

An aerial, top-down view of a large, diverse crowd of people at a vibrant, colorful event. The ground is illuminated with bright, multi-colored lights in shades of blue, purple, pink, and green, creating a festive atmosphere. People are seen from above, wearing various colorful clothing and accessories. The crowd is spread out across the frame, with some individuals more prominent than others.

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CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

THE FUTURE OF **LEARNING**

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THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

Dr. Carmen von Rohr

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ABOUT CRF

Founded in 1994, **Corporate Research Forum (CRF)** is a membership organisation whose purpose is to increase the effectiveness of the HR function, in order to drive sustained organisational performance, through developing the capability of HR professionals. Through more than twenty years of research and the expertise of our team, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes, what works, what doesn't, and in what circumstances. With a network of over 220+ leading organisations, we continue to grow as the respected focal point and knowledge source for improving corporate and individual performance.

We support our members in enhancing their personal capabilities and building organisational effectiveness, guiding them through topics relevant to success, identifying actionable insights and practical recommendations, and facilitating networking opportunities. Our work helps organisations and the HR function make sense of the environment in which they operate, and develop capacity to deal with continuous uncertainty.

For more details on how your organisation can benefit from CRF membership please contact Richard Hargreaves, Managing Director at richard@crforum.co.uk. Alternatively, please visit our website at www.crforum.co.uk.

ABOUT AUTHOR



Dr. Carmen von Rohr is a sociologist with extensive research and learning design experience. She began her career as a digital learning designer in higher education at Cengage Learning before joining CRF in 2018 to contribute to research and learning content.

COURSERA COMMENTARY

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The Urgent Need for Workplace Learning

In the face of a global talent shortage, learning and technology leaders are under immense pressure to source the critical skill sets needed to drive business impact. Companies must urgently rethink their approach to securing the skill sets necessary for digital transformation. Failure to do so will collectively cost those organisations trillions.

The effects of this shortage underscore the case for reskilling and upskilling from within as the single-most sustainable talent strategy. However, creating skills transformation programs that deliver business impact is a broad and complex challenge. The pressure caused by skills shortages and the urgency to relieve them are increasing. Approaching this problem by outsourcing skills, or chasing talent on the open market, are resource-intensive paths with unreliable results. Learning and technology leaders must instead commit to internal reskilling and upskilling through a clear end-to-end approach and long-term strategy.

From identifying and forecasting skills gaps to talent matching and delivering an end-to-end learning program, knowing where to start and scaling rapidly can be overwhelming. This process of 'talent-matching' helps organise a business's learning program, fast-track results, and ensures existing skills are maximised. The process of 'talent matching' – particularly at scale – can be challenging. Coursera helps organisations in their talent matching process across the globe.

By matching this vast pool of talent to relevant learning, organisations can plug skill gaps, provide a pathway to economic mobility for employees and show that costly churn is not inevitable in frontline-heavy industries. The bottom line is clear: long-term upskilling and reskilling strategies are the best solution to overcome the talent shortages. By unleashing the potential of existing talent and building a highly skilled and highly engaged workforce, businesses can deliver on digital transformation goals and achieve ambitious business objectives, even in turbulent times.

Coursera for Business now provides 3,500 companies worldwide with job-based skills development featuring world-class content, hands-on learning, and the ability to track, measure, and benchmark skills through a single, unified platform. With over 275 university and industry partners, Coursera's offerings range from over 10,000 bite-sized videos called Clips for 'just in time' foundation learning in 5-10 minute chunks to Professional Certificates that can get your employees job-ready in completely new roles and professions in as little as six months.

Valerie Focke, Director, Coursera for Business

ORACLE COMMENTARY

ORACLE

As HR and L&D professionals, we all understand the importance of aligning our learning proposition to our organisation's strategy, but this is far from straightforward to do. It presents us with challenges, including:

- How do we future-proof our organisation, ensuring we are building and retaining the right skills and competencies that our organisation will need to grow – particularly in a competitive talent market?
- How do we create self-serve learning options that offer personalised, relevant experiences, that are intuitive to use, tailored for the needs of each person in our workforce, and take them from early career to retirement?

This is when leveraging data analytics and new tools, such as machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI), becomes invaluable.

We are already seeing that employees are benefiting from approaches which help them focus on key skills, which make them more productive and engaged. Recommendation engines using AI are available today, providing self-serve options around the skills employees should learn, what skills organisations should hire for specific roles, and which candidates have the right skills for open positions. Advancements in technology will continue to grow and become even more sophisticated.

We also see that organisations get better results from their investments if they embrace new ways of working and provide a variety of means, to continually upskill and re-skill their employees in a personalised way.

To help solve this challenge, Oracle has developed a [dynamic skills](#) offering in our Cloud HCM solution. Powered by AI, this provides HR professionals with a skills inventory based on an organisation's own data and an always up-to-date view of their employees' skills to help attract, develop, and grow the right talent.

The future of learning is about identifying the skills and capabilities we need and creating personalised, self-serve options that allow individuals to learn in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them. To achieve this, organisations are utilising data to make informed decisions and to create truly evidence-based learning paths and experiences.

Leveraging modern HR technology and innovations is also key. Organisations will need to invest to retain and reskill talent and provide the consumer-like experiences employees expect.

Of course, L&D functions will also need to continue to morph and advance to benefit the organisation and the individual alike and to ensure the strategic goals of the organisation are delivered.

Sarah Horne, Executive Director, HR Transformation, Oracle

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Technological innovation, increasing complexity, uncertainty and competitiveness in the business landscape, demographic shifts, and climate change are powerful forces that have been reshaping organisations, their workforces, and what is required of them for some time now – and these forces have shortened the lifespan of knowledge, placing a premium on upskilling and reskilling. **Learning is a key strategic lever that organisations can pull to maintain performance in this complex landscape.**
- ▶ **The pandemic has accelerated the opportunity to rethink how people learn, and to expand the scope of corporate learning.** Organisations are broadening and improving learning modalities, experimenting with learning solutions, improving the link between learning and business strategy, and building learning cultures. But there are challenges to rethinking learning. There is still too much focus on one-off, formal learning interventions, learning strategy is sometimes only tenuously linked to business strategy, budgets and headcounts are declining, time for learning is scarce, and people are burned out.
- ▶ **Too many organisations are starting with learning solutions rather than clearly defining the business problem and learning objectives.** Learning functions would benefit from being deliberate in the design of learning – start with the learning objectives, and then consider the best blend of learning modalities. How can you deliver the right content in the right way, at the right time (and in an efficient and cost-effective way)? Organisations should also be cautious about the potential of creating a two-tier learning track, where senior and high potential employees receive more thoughtful and higher-quality learning than other members of the workforce.

▶ **The future of learning is strategic.** Strategic learning has two aspects. First, align learning strategy to business strategy, in order to identify and enable the capabilities the business needs for future performance. For many organisations, better strategic alignment is likely to translate to a need for significant upskilling and reskilling. Second, use the learning process to help drive innovation and business problem-solving. Organisations need a mix of productive learning (which optimises today) and generative learning (which helps the organisation build for tomorrow).

- *Strategic governance is an area for improvement.* We find that few organisations are using a governance structure, such as a learning board or council, to regularly connect L&D and business leaders. Improved strategic governance would enable leaders to define, review, design, and fund the learning strategy as the business strategy evolves.
- *Learning leaders need to build strategic relationships throughout the organisation.* For example, Learning professionals will need to work much more closely in partnership with talent acquisition in future, so there's better linkage between what's being learned and opportunities to put learning into practice on the job.

▶ **The future of learning is collaborative and continuous.** By collaborative, we mean that it will be social – people will solve problems, complete tasks, and learn new concepts with and from each other. By continuous, we mean that individuals, teams, and organisations will be 'always learning' – storing, reflecting on, applying, and refining what they have learned. A learning orientation, technology, and line managers are key mechanisms organisations can leverage to support connected, constant learning.

▶ **There is a great deal of consolidation in the learning technology market at present.** A key development we see is the use of social technologies to foster collaborative learning. Employees are creating their own learning spaces, using social technologies such as Teams, Slack, and Miro to create and exchange knowledge. Organisations should lean into the energy around how people collaborate and get work done, rather than trying to monitor and control learning activity in dedicated spaces that few people may use.

▶ **Many organisations are grappling with how to create a culture of learning.** We identify learning habits as a key behavioural mechanism through which individuals, teams, and organisations can build a learning orientation that primes them to be alert to learning opportunities, ready to apply / practice learning, and prepared to try again. Organisations are reporting success with learning habits centred on being curious and making time for reflection.

▶ **Line managers play a key role in setting the tone for learning, enabling access to learning, and helping their teams and individual reports activate learning.** Organisations therefore need to select, develop, and support managers to play this role. Actions organisations can take include teaching line managers how adults learn, rewarding and promoting managers who are skilled in helping their people grow and develop, and reviewing the communications strategy to ensure it's sufficiently focused on giving managers information about what learning is available and how they can support their team's learning.

▶ **The future of learning is evidence-based, but few organisations are using data consistently to inform the different aspects of learning.** Gut feelings are still driving the assessment of learning needs at many organisations, and evaluation of learning, when it happens at all, is usually focused on the immediate evaluation of learner satisfaction. Lack of time, skills, and resources are some of the barriers to taking a more evidence-based approach to learning. Evaluation should start before learning is designed or delivered – at the stage of assessing learning needs. Organisations would benefit from defining a process for assessing learning needs, and clarifying how that feeds into the process for evaluation.

▶ **The Learning function must evolve, or risk extinction.** Businesses need their workforces to learn at speed and scale. This should mean an elevated L&D function, integrated with business strategy and core talent processes. But few learning professionals and functions are currently equipped to play this role. There is still too much focus on learning programmes and how to deliver them, admin and facilitation, and controlling rather than enabling learning. Performance consulting, design, marketing and communication, data literacy, and product management are key future capabilities for the learning function.



1.0

WHY LEARNING, AND WHY NOW?

In this chapter, we explore how the pandemic impacted learning; the business context that is driving the post-pandemic learning agenda; and the challenges that organisations are facing as they evolve learning strategies to support business performance.

“How can you re-engineer the workforce and the way work is done without thinking really deeply about what lifelong learning is; what it is to have a curious, engaged workforce?”

NIGEL PAINE, CEO, NIGEL PAINE.COM LTD AND PRESENTER, LEARNING NOW TV

1.1

WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

In the space of only two years, our expectations of where and how people work have vastly changed. At the same time, mass resignations in some industries and geographies have led commentators to speak of the ‘Great Resignation’ or the ‘Great Rethink’ – signalling an ongoing debate about why people work. While the pandemic has been credited as a catalyst for these changes, it is better understood as an accelerator and enabler of workplace transformations that were already underway.

Technological innovation, increasing complexity, uncertainty and competitiveness in the business landscape, demographic shifts, and climate change are powerful forces that have been reshaping organisations, their workforces, and what is required of them for some time now.

What has perhaps been neglected in the heated debates about hybrid working is what workplace transformation means for corporate learning. The forces described above have shortened the lifespan of knowledge and placed a premium on upskilling and reskilling – whether to support digital transformation, innovation, the business transformation to sustainability, multigenerational working, adaptability to change, or leading in a hybrid workplace. 87% of executives report skills gaps in their organisation, according to research by McKinsey, and addressing that gap could result in a \$6.5 trillion uplift of global GDP by 2030, according to the World Economic Forum.

At the same time, learning and development is a key tool for attraction and retention in a fiercely competitive talent marketplace. A 2019 study from LinkedIn found that 94% of employees said they would stay with their current employer if it invested in their development.

These imperatives are captured by Dstl’s Pete Cooper, Learning and Talent Development Lead, who described the business reasons for his organisation’s focus on learning: *“We are experiencing huge growth at the moment and there is a real focus – a strategic push – on retention and capability building. Technical skill development and management capability are key to our ability to deliver on our commitments; and as part of the civil service, our L&D offering is a key tool for attraction and retention.”*

In short, high performance requires that companies attract and retain skilled employees and exceptional leaders capable of building and rapidly, continually evolving complex knowledge. Learning is a key strategic lever that organisations can pull in service of these goals.

However, as Microsoft's Brian Murphy, Senior Director, Employee Skilling, explains, *"Corporate learning and development traditionally only caters – and not very well – to a small portion of learning – the formal mode in the shape of training courses. It continues to be important – if not more important than ever before – to expand the scope of L&D. The pandemic has accelerated the opportunity to rethink how people really learn, and to reimagine how corporate learning happens."*

In this report, which builds on CRF's 2017 report, [Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance](#), we explore why learning is critical to today's organisation; what the future demands of individual learners, teams, and organisations; and the implications for the learning function.

CHAPTER 1 we assess how the pandemic impacted the learning agenda, the business context that is driving today's agenda, and the learning challenges that organisations are facing.

CHAPTER 2 we argue that the future of learning is *strategic*, examine what that means, and share examples of how organisations are linking learning strategy to business strategy.

CHAPTER 3 we argue that the future of learning is *collaborative and continuous*. We explore how a learning mindset, new (and old) technologies, and managers are supporting the new imperative of connected, constant learning.

CHAPTER 4 we argue that the future of learning is *evidence-based*, exploring the gap between where many organisations are and where it would benefit them to be.

CHAPTER 5 we argue that the future of learning poses an existential threat for learning functions – evolve, or become extinct. We explore the new capabilities that are required of learning professionals.

CHAPTER 6 we share key conclusions and recommendations.

Throughout, we encourage HR leaders and practitioners to stop, take stock, and think about what *their* organisation needs from learning. For learning to achieve its goals, its purpose and pathways will need to complement its organisation's unique context and needs.

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS NOW

Throughout this report we refer to the 'future of learning' as we think about the key changes and challenges facing corporate learning over the next three to five years. However, we recognise that 'the future', in the words of Claire Thompson, Head of Learning and Development at Balfour Beatty, *"is now."* As Thompson explains, *"sustainability, data, and digital – we need those skills now. We need to talk about where we are now and how we can improve."*

The forces we describe in this report – from rapid technological innovation to business transformation to political and economic uncertainty – are here, now; the imperative for organisations, learners, and the learning function is to transform ways of learning in order to meet the challenges they pose, at speed.

RESEARCH METHOD

This report is based on the following data sources:

- Interviews with 27 practitioners, experts and academics. We list the interviewees in the [Appendix](#).
- An online CRF survey, completed by 152 respondents in July 2022. Respondents were predominantly Chief Learning Officers/Heads of Learning & Development and learning specialists. They represented a broad spread of industry sectors. 41% worked for organisations with 10,000 employees or more; an additional 17% worked for organisations with more than 5,000 employees. 70% were based in the UK, 21% in Europe, and the remainder in the rest of the world.
- A review of relevant academic and practitioner literature. The Reading List in the [Appendix](#) contains references.

COVID-19

1.2

HOW DID THE PANDEMIC IMPACT LEARNING?

The biggest and most obvious impact the pandemic had on learning was on delivery methods – namely, the shift to all-virtual learning environments. We explore this shift more closely in [Chapter 3](#). Here, we note that the shift to all-virtual learning challenged assumptions and created space for different kinds of conversations about learning. Many organisations had to upgrade their technological infrastructure and the assumption that the only good learning is face-to-face and classroom-based came under scrutiny.

Now, as the pandemic draws to a close, the conversation is increasingly focused on taking a pause to identify the most appropriate learning modality for the given cohort, skills, and objectives. *“What is the delivery method of choice and how can you get the best impact and performance outcomes from delivery methods?”* asks Dstl’s Pete Cooper. *“For example, if the learning covers sensitive topics and requires a psychologically safe environment, is that better achieved face-to-face?”*

However, organisations are doing more than just thinking about and experimenting with learning modalities. We asked respondents to a CRF survey for this research to tell us about how their approach to learning is evolving post-pandemic. While ‘more blended learning’ was the most common answer, the following additional key themes emerged.

“[There is] a new and much needed focus on how learning must be timely, applicable and relevant, while ensuring a tie to business outcomes.”

CRF SURVEY RESPONDENT

- **Organisations are trying to improve the virtual aspects of blended learning.** More attention is being paid to clearing the clutter in virtual learning spaces – curating, creating learning pathways, and/or using AI-driven tools to support personalised, self-directed learning. Work is being done to make it easier to access learning and organisations are paying closer attention to how to bring action and reflection into virtual learning. As one survey respondent put it, *“How do we create the magic of in-person in this context – for example, can we use platforms that support virtual role-play/practice at scale?”*
- **At the same time, there is caution about the limitations of virtual learning.** While it has democratised access to learning, virtual learning *“is not helping deep cultural / behavioural learning needs”*, in the words of one respondent.
- **There is a renewed focus on linking learning strategy to business strategy.** ‘Alignment with business strategy’ was an oft-repeated answer to our survey, variously described as ‘increasing’ or ‘continuing’, with an additional emphasis on creating a business-aligned learning strategy that is ‘global’ and/or ‘cross-functional’. Identifying the skills the business needs and aligning learning accordingly is a key priority. Certain skills were frequently cited, including digital skills, collaboration skills, change management skills, and hybrid leadership skills.
- **Organisations are grappling with how to create a culture of learning in a hybrid world.** Many survey respondents cited a desire to improve the ‘self-directed’ mindset of learners and to facilitate social learning. Context is key. L&D professionals are expressing a desire to move beyond just providing learning solutions, to creating a context in which learners seek out and share learning by habit. Part of creating this context means, in the words of one respondent, *“engaging with our learners to understand what they want/need instead of the L&D or People team solely ‘prescribing’ what is needed.”*
- **Experimentation is increasing.** Experimentation isn’t just about achieving the right mix of face-to-face and virtual learning. Respondents to our survey cited experimentation with micro-learning (short, timely, relevant bursts of learning); learning communities; user-generated learning content; and academies.

“The vast majority of people in work are under enormous pressure to deliver more and more for less and less. So how do we persuade them, in such an environment, to shoehorn in a little bit of learning? Especially when the business is not pushing them to learn? People work for reward, but they live for recognition. They are incentivised through purpose, autonomy, and mastery. Learning can help people achieve that sense of mastery.”

NICK HOLLEY, DIRECTOR, CRF LEARNING

These themes are further reflected in survey respondents’ answers to questions about what they are doing well and what needs improvement, post-pandemic. Organisations report some strengths, in addition to a long to-do list for improvement.

