and disseminated. A good example of easy-to-access microlearning can be found in millions of “how-to” videos on YouTube. For the purpose of this survey, we defined microlearning as anywhere between two and five minutes long. Some video content producers have been developing shorter content for years, and various studies highlight the effectiveness of short bursts of learning content for skill development, knowledge gains and learning reinforcement.

There are many factors affecting the usage of shorter content. Within organizations, there are various potential barriers to using it, such as technological limitations of existing learning platforms, a scarcity of microlearning content, a lack of knowledge about the effectiveness and best uses, and prevailing dogmas about employee training in general. Among those organizations using microlearning, 80% of them report they combine it with other training methods.



**Survey Statement:** Does your organization serve up microlearning (that is, short bursts of learning 2 to 5 minutes in length)?



About a quarter said they use microlearning in their organizations

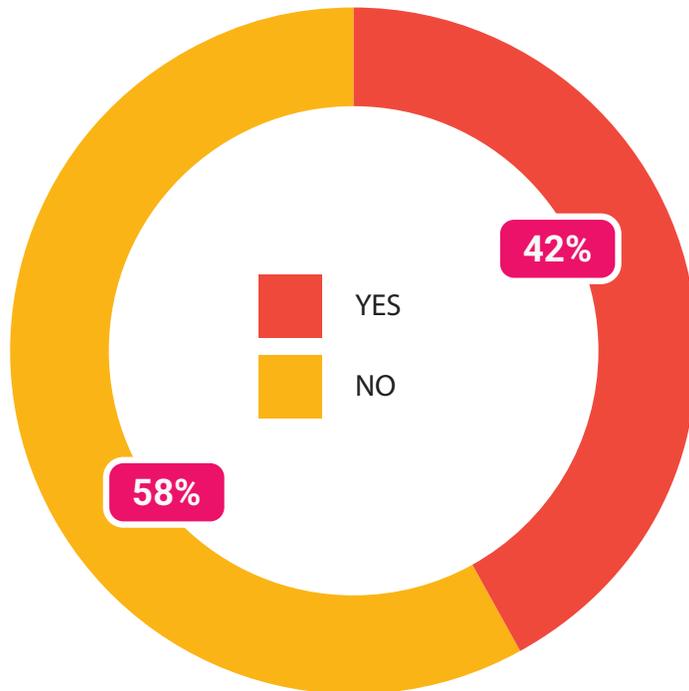
### Finding Six: About two-fifths of HR professionals said their organizations use mobile learning

Smart phones and tablets are just about everywhere employees go. It's a simple extension of their personal lives for employees to bring their own devices to work. Further, employees' use of their personal devices at work is [frequently job-related](#). Most organizations use mobile apps for a range of productivity purposes, making mobile devices almost required for effective job performance.

According to some [recent data](#), employees spend as much as five hours per day on their mobile devices. Sites and apps like Amazon, ESPN, Pandora, CNN, Yahoo!, and Google each deliver personalized content right to employees' devices. Employees have true anywhere, anytime, anyplace and any-device access to the content of their choosing. It's not much of a stretch to see that employees bring similar expectations to the technology apps they use at work. And that includes learning.



**Survey Question:** Is mobile learning an option for your learners?



Ten years after the first iPhone, mobile learning remains relatively limited

Forty-two percent of participants indicate mobile learning is an option for employees. Although this is a sizeable portion, it remains the minority position, which is somewhat surprising given that it's been a decade since the first smartphones entered the marketplace. This may be due to legacy LMS systems that are not yet mobile responsive.

If the objective of employee learning is to maximize opportunities for employees to learn and apply new skills to their job, mobile learning appears to be a logical and necessary element of best-in-class learning programs. In some instances, however, legacy learning technologies do not deliver content to mobile devices very well. Additionally, organizations continue to struggle with Internet and privacy policies to facilitate mobile learning. Lastly, those organizations moving towards mobile learning continue to face challenges with the quality and quantity of learning content. However, the data suggests that mobile learning represents an important training delivery system for forward-looking organizations.