Asked what their organisations currently do well from a learning perspective, respondents cited:

- Improved infrastructure for and access to shorter, sharper, and self-paced learning.
- A large variety of learning opportunities, enabled by technology and available to a wide population (across functions, levels, and geographies).
- Leadership support for learning.
- Improved tailoring of learning to context and needs.

Corporate learning isn’t undergoing a strategic, experimental, and social renaissance at all organisations. One survey respondent provides an important corrective to optimistic ideas about the transformation of learning, and the L&D function’s capability to deliver. What does this respondent’s organisation currently do well from a learning perspective?

“Honestly – nothing! There has been no leadership within the L&D team, no plan and a complete lack of business understanding around priorities. They feel that digital pathways are the only way to train people – it’s lacking total direction and does not align with business needs.”

Asked which aspects of their organisation’s approach to learning they would most like to improve, respondents cited:

- **The link to strategy.** Those learning professionals whose organisations aren’t already continuing or increasing the alignment of learning strategy to business strategy are expressing a strong desire for them to do so. Relevance to business strategy, connection to business purpose and strategy, and clarity of alignment to business strategy were cited again and again.
- **Evaluation.** Impact assessment, in terms of effectiveness and the return on effort and investment, was frequently cited. Survey respondents also expressed a desire to improve their use of data (from skills audits and other sources) to inform the development of interventions.
- **Quality of engagement from line managers.**
- **Parity and consistency of the learning offering across the organisation, in terms of geography/function/level.** While more is being offered to all, the quality of the offering is not always equal.
- **Complementarity of learning.** As one respondent explained, “[We need to] ensure all learning we develop is aligned to strategy/business needs and complements each other – some courses cancel each other out by using different models and information instead of complementing the learning across the piece.”
- **Better marketing of learning opportunities,** with clear routes into the opportunities and a simplification of clutter in and around learning.
- **Focus on practicality.** In the words of one respondent, “[we need to] lose the overreliance on a variety of old models and theories and focus on practical solutions that people can use in their day-to-day lives.”

CASE STUDY:

HOW LEARNING IS EVOLVING POST-PANDEMIC AT HP

We asked Olga Martens-Stuurman, Director – Future of Work at HP Inc. (HP), to share how her organisation’s approach to learning is evolving post-pandemic.

- **They have combined Learning, Talent and Culture into one team that is holistically focused on culture and growing talent, not just delivering training.** *“Our team takes the underlying culture as the foundation for everything, and looks at all the aspects of learning experiences. There has been a focus on creating standards, adopting platforms that are easy to use, and having quality control at a central level, but also democratising information and access so that individuals and teams can make learning their own.”*
 - **There is a focus on getting the correct balance between aspects of learning that are best controlled centrally, and those that are best done in terms of team, function, or geography.** *“Compliance, diversity and inclusion, leadership style and standards – there are certain cultural things which are core to the company that can and should be done centrally,” Martens-Stuurman explained, “but people don’t want to simply consume training. They want to be able to apply what they’ve learned, and application is better done at a team, functional, or regional level.”*
 - **There is a strong focus on the learner’s context.** *“There have always been personal learning styles,” Martens-Stuurman said, “but with the pandemic, context has really come to the forefront. People working from home have different learning needs compared to those in the office. New starters have very different learning needs compared to those who are at the end of their career. We need to be very intentional, offering a portfolio of options for those at different stages of the employee lifecycle and with different personal contexts, and those options need to be in a variety of styles with different ways of applying the learning to your job.”*
 - Consideration of context extends to the level of expertise a learner needs to acquire. *“Take digital skills,” Martens-Stuurman posited. “Not everyone needs the same level of digital skills. There is a central minimum standard, and a need to create a sense of excitement for digital at a basic level. But not everyone needs advanced data skills. How and what each person needs is different. Managers, for example, cannot become experts on all things digital, but they need a good understanding of basic concepts. It’s important for learning to be targeted to these different levels – literacy, fluency, mastery, and so on, and designed in the best way to achieve the desired level.”*
- “People don’t want to simply consume training. They want to be able to apply what they’ve learned, and application is better done at a team, functional, or regional level.”*

 - **There is a growing emphasis on building communities of learning.** *“Lots of people like social learning. We are looking at ways to connect people – for example, by bringing people from different disciplines together to work on a specific assignment, in a hackathon or through a design thinking approach. One success has been the informal, organic development of a community of enthusiastic learners. We have built up a global network of 70 or so volunteers who took on teach-back sessions as a stretch assignment. Their energy, support, and ideas have been really helpful for promoting learning. Without the support of an enthusiastic community, you risk having a great start and then collapsing.”*
 - **Personas are being used to help learners chart their path.** *“Everybody wants to stay relevant, but ‘relevance’ can be an intangible concept. Where do you go? What do you do? We don’t have clear paths with logical steps anymore. People make side steps, go down, try different things. So, we developed personas for the future of work. Each persona is about the activities you perform rather than the role – what does a person in this position think about? What do they do? The personas are facilitating a much more personal learning journey. They provide a framework and recommendations, but allow space for personal influence and passion. They are making it easier for learners to explore new topics, and then decide if their interest is sparked to go deeper.”*



1.3

THE BUSINESS CONTEXT – DO MORE WITH LESS?

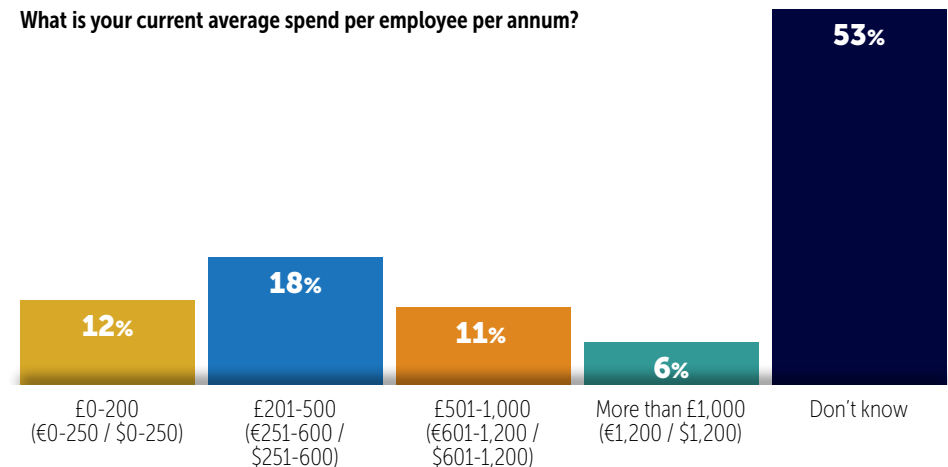
Today's business context is marked by instability, volatility, and change. Post-pandemic logistical challenges, inflation, and war in Ukraine are contributing to a grim economic outlook, with recessions looming on the horizon in many countries. Technological, climate, and demographic change are continuing to increase competitive pressure on businesses: many of which have recently or are in the process of shifting strategies to remain competitive in the new business landscape.

In many geographies, government mandates on sustainability are beginning to or will soon come into force, further increasing pressures – especially cost pressures – on businesses. For example, in 2019 the UK launched its Streamlined Energy and Carbon Reporting Framework, which requires energy and emissions reporting from quoted companies and large unquoted companies. According to the Green Business Bureau, in a review of sustainability regulations in the UK, it is likely that businesses that do not meet energy and emissions standards will have to register and work with national regulators to come into line with standards.

We are already seeing these forces leave their mark on organisational resources, including budgets for learning. In the survey for this research, we asked respondents about learning budgets. Just under two-thirds of organisations have a clear view of annual spend on learning and development, and for 30%, that spend is less than £500 per employee (see Figure 1, below). Spend per employee is further complicated for some organisations – as one respondent to our survey pointed out, learning budget “varies significantly by type of employee”; in this respondent’s case, that variation is between factory workers and professionals.

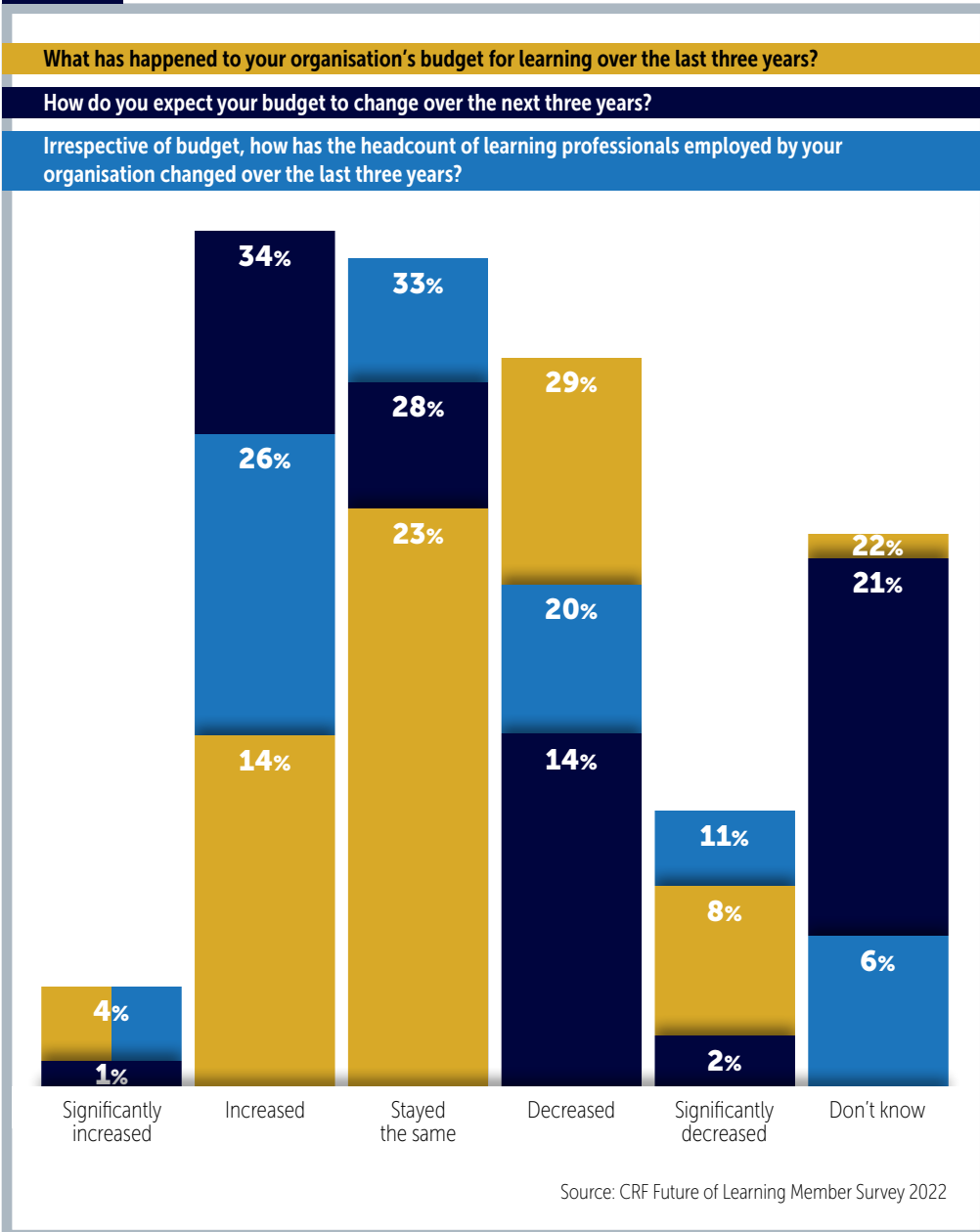
FIGURE 1

What is your current average spend per employee per annum?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

FIGURE 2

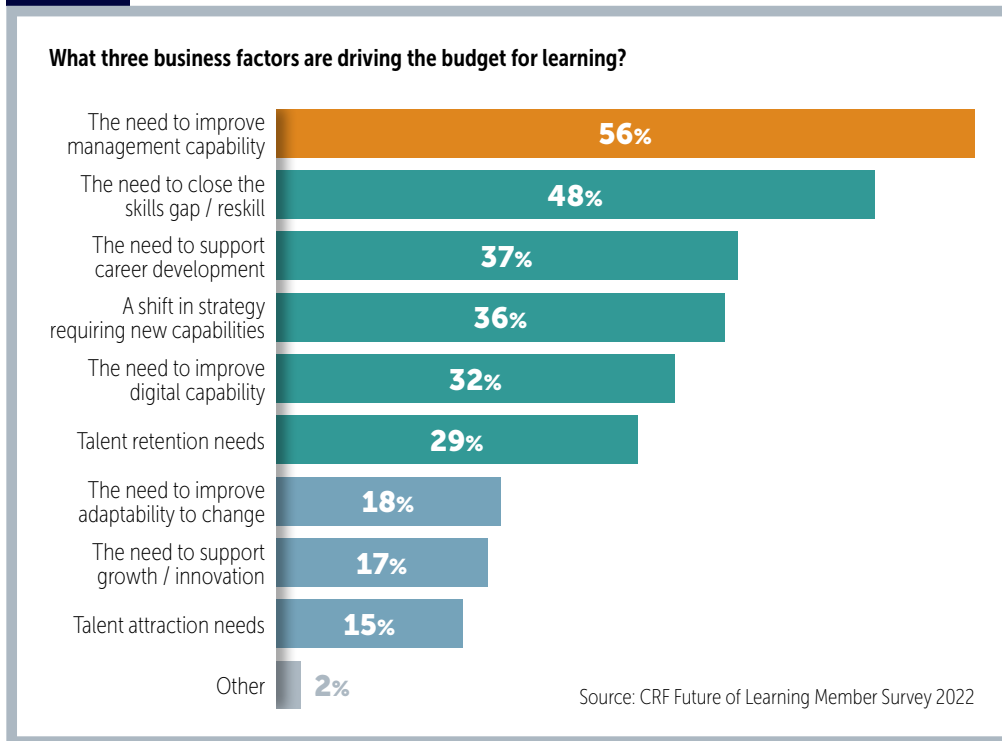


We also asked about the direction of travel for learning budgets and learning headcount. 37% of respondents said their organisation's budget for learning has decreased or significantly decreased over the past three years; only 14% report an increase, and a mere 4% report a significant increase (see Figure 2, opposite).

Reflecting the uncertainty in the broader political, economic, and business environments, respondents were cautious in their predictions about learning budgets for the next three years. While just over one-third expect budgets to increase, 28% expect budgets to stay the same, 16% expect decreases, and 21% report that they simply do not know.

Irrespective of budget, the headcount of directly-employed learning professionals has stayed the same or decreased for two-thirds of organisations over the past three years (33% stayed the same, 20% decreased, 11% significantly decreased).

FIGURE 3



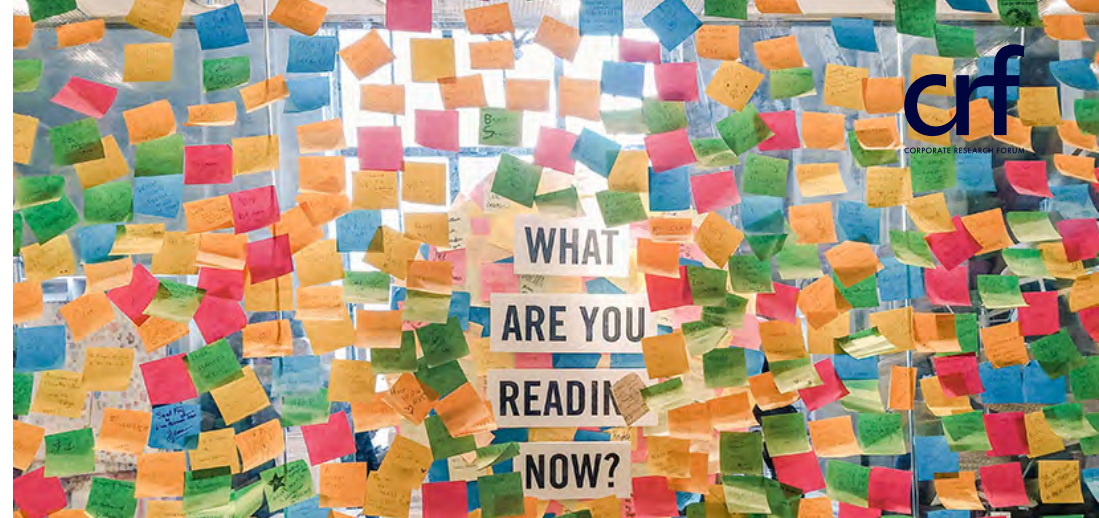
Unsurprisingly, the need to improve management capability (56%) and to close the skills gap / reskill (48%) are the main business factors driving learning budgets (see Figure 3, above).

In sum, with respect to learning budget and headcount, the picture is cloudy at best. The interviews for this research reflected this caution. For example, several interviewees reported that they are already feeling pressure from Finance colleagues to keep or move all learning to virtual, due to increased cost savings. As one said, *"I sense that it will be a struggle for organisations with less sophisticated or powerful learning functions to resist this pressure."*

Another interviewee summed up how the business context is impacting learning budgets at their organisation. Budgets and headcount are decreasing and are expected to continue decreasing. Explaining the rationale, they said, *"there are operational and business reasons for the decrease. Operationally, we are really focused on CO₂ reduction, which makes virtual learning much more attractive. In business terms, it's a difficult environment to operate in, with many different triggers – inflation, the war in Ukraine, political instability more broadly, planet warming, and the pandemic."*

"Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity have increased. Many important skills are also experiencing a rapid decrease in their half-life. On top of all that, the pace of work seems much faster now, and together, these circumstances are stifling many organisations' ability to learn and grow. People just don't have the time or the priority for learning, although ultimately learning is the thing they need to get on and do things better. The one thing we need is time for learning, but the one thing we aren't giving ourselves is time for learning. It could be a sorry state for learning in the future."

PAUL JAMES, HEAD OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, SAGA



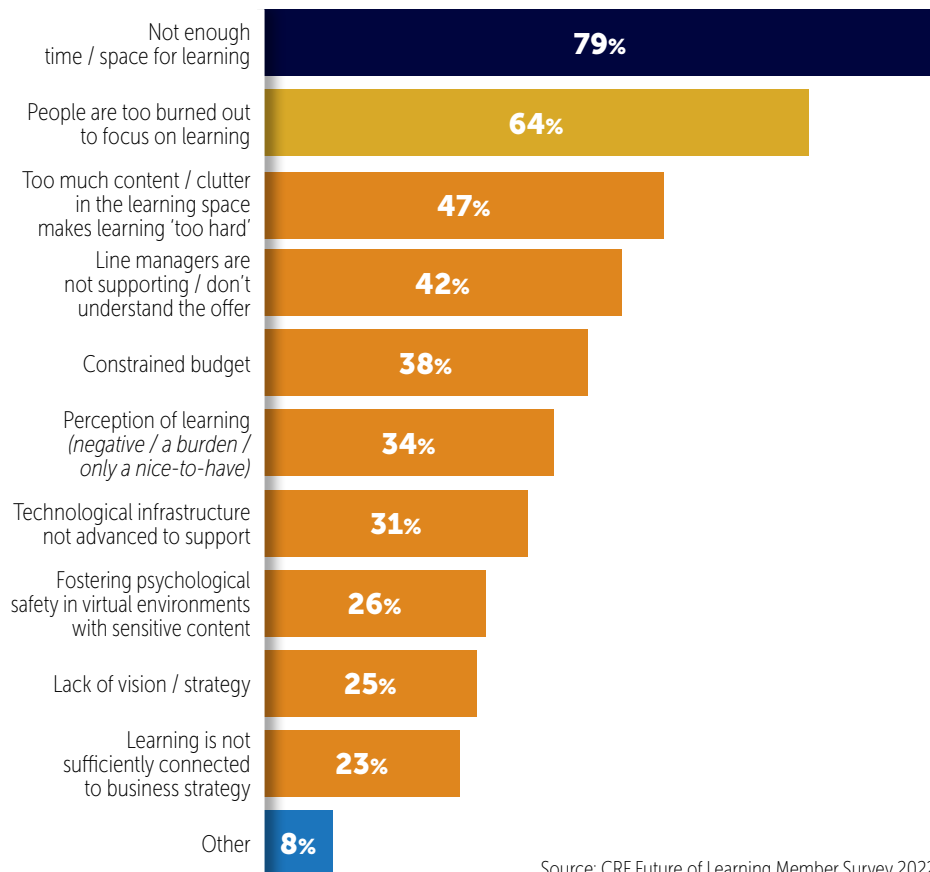
1.4 WHAT LEARNING CHALLENGES ARE ORGANISATIONS FACING?

As if today's learning needs and the limited resources available to deliver against these needs weren't enough, many organisations are experiencing additional challenges to executing learning in the post-pandemic landscape.

Chief among these challenges are time and burnout (see Figure 4, on following page). 79% of respondents to our survey cited 'not enough time/space for learning' as a challenge they are encountering as they try to deliver learning post-pandemic, while 64% reported that 'people are too burned out to focus on learning'. This perspective was reinforced in the interviews for this research, with interviewees frequently citing the intensification of work, burnout, and lack of time for learning.

As Olga Martens-Stuurman of HP explained, *"Time is a challenge. People don't have capacity. They have so much going on. And people were in survival mode for so long during the pandemic, protecting their health and safety, balancing work and caregiving. They kept going, there was no time to slow down. Now people are really tired, and they are working too many hours, working at crazy times. Burnout is starting to surface and people need to step back a bit. People are interested to learn, very much so, but how do they balance it when it's one more thing on top of so much else? For some, learning becomes a lower priority. Others still try to do it, but it can add additional stress."*

FIGURE 4

What challenges are you encountering as you deliver learning post-pandemic?


Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

Other key challenges cited by survey respondents and interviewees include the following.

- **Too much content / clutter in the learning space**, which makes learning 'too hard' (cited by 47% of survey respondents). Qualitative responses to our survey highlighted the additional burden of restrictive and confusing routes to learning.
- **Lack of support from line managers** (cited by 42% of survey respondents). Olga Martens-Stuurman elaborates: *"If managers don't understand what's being offered and why it's important, they might not support, prioritise, or communicate properly. So it's crucial to ensure they understand and have time to absorb it."* Interestingly, technology can exacerbate the problem of manager engagement. As one survey respondent explained, *"new LMS assigns learning and so removes any real need for manager engagement."*
- **Constrained budgets for learning** (cited by 38% of survey respondents).
- **The perception of learning in the organisation** (as negative, a burden, only a nice-to-have, etc.), cited by 34% of respondents. As Dstl's Pete Cooper explains, *"The perception of learning is a challenge. We have a very academic organisation, so we have to work hard to change the learning culture, to change the perception that learning is 'just training courses'."*
- **The limitations of virtual learning**, especially around learner engagement. In the words of one survey respondent, *"Virtual learning makes it easier for participants to drop out or not be fully present. It's difficult to keep an entire cohort together through a programme."* Virtual learning poses other challenges, particularly for global companies. Organising learning around time zones, determining how long to make sessions, dealing with language barriers, deciding if and when to translate and localise, whether and what information to disseminate before the session, and how to make content more visual and simple for multilingual audiences were a few challenges cited by interviewees.
- **The operating model of the organisation**. For example, Pete Cooper at Dstl described how his organisation's operating model is built around projects and the time spent on them. Costs come from the time. If people want to spend time on learning or development, under this operating model, it's time away from delivery. *"It's an incredibly tactical issue. We bill to cost codes; so for learning, the question becomes, 'do you have a cost code for that? No I don't'. You can have the best L&D offering in the world but if the operating model doesn't support it, you won't get far."* For Cooper, the solution lies in ensuring that all learning opportunities are tied back to business problems and deliverables. *"Then, a learner can say 'that piece of learning is going to help me address that project deliverable'; however, this is easier for technical skills than management skills."*

These challenges are exacerbated in organisational cultures where learning is seen as a box to check, something required for promotion, and/or a burden.

Now that we have assessed the current state of learning, the external pressures influencing learning agendas and budgets, and the unique post-pandemic challenges to delivering learning, we turn our attention in the next three chapters to the future of learning.

2.0

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS... STRATEGIC

In this chapter we assess the current state and preview the future of learning before honing in on an understanding of what it means to have a strategic approach to learning. We share examples of how organisations are aligning business and learning strategy, look at how learning can support future skills, and introduce the CRF Learning Matrix.

“Many organisations are struggling to understand what their need is in terms of learning and aligning with business strategy, and how to make use of the new tools available, such as Machine Learning and AI.”

ADELE PICKERILL, STRATEGY DIRECTOR HCM, ORACLE

2.1

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS...

Interviewees for this research told us that learning in today’s companies is, for the most part, flawed. Learning is not delivering what the business needs – too often, it is delivering the wrong things at the wrong time in the wrong way, and for the wrong reasons.

- **The wrong things** – For example, employees may be mandated, en masse, to attend a training session on ‘wellbeing’ or ‘conflict resolution’, or some other course with little alignment to business (or individual) needs. This is usually related to the lack of a proper needs analysis.
- **At the wrong time** – Employees often learn on a rigid and pre-defined schedule, at a time when it may or may not bear any relevance to their role – if they have time for learning at all.
- **In the wrong way** – Learning is often conceptualised as one-off training courses (virtual or in-person), or self-serve e-learning without a connection to a broader context or objectives. Time for reflection is largely absent.
- **For the wrong reasons** – A learning initiative may be implemented because the topic is fashionable or because it is a ‘pet topic’ of a business leader or someone in the L&D function; or the Learning function may simply be offering more of the same that made the company successful yesterday. An issue highlighted by several of our interviewees is that the business sometimes asks for things it doesn’t need; in this case, L&D professionals need the expertise, courage, and clout to push back.



“What does the future of learning look like? Hopefully, not the past. The danger is we start talking about technology, while the issue around learning is the same as the issue with most HR – it’s too often disconnected from the business. The future of learning uses technology, but the starting point is ‘what is the business problem?’”

NICK HOLLEY, DIRECTOR, CRF LEARNING

It is therefore not surprising that surveys consistently find high levels of dissatisfaction and low levels of applicability with learning and learning functions.

- In a survey of 1,500 senior managers from 50 organisations, 75% were dissatisfied with their company’s L&D function.
- A survey from 24x7 Learning found that only 12% of employees apply new skills learned in L&D programmes to their jobs.
- According to a recent McKinsey survey, only 25% of respondents believe that training measurably improved performance.

With technology rapidly advancing, businesses undergoing profound transformation, and a fiercely competitive talent market, corporate learning will have to revolutionise its approach – fast.

Our research finds that the future of learning is:

Strategic learning strategy needs to be aligned to business strategy, identifying and enabling the capabilities the business needs to succeed tomorrow and beyond. Strategy is about more than just alignment to business needs, however. A strategic learning function also uses the learning process to generate new ideas. We explore how organisations can make learning more strategic in the remainder of this chapter and in [Chapter 6](#).

Collaborative and continuous learning is social, increasingly user-generated and user-shared; it delivers what is relevant in real time, using robust and varied learning methodologies and technologies. We explore how a learning orientation, technology, and line managers can support collaborative and continuous learning in [Chapter 3](#) of this report.

Evidence-based from needs assessment to outcome measurement, future learning will utilise newly available technologies and methods to diagnose, design, deliver, and iterate learning solutions. We look at evidence-based learning in [Chapter 4](#) of this report.

2.2 STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT TO BUSINESS STRATEGY

One dimension of being strategic as a learning function is aligning learning strategy to business strategy. It’s about supporting professional development and building capabilities, in a timely and cost-effective manner. For example, if a company is undergoing digital transformation, learning should focus on identifying and building digital capability.

Yet, among respondents to our survey, only 51% of organisations have an explicit learning strategy, and in many cases, this strategy is not strategically aligned to the business (Research from McKinsey finds that only 40% of companies say their learning strategy is aligned with business goals).

ONLY

51%

of organisations **have an explicit learning strategy**, and in many cases, **this strategy is not strategically aligned to the business**

40%

of companies say their **learning strategy is aligned with business goals (MCKINSEY)**

“Aligning learning to the company’s strategy is key. We need to translate the business strategy into capability needs that are critical to the company and prioritise our Leadership and Development (L&D) resources accordingly.”

SATOSHI PROBALA, HEAD OF LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT, SWISS RE

Our research highlighted some of the factors that underlie the lack of alignment, or in some cases very loose alignment, between learning and business strategy.

- **Post-pandemic, business strategies are still unsettled for some organisations.** Several interviewees mentioned the unsettled or unfocused direction of business strategy, as businesses shift from the more tactical ‘what’s required now’ ethos of the pandemic to the longer-term view. In these organisations, learning is aligning to purpose, values, or mission instead. For example, a learning leader at an organisation in the travel industry explained, *“our strategy, pre-pandemic, was based on the industry doubling capacity over the next 15 years. The pandemic was very disruptive to that. During this period, where we’ve had no strategy for two years, we have instead aligned to our mission, which is to serve our industry. We have focused on emergency industry priorities. So we have advocated for the industry, and have looked at how we can build capability to serve the industry – developing a service mindset, commercial skills, leading, and building capability around standard-setting.”*
- **Strategic business priorities may lack specificity and nuance.** This makes it difficult to align the learning strategy. For example, a strategic priority that focuses on digital is most helpful if it articulates the detail eg digital in terms of tech skills, or data, explained Jamie Ward, Head of Learning and Development at Channel 4. *“We haven’t yet articulated what we mean by ‘digital skills’. Do we mean digital in terms of tech skills? In terms of data analysis? In terms of how we support the organisation? We need to get more granular about what we mean by that strategic skill.”*
- **Business leaders may be more tactical than strategic.** Some L&D functions are operating in businesses where senior leaders haven’t grasped the skills implications of new business strategies, nor the importance of learning to executing those strategies. As one Learning leader explained, *“At my organisation, we are undergoing a massive strategic shift, selling entirely new products and services, but the organisation was built for people to have lifelong roles – consequently, we have long tenure and a more fixed mindset among senior leaders.”*

ONLY

23%

of respondents to our survey report that their organisation **has a learning board or council** or similar governance structure **for learning.**

To make the shift, we need leaders who are open to change, prioritise learning, role model learning, and who understand both the skills required to develop the new strategy and the limits of our current capability. Yet, quantitative and qualitative research with our entire senior leadership team (CEO, Executive Committee, C-suite, and VPs) shows that there is a focus on the tactical rather than the strategic and limited internal motivation for learning. Many of our senior leaders are operating as managers rather than directors, and are missing the strategic view. It’s going to be very difficult to transform.”

- **Lack of strategic governance.** Business strategy moves fast these days, requiring organisations to be agile, pivoting and adapting processes and practices at speed. L&D functions must likewise be prepared to rapidly shift learning strategy and initiatives. This is more likely to happen when the L&D function works in close partnership with business leaders. One mechanism for enhancing partnership is governance. A governance structure, such as a learning board or council, in which L&D and business leaders meet frequently to define, review, design, and fund learning strategy is essential to keeping learning and business strategies aligned. Yet, only 23% of respondents to our survey report that their organisation has a learning board or council or similar governance structure for learning.

“We are becoming more diverse as a result of the pandemic; the types of things we do as a business are expanding, and we are assessing where the opportunities lie. There is more innovation internally and we are seeking partnerships externally. This shift in business strategy requires a corresponding shift in capabilities, and that’s where learning and development come in.”

HANSI JACKSON, HEAD OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT, FIRST BUS UK

“All good learning strategy is driven by the business. It makes it easier for learning professionals to explain the value of what we do, and to secure the necessary resources.”

KEVIN MOORE, GROUP HEAD OF ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE, MOTT MACDONALD

STRATEGIC INTEGRATION: EMBEDDING LEARNING ACROSS HR AND INTO THE EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

Learning strategy should be aligned to business strategy, but equally it is important to integrate learning strategy with other aspects of HR (recruitment, performance management, etc.), and to ensure that learning priorities inform all aspects of employee experience – from recruitment and onboarding to performance management, promotion, and beyond.

Those L&D leaders who understand HR management practices and processes are in a position to collaborate with HR leaders. For example, if an organisation is replacing annual performance reviews with continual feedback, an integrated learning strategy will point to the need to upskill managers to provide this type of feedback effectively.

With respect to employee experience, DLA Piper’s Sarah Petherick, Interim International Head of Learning and Development, said, *“we need to plug learning into all the different interactions employees have.”* For example, *“When interviewing and selecting, if we can re-emphasise the ability to learn quickly as a core competence, that already sets the tone and expectations.”*

This, too, requires integration with broader HR. *“During recruitment, we should ask questions like, ‘what did you learn from that situation, what would you do differently, what would you apply?’ Similarly, in promotion panels, we could build in identification of learning agility. In performance conversations, we could nudge people toward reflection – getting people into the habit of pausing to think about what they learned as much as how they performed. It’s really important to embed this learning messaging into all the different stages of the employee lifecycle.”*

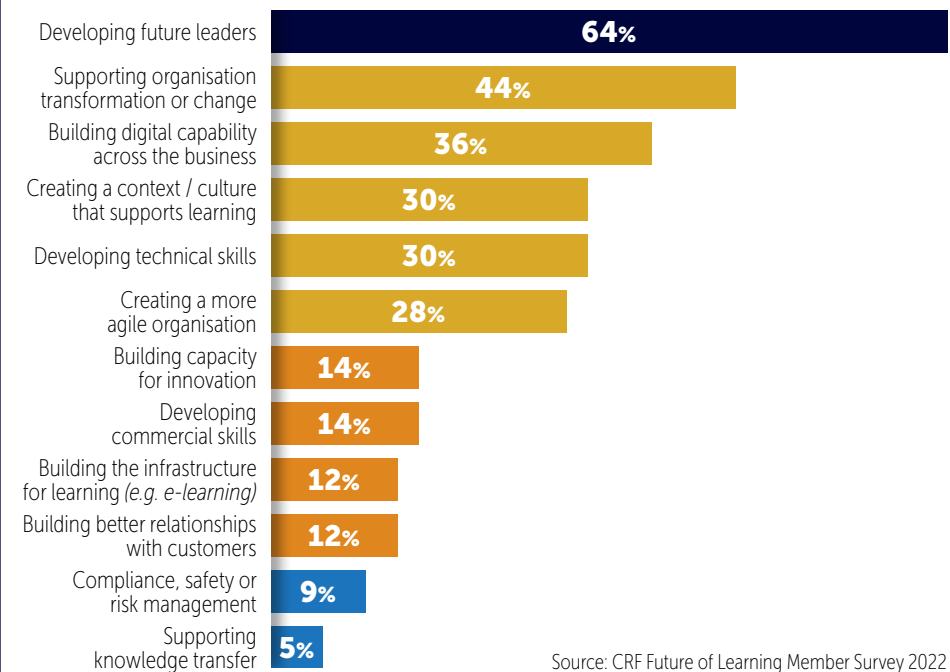
CURRENT LEARNING PRIORITIES: WHAT ARE THEY?

We asked respondents to the survey for this research about the main priorities for learning at their organisation.

As shown in Figure 5, below, developing future leaders is a key priority at nearly two-thirds of organisations. This was reflected in our interviews for the research – helping leaders lead in a hybrid world was cited again and again. Other key learning priorities at organisations include supporting organisation transformation or change (44%), building digital capability across the business (36%), creating a context / culture that supports learning (30%), developing technical skills (30%), and creating a more agile organisation (28%).

Interestingly, few respondents (less than 15%) cited developing commercial skills, building capacity for innovation, or building the infrastructure for learning. Our interviews indicated, in the case of infrastructure, this may be because many organisations now, post-pandemic, have infrastructure in place.

FIGURE 5 What are the main priorities for learning in your organisation?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

CASE STUDY:

"IT'S ALL ABOUT GROWTH": STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AT RBC BREWIN DOLPHIN

Vicky Smith, Head of Learning and Development at investment management company Wealth Management, RBC Brewin Dolphin, shared insights about how learning strategy aligns to business strategy at her organisation.