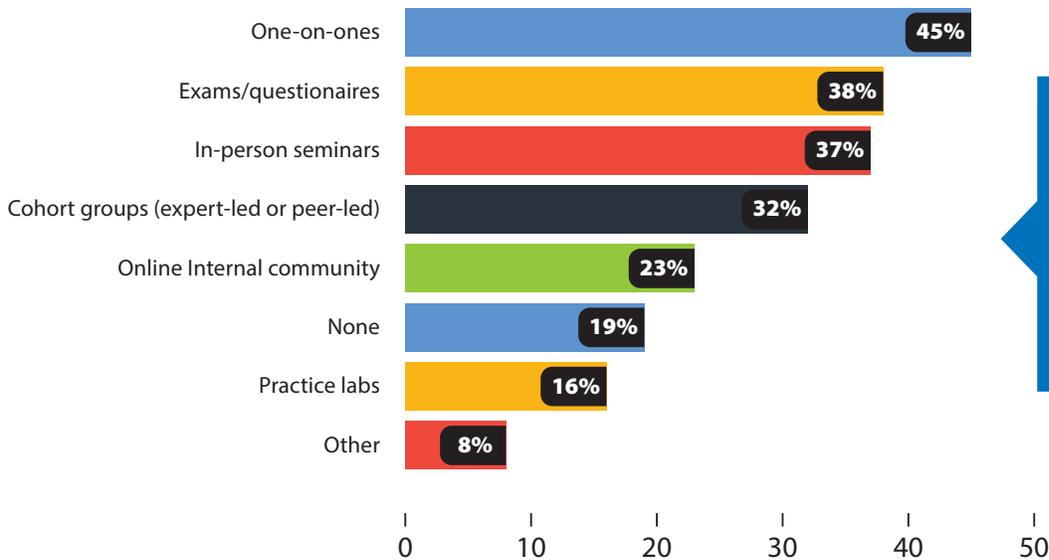
## Learning Reinforcement

### Finding Seven: Most organizations reinforce learning

Most learning professionals know that employees that apply newly learned skills retain those skills more effectively. Therefore, learning reinforcement tends to be a central part of learning best practices.



**Survey Question:** What tactics do you employ to reinforce the retention of learning? (choose all that apply)



Just a fifth said they do not reinforce learning

### Finding Eight: One-on-ones and examinations are the most frequently used methods for learning retention

One-on-ones typically refer to the time that a manager spends with an employee. It often means that a knowledgeable person spends time explaining and demonstrating new skills to another person. This is an organic process that often includes questions and customized responses and a chance for the learner to practice the skill in front of the teacher. It is a form of learning and learning reinforcement that likely dates back to the beginnings of human kind. Managers tend to be uniquely positioned to ask questions, offer ideas and lead highly personalized learning.

In contrast, examinations/questionnaires are a much less time-intensive method of reinforcing learning. A single examination can be used for many learners, and such examinations can be linked with other learning modules so that people can go back and relearn a lesson if they did not get the correct answer to a specific question.

## Targeting and Personalizing Learning

The learning profession accepted individual development plans (IDPs) as a best practice as early as the 1960s. However, learning professionals have often struggled to deliver individualized learning and developing content to large numbers of employees. The emergence of technology-enabled learning represents a vital tool in delivering individualized learning, but substantial challenges remain for most organizations.

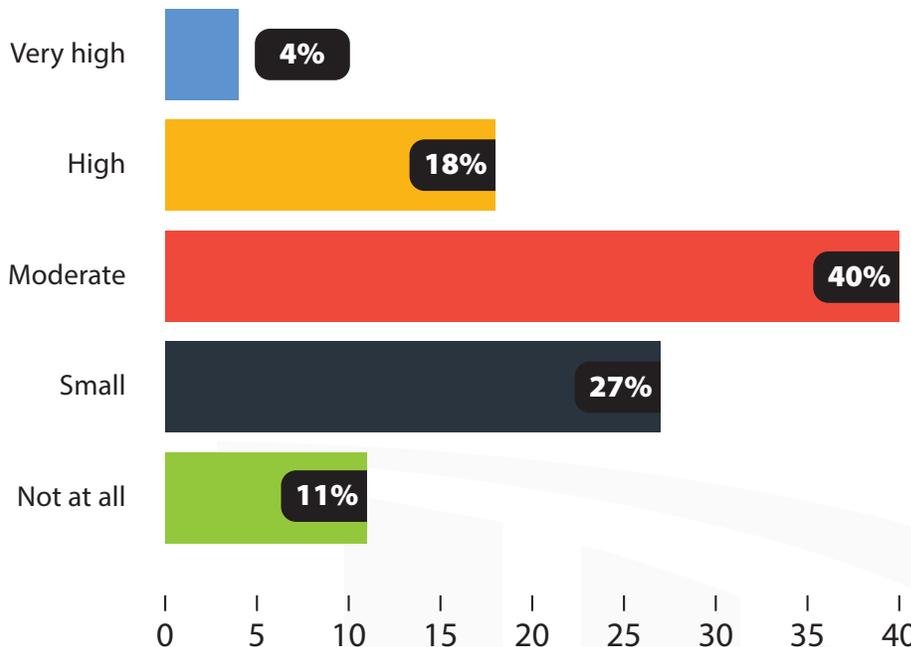
### Finding Nine: Less than a quarter of organizations offer high levels of personalized learning