- **Strategically, "it's all about growth,"** Smith said. At RBC Brewin Dolphin, this means growth in client numbers and in the advice-led services they provide. *"The L&D strategy is to develop employees' capabilities so that they have the skills to build that growth."*
 - For advisers, this means client skills development. Client skills development enables advisors to grow the client base, thus increasing market share, and to deepen existing relationships with clients. For example, developing deep trust in client relationships is key; these relationships are often intergenerational. Conversations are integral to developing deep trust, and so part of the learning strategy is to ensure advisers *"have really deep behavioural skills in how to have amazing conversations – conversations that deepen trust and enable them to question clients in ways that allow them to unearth opportunities."*
 - Leadership development is a core part of the strategy. The current focus is on equipping leaders with future-fit capabilities, such as developing oversight and moving away from the transactional. *"From emerging talent to executive leadership, our development is very tailored – to our business, to our sector, to the capabilities we are looking to build. We always review content and format of learning to ensure it's contextually relevant, for example 'Leadership Labs' that invite business leaders to share their experience and expertise on topics such as strategy, finance, marketing. We don't use a competency framework or have a massive skills matrix."* The delivery of this learning is starting to shift to greater peer learning. *"We are specifically encouraging reflective practice across our programmes, encouraging learners to share what they have tried and learned. In, for example, Coaching Triads."*

"We have a documented People and Culture strategy, cascaded from the Executive Committee. Learning and Development is a pillar of this strategy."

- The strategy is well-developed with respect to apprenticeships. "We only roll out those that are scaleable and which target core areas of the business – investment management, financial planning, and data science / analytics. Apprentices gain a core professional qualification as part of the programme, plus wider skills. For example, an apprentice in our IM Academy will be learning how to hold effective client conversations, a critical capability in deepening existing client relationships, and in developing prospective client relationships."
- **With respect to governance, the relationship between L&D, broader HR, and senior business leaders is close.** *"We have a documented People and Culture strategy, cascaded from the Executive Committee. Learning and Development is a pillar of this strategy. Every month, as part of the HR Management team meeting, we look at each pillar of the strategy. We review what deadlines are coming up across the pillars, and if the goalposts move, we adjust. It's very tight, and very real time. Staying close like this also gives us the opportunity to identify and address learning needs in other pillars. For example, if in the Performance and Development pillar there is a shift in how line managers needs to have performance conversations, we can discuss the learning needs around that."*

CASE STUDY:

"COGNISANT OF EVERYTHING NEW": STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AT **BALFOUR BEATTY**

Claire Thompson, Head of Learning and Development at construction company Balfour Beatty, shared two insights about how learning strategy aligns to business strategy at her organisation.

- At Balfour Beatty, modern methods of construction are a highly important part of the business strategy. *"The business is moving to offsite construction and a manufacturing, assembly-led approach,"* Thompson explained. *"So, the learning strategy has to support this. We are supporting people not just with skill building around modern and digital tools, but especially with mindset."*
 - The company has prioritised supporting influential leaders in the organisation – commercial directors, design engineers, and project managers – to develop a 'modern methods mindset'. This means *"being cognisant of everything new and available to you, in terms of modern methods, from the beginning of a bid or project. Then, when working with clients or partners, we are equipped to bring modern methods into the conversation. To have those conversations effectively, our leaders need lots of knowledge about the methods, but equally the mindset that this is where we are going as a business."*
- The company has been experimental and innovative in its design of learning to support the modern methods mindset. *"The pilot was held at an MMC research centre that enabled learners to see real-life examples of MMC in action and broaden the learning experience as well as learn from the expertise in the business."*
 - This context led to the creation of a social, collaborative design for the learning, which has been run and tested as a pilot. *"It has a blended learning design. We bring people together for a couple of days, face to face. These sessions are not about the tools or methods to use, but are more about understanding that they exist and discussing them in terms of – 'how will it be better if we use this? What can go wrong if we don't use this?'. The sessions are about demonstrating how the industry is moving, and they are led by the people in our organisation who are forward-thinking."*
 - After the initial sessions, the cohort was put into project groups that work on different, but real, challenges the business has. *"There are five projects, spanning logistics, the supply chain, and more. For example, one group has looked at 'how do we, at scale, develop people on modern methods of construction?' – is it digital learning and what tools are needed? Is it more experiential and how do we facilitate peer-to-peer learning?"* The groups are coming back together at the end of the programme to present their ideas on how to move forward through the business.

"We evaluated the experience after each day – we assessed, as project groups, what went well, what didn't, and how to improve."

- Evaluation of the pilot is built-in. *"We evaluated the experience after each day – we assessed, as project groups, what went well, what didn't, and how to improve."*
- A second pilot is being launched in early 2023, iterating from the review of the first. *"We learned from the first pilot. We applied that learning to make the next version more interactive and experiential,"* Thompson said.

A second business priority that learning is addressing is attraction and retention. *"We have a big challenge around attraction and retention right now,"* Thompson said. *"We have many vacancies, the talent market is very competitive, and retention is a challenge. The HR Strategy – attract, retain, grow and thrive – supports this."*

One of the ways that the learning strategy supports attraction and retention is through its Early Careers programme for apprentices, graduates and placements. This programme has grown each year and in 2022 the company welcomed its biggest ever cohort of Early Careers colleagues. A record 320 apprentices and graduates have joined all parts of the business: from Highways to Rail, Health & Safety to Finance, and more. In addition, Balfour Beatty is welcoming 50 Year Out placements and 51 Summer Placements into the business this year, helping to secure a future pipeline of talent into their future Early Careers programmes.

"For the 2022 intake we have launched a new combined programme for Graduates and Apprentices," Thompson explained. *"There is a focus on ensuring the programme is exciting, innovative, inclusive and experiential as well as supporting this population to become professionally qualified. The programme combines role specific professional training with 'leader of self' development aligned to our behaviours and values. The programme is delivered through a blended learning approach including two four-day residentials where our Early Careers colleagues visit the beautiful Lake District. Here we develop strong personal effectiveness skills and increased collaboration through experiential learning. We believe this will give our Early Careers population a strong foundation to build their career with us and also attract future graduates and apprentices to join us."*

CASE STUDY:

'THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE
INFLUENCES THE SHAPE OF THE LEARNING':
STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT AT **SABIC**

"Our resources and programmes are designed to address the real needs of the business,"

Sofian Lamali, Global Head of Leadership Development and Executive Succession Planning at chemical manufacturing company SABIC, shared insights about how learning strategy aligns to business strategy at his organisation.

- SABIC is undergoing a journey of transformation. As part of this journey, the company is both fixing the basics and acquiring capabilities for the future. Learning strategy, therefore, is supporting this transformation. *"Our resources and programmes are designed to address the real needs of the business,"* Lamali said. *"So, we start by asking what business problem we are trying to solve, before deciding on and designing a learning intervention. This sounds obvious, but it's not always the way people practice. Sometimes HR people are so in love with what they do, it ends up being their purpose, and they might ignore or only mildly factor in the business priorities."*
 - One focus of the business strategy is around the core of manufacturing – increasing plant reliability, producing without waste, and keeping people safe. *"This has implications for safety and engineering processes. We want to be more than excellent. So it's driving a lot of movement on the learning strategy."*
 - Another focus of the business strategy is around supply chains. *"Supply chains are very complex. The pandemic has revealed so many vulnerabilities, and from that we have learned a lot about managing risks, improving processes, and safeguarding. This is influencing how we design teams and learning."*
 - A third focus of the business strategy is digital transformation. One specific example of how this translates to learning is in the realm of cybersecurity. Lamali explained, *"Artificial intelligence adds more risk to operations. So we are accelerating learning interventions on cybersecurity. And the nature of the challenge – cybersecurity moves quite quickly – influences the shape of that learning. It's more bite-size and continuous to keep up with the pace of change, as opposed to days-long training."*
 - Sustainability is another focus of the business strategy. *"We have a big focus on environmental, social, and governance factors. This has meant creating new teams at a very senior level, and learning interventions to support sustainability. One piece of work is around creating the programme architecture for leadership and sustainability. We are designing the learning to educate leaders, but we also want to democratise the skills to all employees."*

CASE STUDY:

REFLECTING ORGANISATIONAL PRIORITIES:
THE FESTIVAL OF LEARNING AT **BAILLIE GIFFORD**

Barry Brown, Learning Manager at asset management company Baillie Gifford, shared insights about how a learning intervention, the annual Festival of Learning, aligns to business priorities.

- The Festival of Learning, in 2022 Baillie Gifford's sixth, is voluntary to attend and takes place during the UK's National Learning at Work week. Each year, the festival has a theme. In 2022, that theme was 'Rediscovering'. Rediscovering what? Investments, learning, wellbeing, and Baillie Gifford. These pillars were selected because they align to the company's current priorities.
 - **Investments** – Investment strategies at Baillie Gifford have shifted to focus on ESG. Sessions in this pillar were designed to transfer basic knowledge about the company's ESG investment strategy across levels and functions. What is an ESG investment strategy? How are ESG investment strategies evolving? What are the changes to investing in Russia? What are the changes related to European investment markets?
 - **Learning** – The company has recently changed from a backward-looking appraisal format to regular ongoing conversations. Sessions helped people learn how to update goals, give feedback (including learning about the neuroscience of feedback), and discover a growth mindset, in line with the new approach to performance and development. Other sessions in this pillar provided an overview of Baillie Gifford's learning offering.
 - **Wellbeing** – Recognising that there is an intrinsic link between wellbeing, performance, and development, sessions in this pillar were designed to help people learn how to look after themselves so that they are better able to show up and perform. This is especially important as we are still emerging from the pandemic.
 - **Baillie Gifford** – The company has experienced a great deal of growth and change over the past few years. Sessions in this pillar were designed to help people learn or re-learn about the firm, especially new starters who are still finding their feet.
- The Festival took a mixed-methods approach; most sessions were virtual though a few were in-person. There were higher volumes of virtual than in-person attendees. 62% of the company's workforce engaged with the Festival in some form over the course of the week. The Festival also provided an opportunity for people to forge new social connections, or renew lost ones, something that is valuable in the post-pandemic context.
- With respect to content, Festival sessions provided *"an opportunity to repurpose and remarket existing learning materials, instead of flooding the system with more new stuff,"* Brown explained.
- Key learnings from the event are that people are still engaging in virtual formats, and that there is an expectation that this is the new norm; a second key learning is that people's interest really moved toward those sessions to do with Baillie Gifford as a firm. The appetite and curiosity to learn about where the company itself is heading is something that Brown and his team are addressing in follow-up learning sessions.

STRATEGY AND THE FOCUS ON FUTURE SKILLS

“Skills-based learning is a big part of what Microsoft’s learning strategy, it’s the second of three pillars within the strategy, and it’s really central to building organisational agility and capability to deliver on our mission. We also see Skills enabling us to re-invent Career Development for our people. ‘Skills’ is a complex and emergent area, and we are trying to figure it out; I don’t think most companies have cracked ‘Skills’ yet.”

BRIAN MURPHY, SENIOR DIRECTOR, EMPLOYEE SKILLING, MICROSOFT

For those organisations where learning strategy is aligned to business strategy, upskilling and reskilling are high on the agenda. The challenge is for L&D functions to help the business identify what those skills are, assess the gap between employees’ current and the desired skills, and then to design and deploy learning to support their development. Many organisations are still at the starting line, working to identify the right skills for their strategy, and the gap between where they are and where they need to be. (Research from McKinsey finds that “many companies are ineffective or indifferent at assessing capability gaps, especially when it comes to senior leaders and midlevel managers”.)

A discussion of the shift towards skills – and away from jobs or roles – as the essential unit of analysis for defining the workforce of the future is beyond the scope of this report. See CRF’s recent report, [Building a Future-Fit Workforce — Reskilling and Rethinking Work](#), for a look at the key drivers of this shift and how it relates to upskilling and reskilling.

Our research identified the following key themes around learning and future skills.

- **While the particular skills needed are specific to the organisation, certain types of skills are broadly in demand.** Research from McKinsey identifies three skills areas, all of which were reflected in the interviews we conducted for this research.
 - **Technical / digital skills.** By 2030, according to research from the World Economic Forum, 90% of jobs will have an element of digital. Yet, in the UK alone, 11.8 million working adults – 36% of the working population – do not have digital skills. This is a massive gap for organisations.
 - **Human skills.** Things that machines can’t do well, such as communicate and collaborate, think creatively or be curious, will continue to be in high demand.
 - **Learning agility.** With knowledge quickly becoming obsolete, ‘upskilling and reskilling’ should be modified with an adjective: continuous. As we argue in [Chapter 3](#), the future of learning is continuous – perhaps an individual will be reskilled for the future, but he or she will then likely have to engage in continuous upskilling as knowledge evolves. Hiring and training for learning agility – knowing how to learn, openness and the ability to quickly flex in new directions – is critical in this context.
- **The technological ecosystem around talent marketplaces is one for learning professionals to watch.** Future learning will be highly contextualised, based on the work people are doing and the new skills they need / want to learn. Technology-driven tools will support this.
 - Already there is a plethora of technology-driven tools that enable planning, work allocation, learning and career progression to be skills-driven and decoupled from specific jobs. To be effective, these tools rely on an accurate, up-to-date skills profile of the workforce.
 - Tools such as Faethm and eightfold.ai use multiple data sources and AI to model which jobs are most likely to be affected by technological change and identify potential parallel skills and reskilling pathways.
 - A barrier to learning these new skills is that people don’t always have a good understanding of what skills they already have, and their proficiency level. *“Relying on people to go self-assess, go into an HR platform and update their skills on the vague promise of a future conversation just hasn’t been enough,”* said Microsoft’s Brian Murphy. *“So, how can we use data from the flow of work to support how skills are assessed and validated? It’s early stages, but the work Microsoft is doing with Viva is a great opportunity to bring these worlds together.”*
- **Learning for future skills will require a combination of formal training, experience and support.** It will be designed around principles of adult learning, and will combine modalities such as formal structured learning (virtual or in-person); self-directed learning; practice including individual work experience and group projects; mentoring; and support from experts and peers. We take a closer look at the collaborative and continuous nature of future learning in the next chapter.

CASE STUDY:

“WHAT WORKED YESTERDAY WILL NOT WORK TOMORROW”: FUTURE SKILLS AT DIRECT LINE GROUP

Direct Line Group, the insurance company, has a history of innovative business practice. For example, it was one of the first insurers to cut out the broker and go direct to the customer, via the telephone. But, digitisation is an unstoppable trend, continuing to transform how businesses operate, and “*what worked yesterday will not work tomorrow,*” explained Simon Gibson, former Future Skills and Careers Lead. Business strategies will continue to rapidly evolve, with ongoing implications for skills – how they are identified, built, and deployed.

In Gibson’s view, the new approach to skills will have a hugely disruptive impact on how the Learning function supports its organisation. “*Today, we recruit based on jobs or job titles, which is pretty useless. New technologies, such as those provided by Faethm, eightfold.ai, or TechWolf, use AI to scrape the internet, to dive into job descriptions to find out what is really going on in terms of skills and capabilities, to get at the nuance. If we can better understand skills, that understanding can drive better allocation of resources and better business decisions. The Learning function needs to lean into this, to understand the trends, the technology, and the gaps.*”

This means moving away from tactical, operation-based work (while still “*keeping the lights on*”), toward strategic work that helps the organisation grow and evolve for the future. “*First, what are the capabilities and skills that we need?*,” Gibson said. “*Then, partnering with the business, ‘OK, how are we actually going to close these gaps? Where do we need to hire? Where do we need to build skills? How do we need to reorient a lot of what we’re doing with training to fill the most important skills gaps?’ That’s the hard work that a lot of organisations, at least in my experience, can struggle with.*”

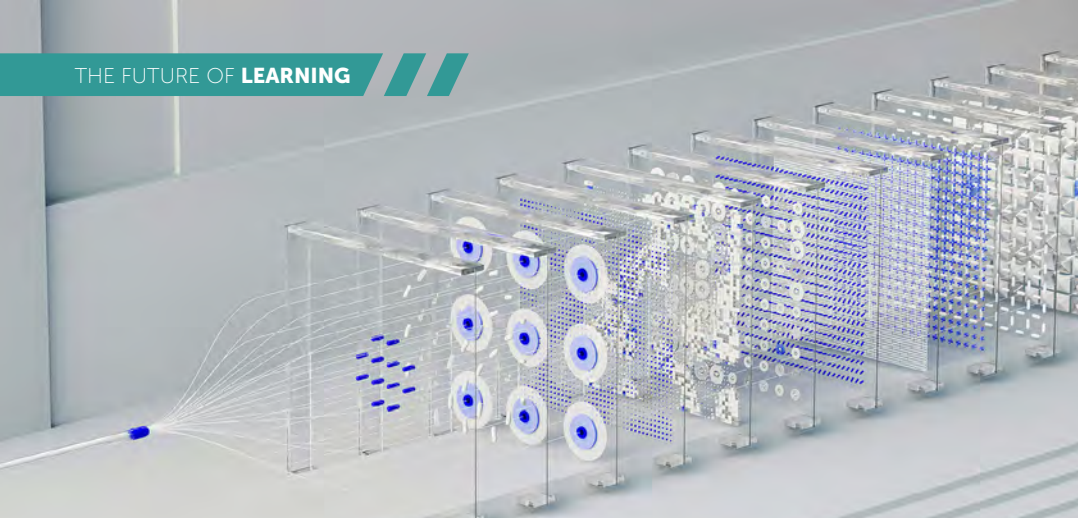
Gibson shared one way that the Learning team at Direct Line has approached this challenge.