Few participants said their organizations provide personalized learning based on topic or career outcome to a high or very high extent. So, there is a disconnect between typical learning practices and the literature on the effectiveness of personalized learning. This offers a clear area for practitioners to improve.

Some of today’s learning technology solutions facilitate the delivery of targeted content to employees based on a variety of learning needs. So, there’s the question of whether learning professionals are taking full advantage of the existing functionality in their LMS.



**Survey Question:** To what extent is learning personalized for the individual at your company by topic or career outcome?

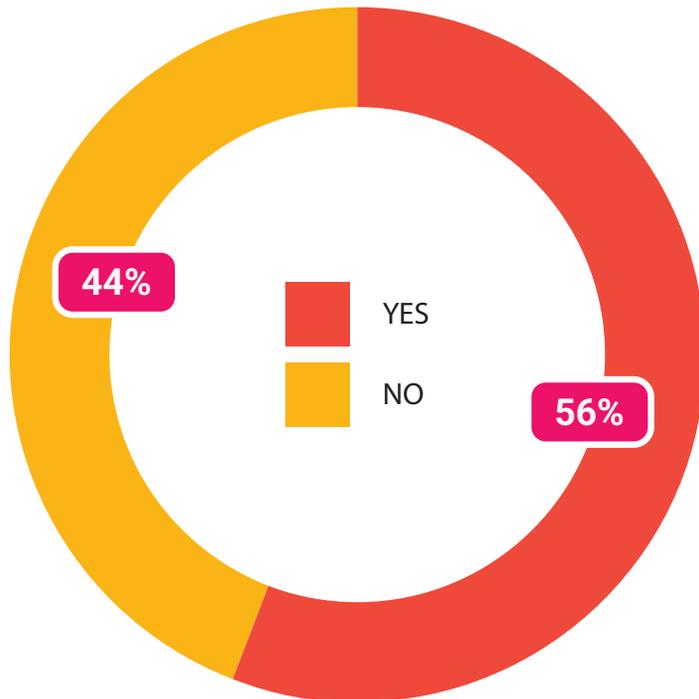


Two-fifths of organizations personalize learning to a moderate extent, suggesting there may gradual movement in this direction

### Finding Ten: Job level helps drive learning for over half of responding organizations

Although most study participants do not tend to deliver highly personalized learning, many recognize that job role is important to consider in employee training efforts. So, the delivery of personalized learning remains a challenge, but many participants recognize the importance of differentiated instruction.

**Survey Question:** Does your organization regard employee job level as an important factor when it encourages various learning options? (for example, entry level employees versus C-level executives)



A surprisingly high 44% do not regard job level as an important learning factor

### Finding Eleven: Managers and entry-level employees get the most training attention

The participants helped clarify which job roles they deem most important for training purposes, and 74% said it's either very important or important to provide learning opportunities to entry-level employees. Participants view development opportunities for managers with nearly the same enthusiasm.

**Survey Question:** In your organization, how important is it to provide learning opportunities to people in the following roles?\*

	Very Important	Important	Moderately important	Slightly important	Not important
C-level	27%	25%	23%	13%	12%
VP	27%	29%	21%	17%	7%
Director	27%	36%	23%	11%	3%
Manager	39%	34%	20%	5%	1%
Entry-level	<b>48%</b>	26%	14%	10%	3%

The lower the job level, the more important it is to provide learning opportunities

\*Darker colors are associated with higher importance



## Making Learning Successful

We conducted various analyses in order to gain insights into which learning practices are most likely to result in learning successes. Of course, correlation is not the same as causation. We cannot state that any particular practice will definitely result in better learning outcomes, but we can point to intriguing relationships that suggest some practices are more likely to be used by organizations with excellent learning outcomes.