- **The company needs to be more data-driven.** “*We need more data science skills, software engineering skills – we have to become sophisticated and up-to-the-minute,*” Gibson said. The skills are needed in order to solve business problems, such as how to better understand customers or how to recruit more effectively. Key to this shift is understanding current data capability outside the specialist element. “*What is the capability of the 10,000, not the 300?*,” Gibson asked.
- **Working across functional lines**, with a data specialist, Gibson and his team identified the five key (data and digital) skills the company would like everyone to have more of,

“*Today, we recruit based on jobs or job titles, which is pretty useless.*”

and then codified a way to assess people’s capability with respect to those skills. “*We took a sample from across the organisation – different disciplines and experiences. We correlated their answers to diagnostic questions back to a matrix, and that further clarified the key skills and their elements.*”

- The exercise flushed out not only the digital skills deficit inside Direct Line, but also the nuances of the digital mindset. “*An interesting thing we found is that people sometimes think they have digital skills that they don’t quite have. For example, Carol in Marketing asks Dave in Data Science for answers because he’s a specialist, and then Carol thinks she’s data-literate and data-first. But what if Dave isn’t there to rely on?*”
- **Now that the skills – and what having the skills means in practical terms – have been clarified**, the results have been shared with the Board and Executive Committee. The next step is driving learning strategy from the insights, and launching direct impact. “*We are going to disseminate the skills across the organisation, in order to increase efficiency and innovation,*” Gibson said. “*We are setting learning objectives, across a time span of three months, for different groups. Marketing, HR, and so on – ensuring the skills resonate, or understanding and addressing it if they don’t.*”
- **Gibson highlighted the importance of marketing the learning in a compelling way.** “*We want to make sure the learning fits into a commercial wrapper. What can I, Carol in Marketing, do with these new skills? Will they give me better insights? Inform solutions? Enable better storytelling? So we are paying attention to the way we communicate the learning, the narrative around it.*”
- **The focus on future skills has wider implications for society.** “*In the future, we won’t need thousands of people operating a telephone,*” Gibson explained. “*Roles are going to be displaced. If we can reskill Bob from the Call Centre to be a Junior Data Analyst, it’s better for Bob, for the organisation, and for the UK, considering the digital skills deficit.*”



2.3

STRATEGIC USE OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

Taking a strategic approach to learning encompasses more than aligning to business strategy and integrating with other aspects of HR. It also means using learning strategically – using the learning process as a vehicle for innovation, strategy development, and generating new ideas. For example, using learning communities as vehicles for innovation, or using an agile learning process to both upskill and solve business problems. For example, consider how Balfour Beatty is using experimentation (see [Case Study, page 22](#)) both to upskill influential leaders and to solve business problems.

Here, we introduce the **CRF Learning Matrix**, a tool for assessing your learning activities in more strategic terms – are you engaged in more ‘productive’ learning, or more ‘generative’ learning, and is it narrow-scope (focused on the individual) or broader in scope (focused on the organisation)?

Productive learning helps people and organisations get better at what we already know how to do, with the goal of improving productivity, quality or customer service. Productive learning can bring everyone up to the standard of the current best performer. Generally, productive learning maintains the status quo.

“Learning strategy should support business strategy otherwise why have it? But, not every chapter of strategy will have a direct, easily mappable implication for learning. So it has to be a sensible and meaningful coupling of learning and business strategies.”

SOFIAN LAMALI, GLOBAL HEAD OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING, SABIC

Generative learning is collaborative, growth and innovation-focused, centred on imagining and building future scenarios, and sharing ideas and knowledge about new capabilities required in order to thrive. Generative learning provides more opportunities to create new solutions to unanticipated problems.

Organisations need to be engaging in both types of learning – optimising today (productive learning) while building for tomorrow (generative learning) at the same time.

Many recent innovations in the learning market, including virtual learning, are concentrated in the ‘productive learning’ space, but real value comes from new ideas and sources of growth that emerge from generative learning. The Learning function has a substantial opportunity to help the organisation invest in this type of learning. Indeed, it should make shifting focus from productive to generative learning a key priority if it wants to sustain its relevance and influence on key business outcomes.

In addition to switching the focus of learning from productive to generative, the other key issue is to identify where learning will have the greatest impact on organisational performance. Traditionally, learning has focused on improving the skills of individual employees. While this is often necessary and worthwhile, the greatest performance improvement occurs when learning is focused at the team or organisational level, where it can help the organisation achieve strategic change. Helping teams develop a collective point of view on the future can deliver greater insight than any one individual could generate on their own.

Figure 6, The CRF Learning Matrix (on the following page), shows how individual, organisational, productive and generative learning interact, with examples of the types of learning that might occur in each segment. An interactive model and worksheet designed to help you use the model can be found at CRF’s [Learning Knowledge Hub](#).

FIGURE 6

The CRF Learning Matrix

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| WORKING ON THE ORGANISATION | <p>ORGANISATIONAL / PRODUCTIVE</p> <p>Working in teams on increasing efficiency or productivity in the existing business.</p> <p>EXAMPLES INCLUDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after-action reviews • delivering management training on a social learning platform • quality circles and application of other team-based continuous improvement methodologies. | <p>ORGANISATIONAL / GENERATIVE</p> <p>Using the collective wisdom of the team or organisation to come up with new solutions, identify new markets, and challenge existing assumptions.</p> <p>EXAMPLES INCLUDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • convening groups to identify the top ten emerging disruptive innovations in your market and work out how they might affect your business model • online strategy 'jams' • co-creation through action learning. |
| | <p>INDIVIDUAL / PRODUCTIVE</p> <p>Learning that's focused on helping an individual improve performance in their role.</p> <p>EXAMPLES INCLUDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sales training • watching a video on how to manage a difficult conversation with a team member. | <p>INDIVIDUAL / GENERATIVE</p> <p>Helping individuals learn key skills to enable them to generate new ideas or strategies.</p> <p>EXAMPLES INCLUDE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching people critical thinking or strategic modelling skills • teaching individuals design thinking methods. |
| | PRODUCTIVE | GENERATIVE |

Source: CRF Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance, 2017

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF LEARNING?
LEARNING EXPERTS' VIEWS

The learning experts we interviewed for this research shared their views on the future of learning. Here we highlight key themes.

- **Learning must be strategically aligned.** *"The learning function that just turns the handle on no longer relevant legacy activities or does some fairly interesting but irrelevant stuff on the side just isn't an option anymore,"* said Ameet Thakkar, Vice President, Future Skills and Learning at BP. *"Especially as the external jobs market gets more competitive for critical skills and companies can't just 'buy' their way to meet the growth needs of the business."* For many organisations, strategically-aligned learning means learning that is focused on reskilling and upskilling:
 - *"At the organisation level, the strategic focus for the next ten years is on the need to reskill or upskill,"* said Sarah Horne, Executive Director, HR Transformation at Oracle. In today's changing landscape, there are redundant skills, new skills, and skill shortages. *"Research from McKinsey found that, in the United States, 67 million skills, capabilities, and roles are redundant, but 97 million new skills, capabilities, and roles are required. This is driven by forces such as automation, or the transformation of organisations – for example, an oil and gas company pivoting to renewables, and reskilling and upskilling their workforce rather than making them redundant. The future of learning is about being able to identify what those new skills and capabilities need to be at your organisation, how to target learning appropriately to the workforce, and then how to execute learning to help the pivot."*
 - In terms of hard skills, the gap between where businesses are, and where they need to be, is "huge," Horne said. *"It's almost too difficult to quantify. Organisations don't necessarily know what their strategy is, and what new skills they need going forward. The gap is smaller for behaviours – everyone knows the softer, specific culture / behaviour stuff they want to drive through their organisation – what types of communication skills, interpersonal skills – it's a smaller gap, easier to quantify and more achievable to address."*

- **Learning will increasingly be a lever organisations can pull to deliver against employee needs to develop and grow.**

As Sarah Horne explained, *“Individuals have so much more power now in terms of choice – who to work for, commit to, stay with; if employees are not given opportunities to learn and grow, if they aren’t motivated and rewarded – the organisation may lose them. But individual needs might not match up to what the organisation needs.”* Horne identifies two learning pathways for employees

- one directly aligned to the business strategy, and
- one that provides opportunities for people to learn that may not be directly relevant to business strategy, *“but keep the individual rounded and engaged.”* For example, the organisation might choose to support a high-potential young professional by financially sponsoring or giving time for studies that are not related to their role or business needs, but instead connect to a personal passion or wellbeing, such as studying another language or taking rock climbing lessons. *“It can be a different way or rewarding or remunerating that colleague; almost part of the benefits package,”* Horne said. *“In this way, learning can also help organisations compete in the war for talent. It also enables employers to be a bit more altruistic with their employees.”*

- **Learning will be about skills, not roles.** *“Progress, growth, and development through the lens of skills rather than roles is a transition we are going to continue to see,”* said Brian Murphy, Senior Director, Employee Skilling at Microsoft. *“It’s about helping people understand what skills they have, what skills they need for the current and future roles. And then how to bridge the gap through both formal and informal development opportunities.”*

- Companies are struggling with skills because they are still thinking in silos. L&D professionals will have to reach out and connect with others to create a value proposition fuelled by skills and supportive of growth.
- Talent marketplaces will be a key mechanism for deploying and developing skills in a dynamic way.
- It’s early days, but Microsoft, through Viva, is doing work around skills inference and the skills ecosystem, to bring learning and work together dynamically.
- Learning’s more skills-based approach will, in turn, push organisations to become true, agile learning organisations. *“We are starting to have more sensitive and realistic conversations about how people develop skills,”* Murphy said. *“It’s clear they aren’t developed by consuming content and attending training. Connections and practise are essential. The key is to enable learning through the right type of technological*

solutions, culture change, and integration of organisation development, strategic workforce planning, and learning and development.” This shift requires change management. *“Most business leaders say ‘it sounds great’,”* Murphy said, *“but it entails changing how work gets done. It requires more modular and agile ways of working. The change required shouldn’t be underestimated.”*

- **Learning will need to be more social and experiential.** As Ameet Thakkar explained, *“Learning professionals have moved from content creation to more curation, but it has not been that much of a game changer. However, a bigger change will be to figure out how to lean in to more holistic learning through social learning especially in a post-pandemic, hybrid working environment. This isn’t new stuff, but especially post-pandemic, we are going to have to push the dial a little differently as we’ve lost some of what we had previously. Many people do not have the time to consume as much content as they did previously, but they will make time to use relevant, useful performance support and then connect with others to share, discuss and explore. Well designed and curated content and performance support tools that help people solve problems has its place, but there is also an opportunity to embed learning, in a hybrid world, using better supported social learning and developmental relationships.”*
- **Learning will be more focussed on enhancing performance and being more evidence-based.** *“We are still stuck in a place where many learning professionals take directions from someone in the business or HR to build some ‘training’ to solve a problem,”* said Ameet Thakkar. *“We design a solution and move on. This rarely works, as we build an unfit for purpose solution to the issues the employee or business is wrestling with, so it can never solve the real problem. Learning needs to take more of a performance consulting approach, engaging the end user to gather information on their needs and understand the context they work in, using more data to understand and build the right solutions and products. With a better front-end approach to understanding and diagnosing the situation and a deeper empathy for the end user we can ask, ‘is learning really the solution for this problem? Or is a process change required? Or a change in technology? This broader perspective and data (both qualitative and quantitative) will lead to better-designed solutions that will take us away from continually delivering eLearning and courses that solve very few issues. We will also use data more to evaluate the effectiveness of what we’ve done, and to iterate our products so they continuously improve, as opposed to the typical approach of delivering something and moving on.”*

3.0

THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS... COLLABORATIVE AND CONTINUOUS

In this chapter we assess the current state and preview the future of learning before honing in on an understanding of what it means to have a strategic approach to learning. We share examples of how organisations are aligning business and learning strategy, look at how learning can support future skills, and introduce the CRF Learning Matrix.

“A tactical mindset reinforces the level of learning that you’ve always done. If you want to grow in your role and learn the things you need for the next position, you need to get out of the vicious cycle of doing and into the space and clear air where you can tinker, try, and do new things. This also means delegating to your team, which stretches them. Then everybody is learning a level above them. You’re out of a vicious cycle and into a virtuous cycle.”

PAUL JAMES, HEAD OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, SAGA

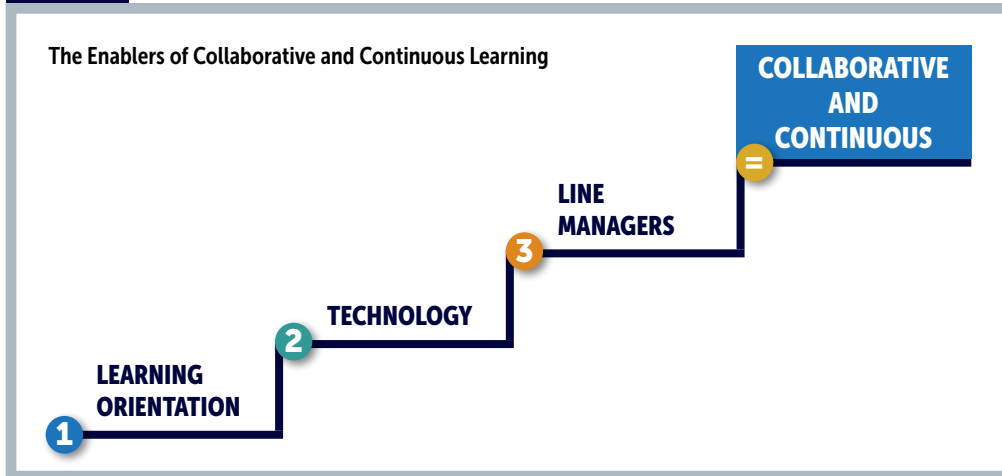
The future of learning is collaborative and continuous, as opposed to one-off trainings focused primarily on the individual. This may sound obvious, but for a function primarily used to facilitating the latter, understanding and supporting the former is no small challenge.

By collaborative, we mean that learning is social – pairs or groups solve problems, complete tasks or learn new concepts with and from each other, which capitalises on everyone’s skills, knowledge, and resources.

By continuous, we mean that learning is a constant. Individuals, teams, and organisations are ‘always on’, banking, applying, and refining what they have learned.

- The Internet has led to an extreme democratisation of information. While there is much debate about the quality of user-generated content and social learning, new technologies will continue to foster a context in which learners look to each other and to open sources of knowledge. The savvy Learning function will leave aside ideas of putting the genie back into the bottle, instead focusing on how to facilitate high-quality collaborative learning.
- To keep up in today’s rapidly evolving and highly competitive business landscape, organisations and their people have to always be learning – but we quickly forget what we learn. (The ‘Forgetting Curve’ refers to the finding that the brain forgets about 75% of new information, if it isn’t applied, after six days). Continuous learning means learning relevant information at the point of need, having immediate opportunities to apply learning, and habitually giving/receiving feedback and reflecting on learning.

FIGURE 7



In this Chapter, we explore three enablers that Learning professionals can activate to support learning that is collaborative and continuous.

Learning Orientation. Individuals must be curious and reflective, primed to learn, practice, and repeat. Teams and organisations need to have these same qualities. We identify habits as a key mechanism for building a learning orientation at all levels.

Technology. Technology is influencing the format and channels for learning in unprecedented ways. Technology offers enhanced access and efficiency, increasing the opportunities for continuous learning; at the same time, social technologies are playing an important and growing role in fostering collaborative learning by connecting people, who then create and share knowledge.

Line Managers. Managers have a key role to play in setting the tone for learning, facilitating access to learning, and helping their teams and individual reports embed and evolve learning.

“Learning is a muscle that can be built, flexed, and strengthened – helping people learn faster, adapt to change better and more quickly, and build resilience. No matter how experienced someone is, adaptability and resilience predict continuous learning success. Those traits are also essential design criteria for learning systems: the ecosystem and climate an organisation establishes for learning and reskilling.”

MCKINSEY & COMPANY

“If you can change the way adults learn, and how they learn in relation to their work, you can transform organisations.”

NIGEL PAINE, CEO, NIGEL PAINE.COM LTD AND PRESENTER, LEARNING NOW TV

Remember the learning organisation? This concept, developed in the 1990s, defines a learning organisation as one that is *“skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.”*

Learning organisations are able to adapt to uncertainty more quickly than competitors, thus gaining competitive advantage. Many of the qualities and practices described in this chapter are the qualities and practices of learning organisations. Though a discussion of the learning organisation is beyond the scope of this report, see CRF’s Speed Read, [Building a Learning Organisation](#), for a closer look at this concept.

BLENDING LEARNING

Blended learning – learning in which both classroom and virtual elements are combined in a given learning intervention – is on the rise, with 60% of respondents to our survey reporting that the use of blended learning is increasing at their organisation.

Our interviews gave rise to a number of key themes that add nuance to the concept of blended learning, its advantages and disadvantages, and how it's evolving.

- **Blended learning is not hybrid learning;** the former can be very effective, the latter is not. As RBC Brewin Dolphin's Vicky Smith explained, *"Hybrid learning – where you have some learners face-to-face and some learners virtual – just doesn't work. It's hard to manage, the learning inevitably ends up tailored one way or the other, and you end up with suboptimal outcomes."*
- **Learning professionals are working to find the right balance and approach to blended learning.** What works well virtually, and what is best handled face-to-face? Kevin Moore, Group Head of Organisational Development and Change at Mott MacDonald, offered a useful framing. *"What is the purpose of the learning? Is it to shift knowledge or skills? Then virtual can work quite well. Is it to shift behaviour or culture, or is it about building relationships? Face-to-face learning is critical for those types of shifts."*
 - At some organisations, there are financial and logistical pressures, which can jeopardise the focus on selecting the best tool for the learning objective. As SABIC's Sofian Lamali warned, *"Virtual learning is good for efficiency. But when relationships are the focus, nothing beats face-to-face. So it's important to be purposeful about what tool is used, when. Often times logistics drives the decision about whether learning is virtual or face-to-face, as opposed to the learning objective being the driver. Don't make logistics your manager."*
- **An advantage of blended learning interventions is that they are more inclusive and typically have higher enrolments.** With less time spent face-to-face, a broader range of people can sign up and participate. As Bicycle Therapeutic's Emma Aplin, Learning and Development Lead, said, *"We are highly aware of our hybrid workforce and therefore implementing a more blended learning approach to suit all employees, especially those who are remote and cannot attend face-to-face trainings."*
- **A disadvantage of blended learning interventions is that people are often less engaged during the virtual portions of the learning.** Paul James, Head of Leadership Development at Saga, explained, *"Learning is no longer about taking a day or two out of the office to attend training. That now seems very old-fashioned and we're glad it's gone. But online, people are often disengaged, doing two things at once. That doesn't happen in the face-to-face environment. So there is a risk that we've replaced the old-fashioned stuff with 90 minutes online that half the people aren't listening to anyway. At Saga, we are addressing this by building dedicated physical spaces for learning. Blended learning will start in person, in these spaces, where we can build relationships within cohorts. Then we can shift to virtual, once those relationships exist. The expectation is that engagement during the virtual components of the learning will improve, because those underlying relationships exist and expectations have been set."*

Blended learning is about taking a deliberate, considered approach to combining the best aspects of face-to-face and virtual learning, in order to deliver the right content in the right way, at the right time (and in an efficient and cost-effective way).

- **Several interviewees reported an increase in cancellations and no-shows,** even for the face-to-face aspects of blended learning. This is despite widespread reports of an increased appetite for face-to-face learning. As one interviewee explained, *"People just don't show up. Pre-pandemic, people would have felt quite bad about cancelling, but now there seem to be no qualms about not showing up. This is easier to deal with in a virtual environment, but for in-person learning it can have quite negative effects. Perhaps we've lost the muscle of good planning. Before the pandemic, we would have booked time to travel, organised things around it. Now, it's easier for people to flake, despite good intentions."*
- **Organisations are continuing to evolve their approach to blended learning,** especially with regard to building in more time for socially-driven action and reflection (such as group coaching, digital cohorts, and action learning projects). There is also a focus on getting the timing and structure right. For example, RBC Brewin Dolphin's Vicky Smith said, *"Blended learning is our preferred approach for most learning. But we are paying attention to every detail. What can we send in advance to help facilitate learning in a virtual session? How long should it be? We find 90 minutes, tops. How do we want to use the face-to-face time? We find that meeting in person at the beginning, with a focus on the social and building networks, leads to better virtual sessions, with more banter, psychological safety, collaboration and contribution."*
- **The reputation of virtual learning has improved,** as it's become normative and as the technology and facilitators' skills have improved.

We suggest one caution when thinking about blended learning. Blended learning is about taking a deliberate, considered approach to combining the best aspects of face-to-face and virtual learning, in order to deliver the right content in the right way, at the right time (and in an efficient and cost-effective way).

It is not two-track learning, with high-quality face-to-face learning for leaders, and a glut of bite-size, self-serve virtual learning for everyone else. In both qualitative responses to our survey and some interviews, a theme emerged wherein face-to-face learning is now rare, the preserve of high potentials, senior leaders, or other top talent, while all other learning has gone virtual. This is unlikely to be the most productive way forward for individual, team, and organisational learning.



3.1 LEARNING ORIENTATION

By 'learning orientation', we mean that individuals, teams, and organisations need to be primed for learning – alert to learning opportunities, ready to apply / practice learning, and prepared to try again – in other words, a learning orientation is about intentional, continuous learning. Where a learning orientation is broadly shared, this continuous learning can be more easily approached in a collaborative manner. What are the qualities associated with being primed for learning? For individuals and teams, three qualities were repeatedly emphasised in our research.

- **Curiosity.** Curiosity is what sparks the inspiration to learn. It is about being open to ideas, aware, and willing to try new things. The curious individual or team is exposed to broad perspectives and able to make connections between disparate ideas.
 - How much is curiosity a trait of an individual, and how much is it a quality of an organisation's culture? Is there a cure for low curiosity? Research finds that individuals and teams can build their curiosity muscles by developing habits that spark and reinforce curiosity, a point which we will explore in more detail later in this section.
 - Some organisations benefit from having a workforce that is naturally curious. This has advantages and disadvantages. As Kevin Moore of engineering and management consultancy Mott MacDonald explained, "Our workforce is comprised of a large number

"Learning happens mostly on the job, but there is one caveat – you need to be reflective. If you aren't reflecting, you will keep doing same thing without learning from it. As an individual, this might be journalling to reflect on key learnings. As a team, it might be celebrating at the end of a project – this offers an opportunity to sit together while it's still warm and ask 'what can we learn from what we've done?'."

SOFIAN LAMALI, GLOBAL HEAD OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING, SABIC

of people who have been brought up, from university level, with an ethos that you have to keep learning. It's a quite academic-feeling culture. The upside of this is that it's easy to get people to buy into the idea that development is important. The downside is that people always think they know how to pass on that knowledge. But sometimes – particularly among more senior leaders who learned in a more traditional way – they don't. So there is still work to do to help people embrace different methods of learning."

- **A belief in the possibility of change.** In order to learn, individuals and teams need to believe that they can grow and change. A useful framing for thinking about this is the idea of a 'growth mindset'.
 - A fixed mindset is the belief that talents, abilities, and other characteristics are static resources; they can't be changed or improved. A fixed mindset inhibits learning because it does not allow failure or struggle.
 - A growth mindset is a belief in the possibility of growth and change. Talents and abilities are not fixed points but are instead traits that can be cultivated. Failures and mistakes are tools that inform development, not innate limitations. Getting into the habit of making simple restatements can help shift a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. For example, instead of thinking, 'I'm terrible at public speaking', try 'I need to practice speaking in front of others.'
- **Reflectiveness.** Reflection is critical to evaluating what happened and learning from it in a given situation. It reinforces the belief in one's ability to learn and change, highlights the steps needed to achieve a change, and builds confidence to take on new challenges.
 - To glean learning from an experience, it's important to reflect before, during, and after it. Reflecting before an experience – such as thinking about what you will say during a

“The idea that learning is a fixed journey with a fixed end goal is a myth. We have to get away from a fixed mindset, and instead think of learning in terms of growth – ‘I don’t know this yet but I can learn it’. This is a more positive, less competitive way of thinking about learning – focused on one’s own goals.”

OLGA MARTENS-STUURMAN, DIRECTOR – FUTURE OF WORK, HP

difficult conversation – primes one to learn. Reflecting during an experience – such as noticing when your conversation partner misunderstands something you’ve said – allows one to make adjustments, in effect learning as you go. Reflecting after an experience – such as journaling about how a difficult conversation went – allows one to consider the effectiveness of their actions, and consider how they might do it differently next time.

- Almost all of our interviewees for this research talked about the importance of reflection, and their efforts to build reflection into learning. One critical barrier? Time. And yet, the busier the world around us, the greater the need to pause and reflect on what’s happening. Building a habit of reflection can make it easier to practice, because it takes away the number of time-consuming decisions related to reflection (such as when, where, and how do I reflect?).

Organisations that are primed for learning:

- **Are psychologically safe.** It is psychological safety that creates the conditions in which curiosity, willingness to experiment, and space to reflect flourish. Is it safe to fail, and to take time to learn from that failure? Is there a culture of honest feedback? For example, as one Learning Director told us, *“Culturally, we aren’t great at curiosity. You need quite an honest culture, a culture of honest feedback, and we don’t have that. We brush things under the carpet – we don’t have the radical candour that we should have for people to ask difficult questions and be curious.”*
- **Set the tone for learning at the top.** Senior leaders need to buy into the value of and support learning if the rest of the organisation is going to follow suit. For example, at Balfour Beatty, there is an ethos to ‘encourage constantly’, with the CEO regularly asking, *“whose shoulder is your hand on?”*. In this way, he communicates the importance of learning, and that it is everyone’s responsibility to nudge and encourage others to learn.
 - Another way to signal the value of learning is by robustly budgeting for it. At computer software company WeTransfer, there are three learning budgets: corporate, team, and personal. The corporate budget is for more formal learning interventions that are

organised from the centre. Team budgets are flexible – for example, part of a team budget could be used to contribute to the cost of a team member’s study programme, or the budget might be used for a team-building day. Personal budgets can be used in whatever way the individual sees fit. Ronen Mendelovitz, Learning & Development Manager, explained, *“As a creative organisation, we don’t want to block anybody from learning something in the way they find most suitable for them. So their budget is their budget. They can use it to purchase learning from a marketplace that we have partnered with, or can spend it on books about management or wellbeing, or on courses they find for themselves. We share good practices on how to use the budget, and we nudge teams and individuals to use their budget before it expires.”*

- Senior leaders need to have a flexible orientation toward learning. Some of our interviewees described overly rigid senior leaders who support learning, but only in the way they are used to. It can sometimes be a struggle to help senior leaders understand, empathise with, and embrace new modes of learning, which can have implications for budget and buy-in to fresh learning initiatives. In Kevin Moore’s view, this requires the Learning function to *“be a bit more assertive as to what the future of learning looks like”* when engaging with senior leaders.
- **Create autonomous spaces for learning.** The days of trying to rigidly control what, when, where, how, and why people learn are long gone. People are learning on phones, over Slack, at Teams meetings, through YouTube, at weekends, from managers, peers, and subordinates – organisations have a limited ability to control the flow, and even the content, of learning. In addition to more formal learning spaces, it’s useful for organisations to focus on creating supported, but autonomous, spaces where social learning can happen. Hansi Jackson, Head of Learning and Development at First Bus UK, shared an instructive example. *“During the pandemic, we launched an initiative called Learning Together. We focused efforts around one topic, such as mental health or customer service, and provided many avenues to learn: podcasts, articles, stories from the business. It was a bit hit and miss. It was a nice opportunity for people to share their learnings with others, but we struggled a bit with communication channels and keeping momentum. But then we noticed that a lot of learning is happening socially, through peer networks. We have 80 Mental Health First Aiders and as a network they are coming together on Yammer, in Facebook groups, working together locally as small teams and creating content themselves to drive learning on those topics. They’ve been very proactive, and we’ve given them space and the opportunity to be autonomous. And they are taking that space and those opportunities.”*
- **Understand that it takes time and are fully committed.** Learning orientations aren’t made overnight. It happens at different paces in different parts of the organisation. There has to be a commitment to keep practising until the orientation permeates.
- **Find, celebrate, share and encourage good practices.** Doing this helps a learning orientation spread from pockets of good to being systematically part of the organisation.

- **Troubleshoot at the sticking points.** Equally, it's important to hone in and address trouble spots. Are there teams or larger parts of the business that just aren't moving along as the rest of the organisation becomes more skilled at learning? Can you use data to analyse what the blockers are? What action will you take if things don't improve? For example, if after being given time and support, a manager just isn't able or willing to facilitate learning, would the organisation consider exiting them?
- **Learn from other organisations.** Learning is generally conceptualised within the scope of an individual organisation, yet business takes place in complex economic, environmental, and social contexts. Research finds that relationships beyond organisational boundaries (such as networks, alliances, and partnerships) are an important source of learning. For example, as DLA Piper's Sarah Petherick explained, *"A lot of our sector-led learning is done with senior member of the practice group, but also through partnering with organisations in the wider professional services. For example, we've partnered with a Big Four accounting firm – they bring market insights and we bring a legal perspective; these partnerships work really, really well."*

Many of our interviewees for this research emphasised that developing a learning orientation is a change management activity. Habits are a key mechanism through which behaviour is changed; as such, we identify 'learning habits' as a key mechanism through which individuals, teams, and organisations can develop a learning orientation. By 'learning habits', we mean the routine behaviours that together reorient the individual, team, or organisation toward learning in everything that they do. It's through habitual practice that learning moves from being an extra or separate effort to a reflexive behaviour.

In the remainder of this section, we share examples of how organisations are building habits that reinforce curiosity, reflection, and other qualities of a learning orientation.

"Learning quickly and continuously is a capability many of us need, but it requires a mindset that you can learn wherever you are, whatever you are doing. And then bank it, reflect on it, and apply it. If you only think of learning as formal learning, and it's a tension against your day job, then everything becomes an excuse not to go on a course."

SARAH PETHERICK, INTERIM INTERNATIONAL HEAD OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT, DLA PIPER

One interviewee shared a great idea for driving knowledge transfer inside an organisation – adapting the concept of the Human Library. **The Human Library** is an organisation that supports diversity and inclusion. The concept is that an organisation can 'check out' a person with less common experiences (such as being a black female CEO) to teach the organisation about both their experience and broader underlying principles of diversity and inclusion. Applied to learning, this interviewee suggested: *"If we have a Human Library inside the organisation, learners could 'check out' a person known to have specialised experience or expertise – for example, our best personal mentor or someone with expertise in a particular subject matter area. You could book a half hour with them for a learning session. Leveraging the people, resources, and knowledge we have in this way would be incredibly powerful and cost-effective. But it would require guidance, such as how to be intentional about what you get out of the session."*

STAFF-LED LEARNING SESSIONS

One trend picked up in our survey for this research is increasing use of internal staff-led learning sessions. 53% of survey respondents said that these types of sessions are increasing at their organisations. Considering that, according to research by Degreed, employees are most likely to ask a manager or colleague when they want to learn a new skill (ahead of turning to a learning management system, or to Google), we see this as a positive development.

Our interviewees made the following points about staff-led learning sessions.

- These sessions are especially helpful for certain kinds of skill-building, such as building first-time managers' skills or communications skills, and for knowledge transfer.
- Staff-led learning is a great tool for role modelling a learning orientation. HP's Olga Martens-Stuurman explained, *"Staff-led sessions provide context but also a role model. Seeing someone take the time to share back encourages others to do the same. This creates less distance between people and helps people bond."*
- Staff-led learning is good for the teachers. Research has found that if someone learns with the intent to teach back what they've learned, they listen more carefully and learn more intensely. In effect, by teaching back, they learn twice.

Here are a few examples of how organisations have used staff-led learning sessions.

- At Mott MacDonald, the Early Career Professionals (ECPs) network is a place to exchange ideas and learn. A network exists in each region, and there is high take-up. Networks self-regulate and meet regularly. Importantly, when the Board goes to a location, that region's ECPs are invited to present projects they are working on and what they are learning to the Board. These meetings create opportunities for two-way knowledge transfer – the Board learns from the ECPs, and the ECPs have the chance to quiz leaders on topics such as what's happening in the market or aspects of strategy.
- At SABIC, 40% of leadership programmes for junior and mid-level people are delivered by SABIC people (the concept is 'SABIC Teach SABIC'). One example is the recent delivery of training in a new leadership framework. Instead of just telling people about it, SABIC-trained senior leaders to teach and role model the new framework through Ted Talk quality learning sessions. Sofian Lamali explained: *"Our objective was to create a company-wide moment of inspiration that shows people what good looks like, and makes them so passionate about the framework that they want to do it themselves."* Senior leaders were trained in public speaking skills and worked through journeys of personal transformation as they created their sessions. Sessions were delivered over the course of a three-day virtual, global 'Leadership Summit'. There were 12 'Ted Talks' with the most inspiring leaders at different levels and in different regions. The Talks included the opportunity for learners to chat with leaders / ask questions. Lamali said, *"instead of telling, we showed people how good leaders show up. It was unique in terms of what we have asked leaders to do, and we received overwhelming positive feedback both from the teacher/leaders and learners. It didn't feel like we were just presenting a model. External coaches helped our leaders develop their talks, but it was a 'for us by us' ethos."*
- At DLA Piper, leaders with specialised expertise are interviewed for 'Virtual Masterclasses' that then go into the organisation's digital learning academy.
- One company wants to go in a more social and collaborative direction with learning. To begin to change learning behaviours in the organisation, a campaign was launched to begin to build a norm around staff-led learning. *"As part of a first quarter initiative to test collaborative learning, we asked employees to 'share a passion',"* explained their Assistant Director Learning and Development. *"It didn't have to be work-related, it could be a passion such as photography or painting. The point was for employees to offer other employees learning, in order to create social learning norms. We see starting with a passion as a step to move towards more technical staff-led learning."*

MENTORING AND COACHING

Mentoring and coaching are a form of learning through exposure, one of the Es mentioned in the Four Es learning framework (see [page 36](#)).

The practices were named several times by research participants as a useful tool for supporting collaborative and continuous learning.

- At Mott MacDonald, mentoring and reverse mentoring have been introduced as a new way to enable learning. *"It's a new concept for the organisation, but we are trying,"* explained Kevin Moore, Group Head of Organisational Development and Change. *"If we are selling innovation, we have to do it ourselves – try new things, evolve the way we learn."* The new mentoring scheme is fit for post-pandemic ways of working – participants can plug into a mentor across the global network. *"If you are interested in engineering in a particular technological domain, and you are in San Francisco, but the best person to learn from is the Head of Practice in Singapore, you can link up with them,"* Moore explained. *"We are trying to make the world a lot smaller as a way to facilitate more, and more self-directed, learning."* Mentoring is voluntary and a reverse mentoring scheme has new graduates mentoring senior leaders. *"They are learning a great deal through this cross-fertilisation,"* Moore said.
- At Bicycle Therapeutics, a three-pillar approach to coaching has been introduced.
 - Executive coaching is for those at Director level and above. A coach is available once a month for an entire morning, and any Director can sign up to a slot as and when needed. *"Because it's one-off, people are coming with real problems instead of thinking one up, which helps really embed the learning,"* explained Emma Aplin. People can return again for another session, and often do, but it's a different model – more coaching on-demand – than the more traditional approach of coaching as a series of sessions. The programme, which is cost-efficient, is being rolled out across Bicycle after a pilot in the United States.
 - The second pillar is comprised of internal coaching. An internal person who is qualified as a coach is putting aside a portion of her time to coach others. Anyone at any level can take advantage of the opportunity, though they have to apply through HR. Three to four sessions are offered through the internal coaching model and the Apprenticeship Levy is being used to train up a couple of additional qualified coaches.
 - The third pillar is called 'coaching as a culture'. In its early stages, this is about rolling at cultural / behavioural change so that Bicycle becomes a place where all managers using coaching techniques, such as having continuous, open, and honest conversations, building a high level of psychological safety, and paying close attention to their people's performance and growth.

THE FOUR ES: A FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING A LEARNING ORIENTATION

The 'Four Es' is a flexible, versatile framework that can be used to support cultural change around learning. The framework isn't for designing learning, but is something that disjointed L&D teams can coalesce around, and something that individuals and teams can apply to their own situations. The framework brings learning and work together, and works best when the L&D function has rethought its role – from one-off training providers to builders and supporters of a learning ecosystem.

The Es include:

- **Education.** Learning through education takes place through structured development plans and formal training programmes. It covers the more traditional and formal methods of learning such as classroom-based training, leadership development programmes, or gaining external certifications.
- **Experience.** Learning through experience takes place through daily work. It's about stretching beyond your comfort zone, for example by getting involved in stretch assignments, job rotations, and other complex projects.
- **Exposure.** Learning through exposure takes place through conversations, networking (internal or external), collaboration, and community.
- **Environment.** The most recently added 'E' is environment. Environment refers to the tools, systems, and infrastructure that support employees to learn and do their work, but equally to the cultural environment. Does line manager behaviour support learning? Are jobs designed in such a way that people have the opportunity to put learning into practice on the job?

Many of our interviewees for this research referenced the Es Framework as a powerful tool that they have used to inculcate a learning orientation at their organisations. They made the following points.