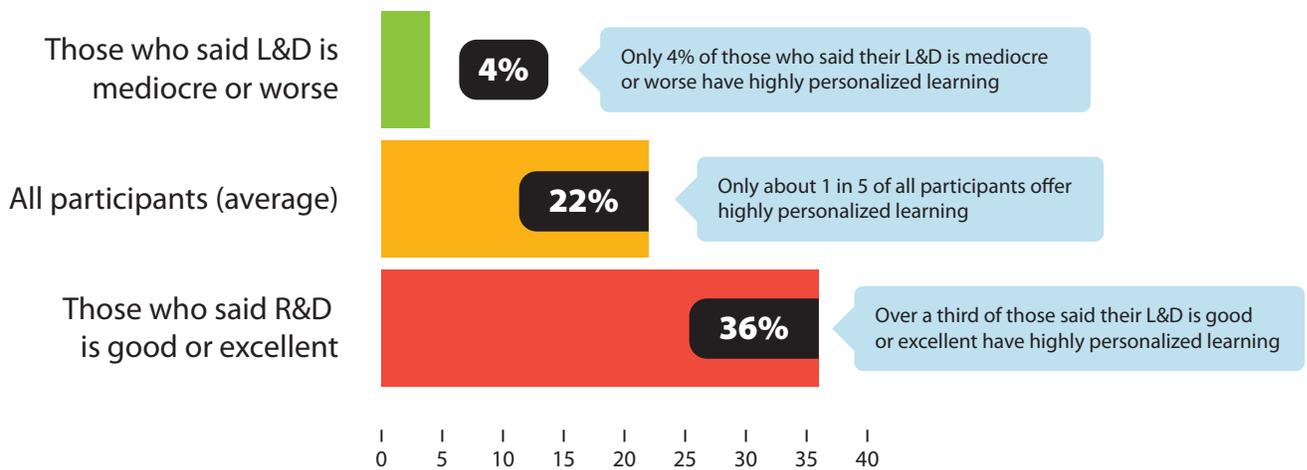


**Organizations that say they have good/excellent L&D are nine times more likely to have highly personalized learning compared with organizations that said their L&D was mediocre or worse**

### Finding Twelve: Personalized learning is strongly linked to good L&D

As noted previously, relatively few organizations offer high levels of personalized learning by topic or career outcome. However, organizations that do offer high levels of personalized learning are nine times more likely to say their organizational learning and development is good or excellent.

**Survey Question:** To what extent is learning personalized for the individual at your company by topic or career outcome? [Filtered by the perceived quality of L&D]



Only 22% of the entire survey panel said they delivered highly personalized learning. But 36% of organizations who say their organizations have good or excellent L&D said so. The impact was also more pronounced when we filtered these same responses according to learning culture.

### Finding Thirteen: Top-notch L&D programs tend to blend training methods

Organizations with good learning programs use blended learning. In fact, not a single participant describing their L&D as excellent or good used fewer than three methods of employee training.

In the following table, we've sorted the data into two groups based on how they rate L&D in their organizations. We've reported the percentage of each group using the various options the survey offered for training modality. For instance, 89% of the participants in the perceived "excellent" or "good" L&D group use ILT, while 71% of the rest of the participants use ILT. That means the "excellent" or "good" L&D perception participants are 27% more likely to use ILT than the group describing their L&D less favorably.

**Assessments, mentoring and videos are strongly linked with good/excellent L&D**

**Apparent influence of training methods on how participants describe their L&D programs**

Method	Excellent + Good (ratio of usage)	Mediocre + Poor + Almost nonexistent	Difference in Rate of Usage
Instructor-led training	89%	71%	27%
Online courses	76%	50%	50%
Video	65%	34%	93%
Books	36%	19%	95%
Simulations	34%	11%	113%
Mentoring	65%	30%	119%
Assessments/ practice exercises	58%	24%	141%
Book Summaries	18%	5%	233%

### Finding Fourteen: Videos, mentoring and assessments are all worthy of consideration

Assessments/practice exercises, mentoring and videos are especially noteworthy as methods that distinguish between those with high-quality and relatively low-quality learning and development systems (based on self reports). In each case, a majority of those with high-quality L&D programs use these learning methods, and these strategies are used much more often by those with high-quality programs than by others.