- In cultures that are traditionally credentials-focused, it can be challenging to shift people beyond the E of education. It can be helpful to ask people to reflect: What haven't you tried? Who can you learn from who is good at (experience, exposure)?
- The framework provides a common language. In a large, complex organisation, a common lexicon for understanding how learning happens is vital.
- Communicating the framework to the employee base is crucial to its success. It's helpful to bring it to life through campaigns so that people understand the philosophy.

Brian Murphy, Senior Director, Employee Skilling at Microsoft, shared insights from his time at pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, where the framework was used to help create a learning ecosystem.

- AstraZeneca wanted to build lifelong learning skills in its workforce – not just among research scientists, but in sales, manufacturing, and so on. The company needed to *"empower our people to renew and refresh the skills and capabilities they need to thrive in an ever-changing world"* in order to drive innovation and delivery of medicines to patients.
- The first step was to roll out the Three Es framework (experience, exposure, and education) as a way to organise one's learning and as a common language for learning inside the organisation. The framework helped people extract the learning from their work; it helped demonstrate the impact in practical terms. The focus was on people finding their own personal combination of the Three E's, and then noticing and reflecting on the learning opportunities and how they drive greater impact in one's role.
- The company focused on building learning habits as a key mechanism through which to bring the framework to life. The focus on learning habits was supported by experimentation in the form of a behavioural learning trial.
 - The question the trial sought to answer was, *"Is it possible to build the foundations of a habit of everyday learning in the space of four weeks?"*.
 - Participants were split into control and intervention groups, for a clear comparison of impact. The intervention group participated actively by receiving daily interventions (enabled through an app), recording their learning moments, and completing surveys. Participants were nudged to seek out learning moments in their day using the Three Es framework and the learning was aligned to AstraZeneca's values of bravery, curiosity, and collaboration.
 - Recording learning moments sparked reflection: a key tool for embedding learning. The daily surveys nudged people to make time for that recording and reflection.
 - Key insights from the trial included that reflection on learning increases the chances that it will be applied and that consistency is essential. The trial found that it is possible to build a learning habit. The orientating framework, combined with intentional practice and reflection, increased people's ability to identify learning opportunities, increased their motivation to apply their learning to their everyday role, and increased their perception of their personal impact at work. of bite-size, self-serve virtual learning for everyone else. In both qualitative responses to our survey and some interviews, a theme emerged wherein face-to-face learning is now rare, the preserve of high potentials, senior leaders, or other top talent, while all other learning has gone virtual. This is unlikely to be the most productive way forward for individual, team, and organisational learning.

CASE STUDY: CONNECTED AND CONTINUOUS: A NEW LEARNING MODEL AT BP

At BP, a new learning model has recently gone live as a pilot. *"We needed something more malleable and modern than 70-20-10,"* explained Ameet Thakkar, Vice President, Future Skills and Learning. *"The new model absorbs 70-20-10, but with a more up-to-date focus that is not prescriptive about the amount of time people need to spend on each element, which can change depending on where people are in their careers and their roles. It is based on four elements: learn, do, connect, reflect."*

- **Learn** refers to formal and informal learning, and includes courses *and* resources. This includes the typical instructor-led training, eLearning and things like Ted Talks, articles, podcasts, and so on. In Thakkar's view, *"learning professionals focus too much on the 'learn' piece because it's tangible, and it's what leaders ask for."*
- **Do** includes all the things people do on the job and can include things like rehearsal of activities, simulations, role plays, and even vicarious learning through observing others.
- **Connect** refers to the social, collaborative element of learning and developmental relationships. It includes development through coaching, mentoring, line manager conversations, communities of practice, and other types of peer-to-peer learning.
- **Reflect** as Thakkar explained, *"is the biggest missing bit in 70-20-10. We have lost the focus on this even more with the intensification of work, but one of the key parts of learning is to reflect, absorb, and then apply. The sensemaking and consolidation that comes from reflection is critical – and is necessary after engaging in an experience (Do), having had a great developmental conversation (Connect), or having consumed useful content (Learn)."*
 - A campaign, including video, animation, and PDF communications, is introducing the elements of the model, but also zooming in on reflection. The 'What? So what? Now what?' model of reflection is being introduced to support people to incorporate reflection into their learning practice. *"Reflection is the one thing you can do when you haven't got time to do anything else,"* Thakkar said. *"For example, you can build ten minutes into the end of our week to reflect on what went well and what didn't go well."*

In addition to the launch of the model, there is a broader focus on learning and development in 2022, with senior leaders emphasising learning and the value of a learning orientation. The Chief Human Resources Officer and CEO are leading by setting the tone. For example, the CEO's first communication of 2022 was a note sent

"We've invested a lot in learning technology, but found that people were getting overwhelmed and giving up because it was difficult to find things quickly."

on Yammer declaring 2022 the 'Year of Development'. As Thakkar said, *"All the business leaders know and have been good at promoting the focus on learning."*

To support the new model and the focus on continuous, collaborative learning, BP has also made some upgrades to the environment.

- *"We've invested a lot in learning technology, but found that people were getting overwhelmed and giving up because it was difficult to find things quickly. So, we've focused on upgrading to give quick, easy, consumer-grade format and access to great learning content."*
- *"We've also upped our marketing and communications. We've launched a global, monthly Learning newsletter, have increased our use of internal channels to promote learning, we are trying to make more discipline-specific communications, and we are trying to drip-feed learning to our people on a regular basis."*

Finally, a 'Growth Week' event reinforced the broader focus on learning in 2022.

- 18,000 people (40% of the workforce) signed up to attend this week-long internal Learning conference. *"There were 43 sessions, and people really made time for it,"* Thakkar said. *"It was a 'big bang' event with external speakers, senior leaders – the CHRO did a session with one of the LinkedIn co-founders about the future of work. We used simple, digestible frames to help people approach content, such as 'future skills you need'." (The future skills are: agility, digital, commercial, and sustainability).*
- Growth Week had broad support throughout the business, with managers, functional heads, and senior leaders encouraging people to go, do, and take advantage of the opportunities. *"People will come if you make it good, if you help them get excited, and if it's energetic,"* Thakkar said.

LEARNING HABITS

Learning habits are the routine behaviours that orient individuals, teams, and organisations toward continuous learning. We asked interviewees to share their individual and team / organisational learning habits.

Individual

- **Make and protect time for learning.** Pete Cooper at Dstl sets aside the first 15 minutes of every day to read an article, watch a Ted Talk, or engage in other learning. *"This reinforces learning as a priority for me,"* Cooper said. Cooper is also in the habit of 'learning loudly' – *"I'm always recommending stuff to my team – sharing videos, books. In this way, I am trying to overtly and loudly give them permission to make time for learning."*
 - Organisations can help people make and protect time for learning by giving them dedicated company time to learn. For example, at HP, employees get four hours each month for development. Sometimes teams use this time to learn something together; in other cases individuals use the time to learn on their own. At Channel 4, employees are given approximately 10 days annually to 'give back and grow'. The focus is on activities that are not part of the core job, but are critical to organisation success. Five days are for the development of the individual self, and can be spent attending events, reading, doing digital learning, etc. Three days are for serving the communities with which Channel 4 works, and two days are for serving the organisation, such as by supporting an organisational event or contributing to a departmental meeting.
- **Set goals.** Setting small, clear goals that are specific and explicit and that matter to you is a useful learning habit. For example, Sarah Petherick at DLA Piper keeps not only a 'to do' list, but also a 'to learn' list: *"This list is kept in my notebook. It includes things that are really tactical such as 'learn the process of xyz' or 'learn more about giving feedback to Gen Z'. I keep the list up-to-date so that it always stays relevant."*
- **Actively seek feedback.** It's easier to seek feedback if you've already primed others to give you feedback – for example, by asking them to keep an eye on how you present in a meeting, if you are trying to learn how to present more effectively. It's helpful to seek feedback from both peers and experts, and to press feedback-givers for details (this makes feedback more actionable). Then take time to reflect and decide whether or how to act on the feedback.
 - Management consulting company McKinsey suggests the '3x3x3' learning habit – define three learning / development goals, accomplish them over a three-month period, and prime three other people to hold you accountable to the goals and provide feedback.
- **Reflect.** Journaling was a commonly cited reflective habit. Kevin Moore at Mott MacDonald is in the habit of reflecting on bad days: *"It's easy to reflect when the sun is shining. So if I'm having a bad day, I constantly ask myself, 'what can I take from it? What can I learn from it? What can I do differently next time?' In this way I try to still grab learning when I'm feeling rubbish."*

Team / Organisational

- At Bailie Gifford, Barry Brown's team has established a habit of problem-solving together: *"At team meetings, instead of team updates, we identify and solve a problem together. For example, 'this dataset says one thing but it doesn't seem right, does anybody else have a different perspective?', or 'I'm having a challenge with a stakeholder, has anyone been in a similar situation and can they help me navigate it?'. We meet fortnightly or as and when a problem needs to be solved. There is group facilitation with rotating chairs; if there are several problems, the group prioritises using a thumbs-up voting system. We start with the problem that's been mostly highly ranked, spend a few minutes on it and then move down the list. We usually get through most of them because we keep the focus quite tight. The practice is really working well at the team level and we're encouraging other teams to adopt this model."*
- Law firm DLA Piper has developed 'prompt cards' to build habits of prioritising learning and reflection into development conversations. The prompt cards are double-sided. On one side are four quadrants to be filled in – what on-the-job learning will help you over the next 12-15 months, what can you learn from peers, what can you learn from leaders, and what can you learn from the outside world. The other side of the card contains tailored prompts such as encouraging people to ask their manager during down-time why they handled something in a particular way and what they learned from it.
- At Balfour Beatty, the 15 members of the L&D team participate in an 'outside in' book club. Claire Thompson explained, *"every month someone takes the lead. They pass around an article, video, Ted Talk, whatever it might be, and ask everyone to read or watch it. We have dedicated time to then get together and have a discussion about it. It's not designed to be a discussion with a to-do list. Rather, it's to stimulate thinking. We've looked at all sorts of topics – designing training, understanding learning needs, tips and tricks for getting people's attention in the room, diversity and inclusion, neurodiversity in learning. Sessions are recorded and shared with those who can't come. The club allows people from different areas of L&D to come together and think differently and it can lead to change, too. Our meeting on neurodiversity prompted a review of our slides, with a focus on the needs of learners with dyslexia."*
- Nigel Paine recommends that organisations develop a culture of sharing: *"studies have found that the majority of people don't admit mistakes because it's seen as career-limiting. But nearly as many people would not give help because it might limit their success. Organisations can set a tone where it's ok to ask for help, and it's one's duty to offer help."*
- At HP, some managers are in the habit of calling out and recognising in meetings those people who have taken time to learn, sharing details of what they learned and what impact it had. In this way, the priority and value set on learning is reinforced.



3.2 TECHNOLOGY

Technology is one of the most significant enablers of continuous, collaborative learning. The word ‘technology’ encompasses a large ecosystem of learning platforms and applications – there are learning management systems; learning experience platforms; mobile learning apps; virtual reality and virtual classrooms; massive open online courses (MOOCs); performance support systems; collaboration tools, and much more.

Technology is important because it increases the efficiency and scale of learning (it delivers more, faster). Deployed effectively, it can provide ‘just-in-time’ learning on a continual basis; some technologies also create opportunities for social learning by connecting people, who then exchange knowledge and learn from one another.

In the literature review and interviews for this research, we identified the following key themes with regard to the role that technology is playing in corporate learning.

- Most organisations will have an ecosystem of learning technologies. However, as yet, there is no ‘Holy Grail’ product that can do everything. Part of the challenge for L&D leaders is to ensure learning technologies inside the ecosystem complement and reinforce one other.
- The learning technology market is fast-moving and glutted with products – many of which aren’t very good. At present, there is a wave of consolidation in the market. As Microsoft’s

“We don’t want to use an e-learning platform. From experience, it doesn’t work – people just don’t feel the connection. They aren’t eager or thrilled to learn this way. We need to be realistic and it’s just not a draw.”

RONEN MENDELOVITZ, LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, WETRANSFER

Brian Murphy explained, *“learning technology has been underperforming for a long time. Lots of money has been spent, sometimes in an indiscriminate way. LMSs, LXPs – technologies are now starting to come together into one. It’s a very interesting space to watch.”*

- There is a move from using technology to deliver as much as possible to as many people as possible (massification, as exemplified by MOOCs) to using technology to deliver just what an individual needs, at the point of need (personalisation, which is being helped along by AI).
- The future of learning technology will shine more of a light on collaboration tools, which will come to the fore as key enablers of collaborative and continuous learning. For example, Bicycle Therapeutic’s Emma Aplin explained that, *“we have created a dedicated Teams channel for managers. We communicate and share knowledge there, run polls, have a question section. It’s really taken off and what we’re seeing is that managers are using it to learn together. It’s not a traditional development tool but it’s one that is working really well for us.”* Teams channels are collaboration tools, but at Bicycle they are also facilitating learning.
 - Qualitative responses to our survey provide more support for this idea. Asked ‘what are the learning platforms / technologies of the future?’, a number of respondents named highly visual virtual collaboration tools such as Miro and Padlet, while others emphasised in particular the sharing and networking aspects of tools such as Degreed.

We also explored a few specific questions around how learning technology is evolving.

What about hot new technologies such as virtual reality or gamification? Are they being used to deliver learning?

‘Virtual reality’, ‘the metaverse’, ‘gamification’, and ‘AI’ are often invoked to describe the learning technologies of the future. The idea is that learning enabled by advanced technologies will be more immersive, stimulating, personalised, and challenging, leading to better learning outcomes.

Let's take virtual reality as an example. Virtual reality applications are already being used in some sectors to accelerate skills development. Bosch and Ford Motor Company have partnered to create a virtual reality tool that trains technicians on electric vehicle maintenance. And virtual reality is being widely used in healthcare, to train medical students in anatomy, to train frontline nurses, and to aid medical professionals in the diagnosis of dementia.

The majority of respondents to our survey – 72% – stated that their organisation does not currently use virtual reality-based learning. (57% are not currently using gamification, 69% are not using machine learning, and 59% are not using computer-based simulations.) See Figure 8 opposite.

Our interviewees cited three reasons for low take-up of virtual reality technologies.

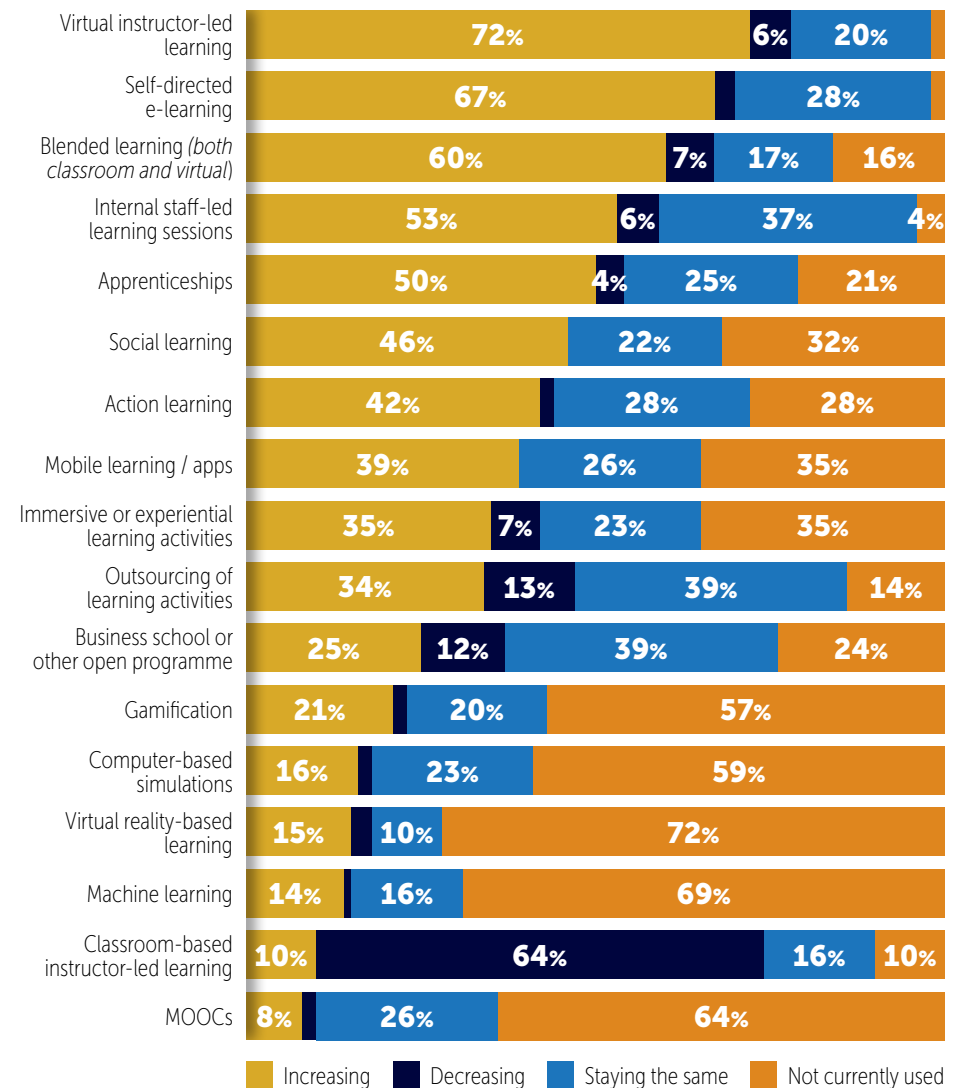
- **Limited use case.** Microsoft's Brian Murphy said, "It's a great solution but the use case is discrete. The risk is people get excited and go looking for problems to solve with it." What are some of the use cases? Things that are too dangerous to do in practice (such as landing a plane in distress), things that involve interaction (such as having difficult conversations), and performance support (particularly of new hires in intense, front-line roles, such as working on an oil rig) were three use cases cited by our research participants.
- **Cost.** As one interviewee explained, "It's more potential than good solution so far. The devices are expensive right now, so it requires a heavy initial investment in hardware and software."
- **Quality of the software.** While virtual reality hardware is quite advanced, the software is less impressive. There was wide agreement among our interviews that virtual reality software needs more work.