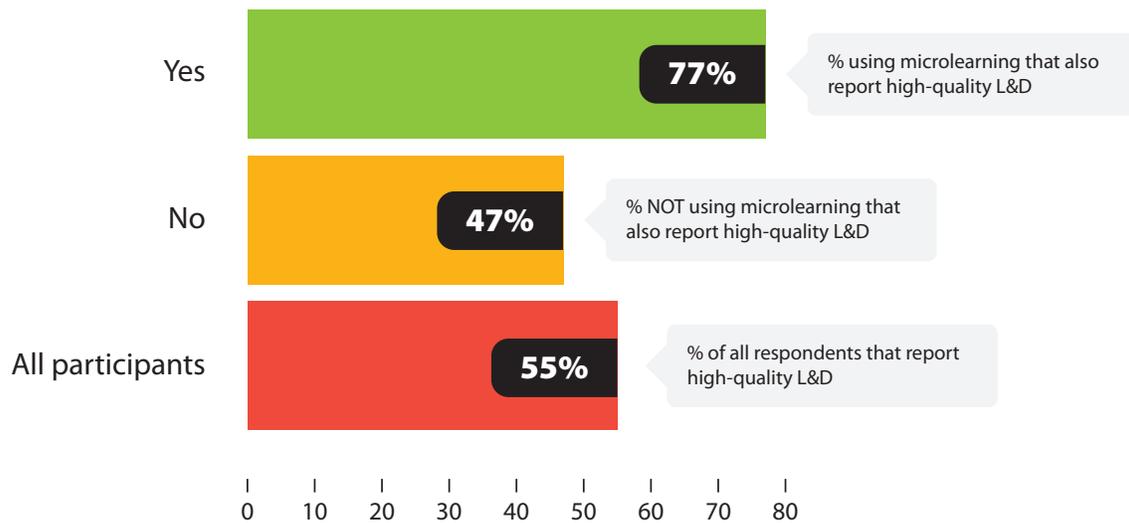
### Finding Fifteen: Microlearning is linked to L&D quality

Those organizations that report higher levels of perceived L&D quality are more likely than average to use microlearning. Just 55% of all responding organizations said they have good or excellent L&D, whereas 77% of those using microlearning fall into that category of perceived good or excellent L&D.



Of those that said their organizations use microlearning, 77% also said they have high-quality L&D

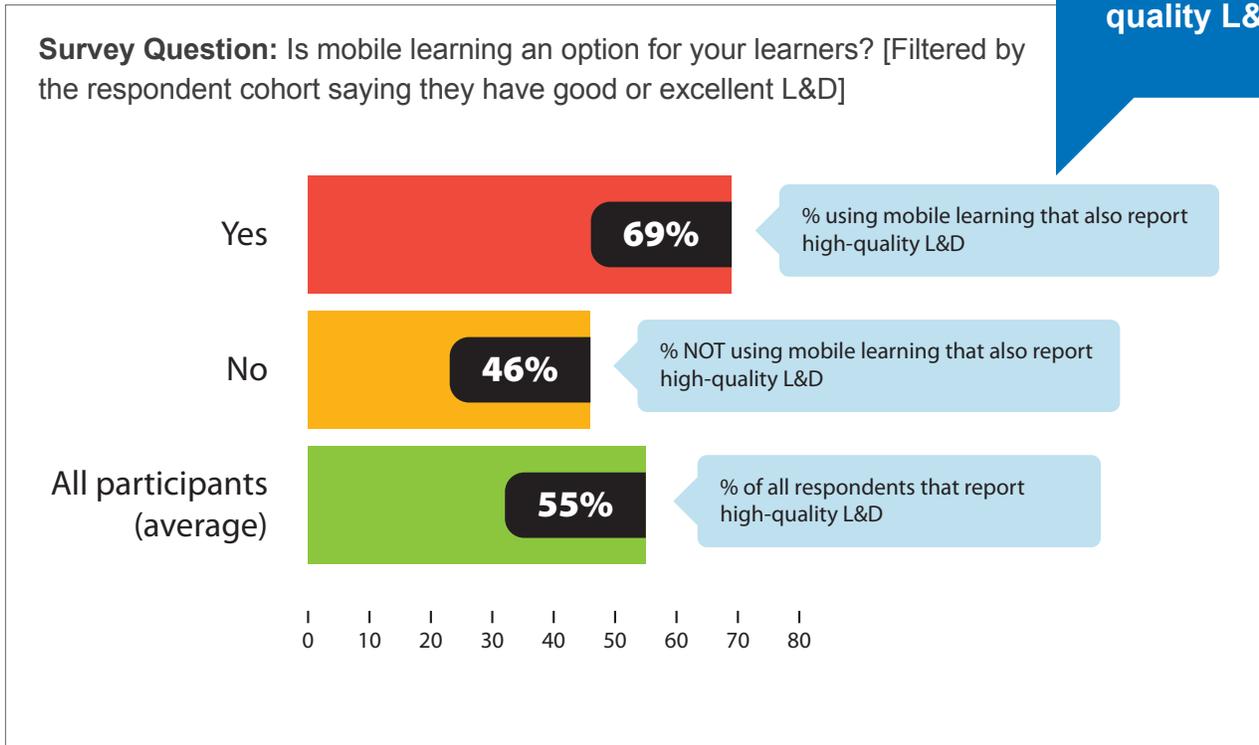
**Survey Question:** Does your organization serve up microlearning (that is, short bursts of learning 2 to 5 minutes in length)? [Filtered by the respondent cohort saying they have good or excellent L&D]



### Finding Sixteen: Mobile learning is also linked to better learning

As with microlearning, those organizations that report higher levels of perceived L&D quality are more likely than average to use mobile learning. Just 55% of all organizations said they have good or excellent L&D, whereas 69% of those using mobile learning fall into that category.

**Of those that said their organizations use mobile learning, 69% also said they have high-quality L&D**



## Finding Seventeen: The critical role of LMS and learning portals

Many of the learning methods mentioned in this section are linked to LMS and/or learning portals. Online courses, videos, and assessments are often packaged and clustered together in LMS systems, working together to create high-quality learning content. In fact, organizations with high-quality learning and development are 50% more likely than other organizations to use online courses.

Simulations, books and book summaries also tend to be housed in such systems. Simulations are typically video-based training content with the capacity to illustrate situations which the learner can observe through the video. Simulations are visual, and they show behaviors that result in immediate, observable outcomes. Moreover, human beings are wired to take in information visually and learn from observed behaviors. Simulations also promote self-directed learning where the employee manages their own time, space and pace of learning. All of these factors combine to make well-crafted simulations effective learning content.

Books and book summaries also allow for a high degree of self-directed learning. Adult learning theory teaches practitioners that self-direction positively influences learning outcomes.



## Key Takeaways

**Personalize learning.** Personalized learning is associated with better learning outcomes, according to this study. Individual development plans, or IDPs, are a well-known method for generating personalized learning paths for employees. The next step in the delivery of personalized learning is to use available technology tools to improve the personalization of learning. Employees should, for example, be able to access content in a variety of modalities, depending on which ones they're most comfortable with.

**Deliver content using multiple modalities.** This study indicates that having multiple learning modalities is linked to higher learning success. Instructor-led training remains the “go to” training method for most organizations, with both high-performing and low-performing organizations using ILT heavily. High-performing organizations, however, tend to incorporate other modalities like video, simulations, online courses, assessments/practice exercises, books, and mentoring. To improve learning outcomes, organizations should offer learning opportunities to employees in a wide variety of modalities.

**Make liberal use of technology-enabled learning.** Technologies help enable blended and personalized learning. Organizations should be able to offer learning options such as video, simulations and online courses. This study also indicates that mobile learning and microlearning are associated with improved learning successes.

**Build a mentoring program.** One-size-fits-all training doesn't work very well. An excellent way to foster a culture of learning that is specific to each employee is with mentoring. Mentors can help shape learning for each individual employee based on career goals or mastery needs. Further, mentoring is an outstanding tool for bridging generational divides. Experienced employees have had opportunities to impart knowledge and wisdom acquired through years of exposure to the industry and organization. Less experienced employees can connect with more experienced employees, and both groups gain personal insights to the other cohort's work experience, needs and motivations.

**Get creative to help employees retain learning.** Employees need to learn, remember and then apply new skills to improve performance. Learning retention is a vital element of high-performing L&D programs, so it's important to find out which training options result in higher retention rates. This study indicates that one-on-ones and examinations/assessments are the most commonly used ways of helping learners retain information.

**Involve managers and experienced coworkers.** Front-line managers and experienced coworkers are crucial stakeholders for any successful L&D program. They are closer to the needs and performance challenges facing employees. Managers are also uniquely situated to offer valuable, real-time observations about skills and performance. However, organizations cannot assume their managers know how to help employees learn, nor can they assume managers know how to effectively communicate learning needs. The solution is to teach managers the skills they need to facilitate greater L&D gains for their employees. Once this is done, managers can also help coworkers train one another.

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### About Skillsoft

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