Performance support systems have been identified as a way of integrating learning into the flow of work. Is the use of this technology growing?

Performance support systems are learning resources that are accessible and applicable at the point of need. Think of performance support as more than a search engine but less than a full-fledged Learning Management System. A performance support system holds knowledge that is unique to an organisation, and provides instructions, on demand, to help people perform job-related tasks more effectively. For example, a performance support system might offer up a video on how to add a new customer to a customer relationship management (CRM) system. The video would pop up in the system, to assist the learner as they complete the task. Our research finds that performance support technology is less of a focus right now, as many organisations are focusing instead on creating virtual classrooms and digital learning content.

FIGURE 8

How would you describe your current use of each of the following?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

HP's Olga Martens-Stuurman distinguishes between three different types of things we need to learn at work:

- 1. Things people need to know for their day-to-day job.** For example, learning how to use a new tool. Learning in the flow of work can be very beneficial for this type of learning, because the learner sees and applies the learning right away. Performance support systems are a great tool for this type of learning.
- 2. Things that are completely different from one's day-to-day job, and which need a certain level of mastery.** This type of learning is more personal, takes more time, and is less suited to learning in the flow of work.
- 3. Entirely new skills.** This type of learning needs to happen outside the flow of work because it is typically connected to what the organisation needs for the future. Consequently, there is a desire to build enthusiasm and excitement around learning the new skill(s), applying them, and sharing what's been learned with others (for example, through teach back sessions).

Everyone is providing digital content libraries, but are employees really using them, and what impact do they have on learning? Are we simply providing a load of 'stuff' that people don't use?

We heard many criticisms of digital content libraries: they aren't appealing, many people aren't engaging with them, they are too cluttered and it is hard to find the good stuff, the content is generic, very basic, and sometimes irrelevant. As Hansi Jackson at First Bus explained: *"Many times they are so generic. They have been devised for multiple national and international organisations, so they aren't bespoke to our industry, and they are heavy on American examples and voices. The material often just isn't relevant enough. And many packages are still quite basic in terms of the learning design of the content – too much text, not enough video and audio. There doesn't seem to be much innovation coming through. Even the Ted Talk style feels a bit dated already."*

In terms of usage and impact, it seems that few organisations are systematically tracking this as yet.

HOW TO USE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES TO SUPPORT CONTINUOUS, COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Learning technology is a fast-moving, complex landscape. So what can the learning professional do to harness its power to support learning that is continuous and collaborative?

- **Focus on novel use cases, not novel technologies.** Desired learning outcomes should guide when and how learning technology is used. Make sure you have the right tool for the job in order to avoid wasting money or people's time. It's the access and experience that technology enables that delivers learning. Keep an eye on how technologies might enable collaboration – it's not just about delivering content to the isolated learner through a slick interface. Technology can drive high-quality informal learning too.
- **Exploit the full power of your technology.** CRF Learning's Nick Holley explained, *"Most learning professionals are not exploiting the real power of their learning technology. For example, they are using LMSs as an admin tool – for nominations and joining instructions. Organisations with Degreed often don't know what all it can do. There is some amazing technology out there, but you have to dig in and use more than 10%."*
- **Combat digital clutter by creating learning pathways.** A learning pathway is *"a designated sequence of activities, often from different sources and in different formats, devised to develop the skills and behaviours of colleagues."* A learning pathway stitches together disparate digital resources to create a learning journey that is diverse, yet cohesive. In other words, a learning pathway is really about the careful curation of learning content.
 - Pay attention to structure and content. What is the purpose of the pathway (to instruct, inspire, inform?). Who is the audience? Has the content been logically ordered and is content complementary rather than duplicative? Use mixed modalities from a mix of providers, and balance short-form and longer content.



3.3

LINE MANAGERS

Line managers play an important role in supporting collaborative, continuous learning. Because of their proximity to their employees, they have the largest and most immediate influence on if and how they learn. It's managers who set the tone for learning among their team, who can facilitate access to learning, and who help embed and evolve learning.

What does this mean in terms of practical actions? Our research uncovered several themes. Managers should:

- **Be vocal role models.** Research from Emerald Works finds that employees rank lack of support, advice, or encouragement from managers as one of the largest barriers to learning, yet they also rank managers as one of the most valuable types of resources for learning. Managers can signal the value of and support learning by being vocal role models. A good habit is to talk about one's own development – what skills are you developing next? How did you decide on those skills, and what does 'development' look like? What are you reading and watching? What are your personal learning habits? After a workshop or training, share a story about something specific you learned. Bring it to life with an example. As HP's Olga Martens-Stuurman said, *"Managers need to set a good example. They need to show that it's good to learn and develop. One way to do this is to share what you're learning. It doesn't have to be big, it can be as simple as sharing something you've read and what you learned from it."*

"We don't want to use an e-learning platform. From experience, it doesn't work – people just don't feel the connection. They aren't eager or thrilled to learn this way. We need to be realistic and it's just not a draw."

RONEN MENDELOVITZ, LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, WETRANSFER

- **Guide people toward learning opportunities.** Learning opportunities need to be easy to access, both in terms of finding resources and knowing about the existence of opportunities. In the Emerald Works research, line managers (alongside internal communications and colleagues) were cited as the main source of information about learning opportunities. Managers should take responsibility for learning about and regularly communicating the learning offering, though, as discussed below, HR / the organisation can take steps to help managers do this more effectively.
 - Guiding people toward opportunities isn't enough. Managers also have to support people while they are learning. For example, lighten someone's workload if they are on a programme so that they can focus and be present.
- **Give feedback.** Feedback should be timely and regular, given at the individual level when someone has embarked on solo learning, and shared together as a team when learning has been collaborative. For example, consider instituting mandatory after action reviews, whether a project was a success or a failure. Give feedback to the team, and use the time to reflect together on learnings, both in terms of what went well and what did not. Then decide on any changes or next steps.
- **Hold learners accountable.** As CRF Learning Director Nick Holley explains, *"The real value comes after the learning, when it's applied. Managers can do their part by holding their direct reports accountable for following through on learning. Continue the conversation – ask learners what they learned, and what they are going to do differently as a result. Then check in in a few months' time to see if things actually were done differently."*
- **Create and support collaborative and continuous learning experiences.** On [page 38](#), we share some examples of how managers are building collaborative and continuous learning experiences for their teams. Managers can also be on the lookout for opportunities to collaborate with peers from other functions to create cross-functional learning opportunities, and should be deliberate about using technology to facilitate collaborative learning (as discussed on [page 41](#)).
- **Create opportunities for people to apply new skills.** Stretch projects and teach-back sessions are two examples of ways managers can enable learners to apply new skills. Managers also have to be willing to let go of good people to foster their learning – for example if a lateral move or promotion is the appropriate next step for application of new skills.

How can HR support managers to support employees' learning?

- **Provide appropriate guidance to managers, so that they can in turn guide others.**

Managers can't point their team to learning opportunities if they don't know they exist, or don't understand the offering. One organisation we spoke to has run Town Halls just for managers, to explain the importance of learning and the broader context within which learning sits. Managers have the opportunity to ask questions, and receive booklets that summarise the offering.

- **Involve managers in learning design.** WeTransfer's Ronen Mendelovitz explained: *"The best way to engage managers is to sit down with them. You can create the best learning interventions but if managers don't encourage employees to take up the learning or give them space to do it, it will fall flat. We've sat down 1:1 with managers to get their input: 'this is what we're planning to do. What do you think? What are your concerns?', and we've done learning roadshows to explain programmes."* There are several touchpoints at which managers can be engaged:

- Involve managers in diagnosing learning needs. Managers usually have a good sense of the skills their team members need to build. Establish a process – for example, through regular surveying – by which managers can have input into the discovery of learning needs.
- Engage managers as learning is designed, so that they can give feedback and guidance. This can be accomplished through 1:1s, focus groups, and/or including managers in user testing.
- Leverage managers' visibility and influence over employees' priorities by having them announce new L&D programmes/initiatives, rather than sending an email direct from HR or L&D.
- Collect feedback from managers. As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), evaluation of learning, when it's done at all, tends to focus only on what learners thought of it. The views of learners' managers should also be assessed. The timing and questions will be different. Try asking managers about their expectations before the participant learns, and then check in at delayed intervals (such as 30, 60, 90, 120 days) to see how expectations have been met. Ask questions about impact instead of quality.

- **Build learning into performance management processes.** For example, when goals are set, they should involve not just business but personal development goals. As HP's Olga Martens-Stuurman said: *"This signals that learning is a priority and can trigger behaviours. It conveys the message that it's part of the job to keep learning and stay relevant."* Equip managers with the knowledge and skills they need to inform goal-setting and to have ongoing conversations about learning and development goals.

4.0 THE FUTURE OF LEARNING IS... EVIDENCE-BASED

In this chapter we look at the role evidence is playing in assessing learning needs, designing interventions, and evaluating learning. We argue that the future of learning should be more evidence-based.

"Did you enjoy the training?' should be banned."

NICK HOLLEY, DIRECTOR, CRF LEARNING

An interviewee for this research made the following observations:

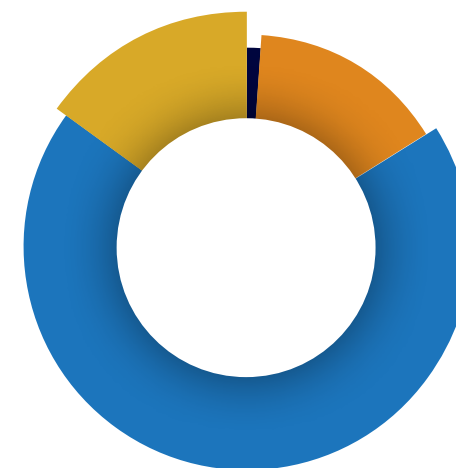
"I've never worked at an organisation that has been fantastic at evaluating learning. Mostly, evaluation is at Kirkpatrick's Level 1 or 2. There are real challenges and barriers to understanding learning transfer – I can't give any good examples of how we've done it well. How has my team changed, what's the business impact, how has it affected me as an individual? Finding time, doing it, and influencing people to understand the value are all challenges, especially in organisations that are going through change constantly."

These observations were borne out by our survey results. While a majority of respondents – 69% – evaluate the outcomes of 'some' learning activities, only 15% say they consistently evaluate outcomes of all learning activities.

FIGURE 9

Does your organisation formally evaluate the outcomes of learning activities?

- 15%** Yes – we evaluate all our learning activities consistently
- 69%** Yes – we evaluate some learning activities
- 15%** No – we don't typically evaluate the outcomes of learning activities
- 1%** Don't know



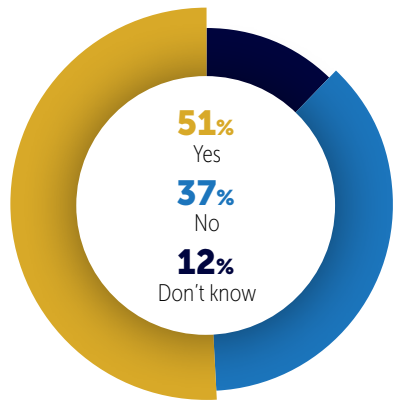
Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

“Analytics are really important, but most people don’t really know what to do with the data. Maybe they collect the number of hours spent on learning, who completed what, but those things are irrelevant. Instead, use data to focus on levels of engagement and business impact.”

NIGEL PAINE, CEO, NIGEL PAINE.COM LTD AND PRESENTER, LEARNING NOW TV

FIGURE 10

Do you have a model for evaluation?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

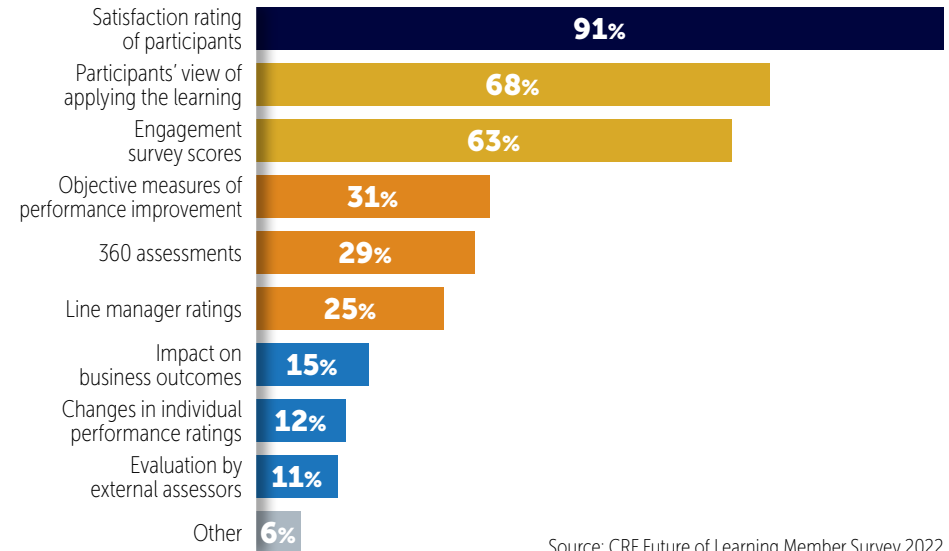
While 51% of respondents say their organisation has a model for learning evaluation, the measures and frequency of measurement show a bias toward immediate evaluation of learner satisfaction.

As shown in Figure 11, participants’ satisfaction with learning (91%), participants’ view of how well they’ve applied learning (68%), and engagement survey scores (63%) are by far the most commonly measured impacts of learning. Less than a third (31%) of organisations use objective measures of performance improvement such as before and after skills assessments. Only 15% measure impact on business outcomes, and only 12% measure changes in individual performance ratings.

Looking at who is asked to evaluate learning’s impact, 96% of survey respondents say their organisation consults the individual learner. Only 53% consult the learner’s immediate line manager, and less than a third (30%) use 360 assessments, involving the individual, peers, subordinates and managers. Only 9% involve other managers in direct contact with the learner, such as their boss’s boss.

FIGURE 11

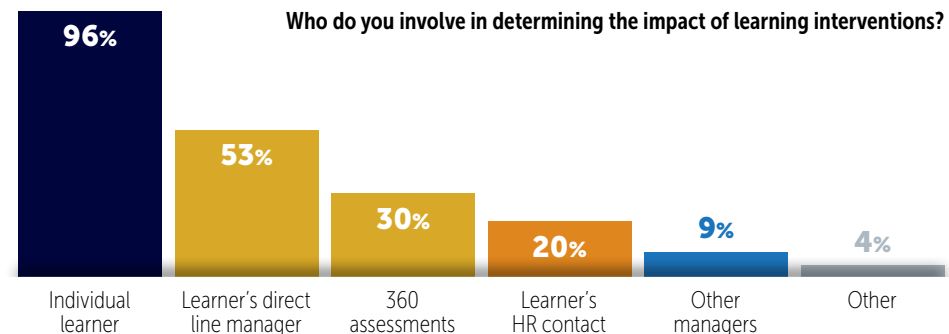
Which of the following do you measure / evaluate?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

FIGURE 12

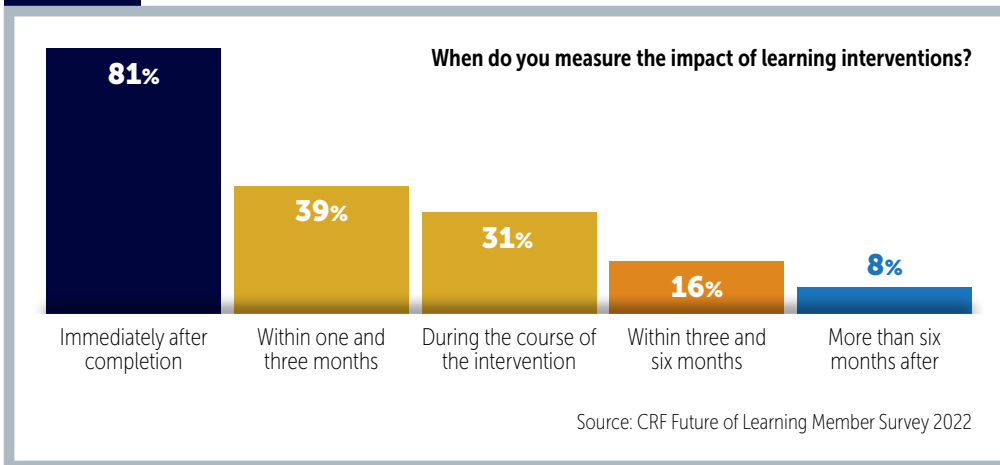
Who do you involve in determining the impact of learning interventions?



Source: CRF Future of Learning Member Survey 2022

Finally, asked *when* the impact of learning interventions is measured, 81% of respondents say they evaluate immediately after an intervention. Only 39% evaluate 1-3 months after intervention, only 16% evaluate 3-6 months after an intervention, and only 8% do so six months or longer after the intervention.

FIGURE 13



Lack of time and a lack of the right resources – in terms of both systems/tools and people to do analysis – were the most frequently cited reasons for this ad-hoc approach to learning evaluation. For example, one learning leader told us, *“we are struggling with this. We lack the time and resources to evaluate properly. We have an automatic questionnaire – smile sheets – after each learning intervention and we look at those results. And we look at business indicators to try to define a positive trend, but it’s not systematic. We would love to be able to use analytics to understand the behaviour of learners, but our current system doesn’t give us that functionality.”*

In terms of needs assessment, only 42% of survey respondents said their organisation has a formal approach or process for assessing learning needs. Many of our interviewees described the assessment of learning needs as being driven by what managers or leaders say they want, or by a gut feeling or hunch about what is needed. As Oracle’s Adele Pickerill said, *“For many there’s no real science behind it. With the help of technology and the new tools available, there is an unprecedented opportunity to collect and leverage data insights to assess learning needs today and requirements for the future and to show business impact.”*

ONLY 42% of survey respondents said their organisation **has a formal approach or process for assessing learning needs.**

Interestingly, a few interviewees told us that needs assessment and evaluation vary depending on the level of investment in or target audience of an intervention, with more sophisticated measurement for more expensive interventions, or for those targeted at a more senior group.

On balance, the picture with regard to evidence is that it is little-used when it comes to corporate learning. Yet evidence can and should play an important role in learning.

- Assessing learning needs.** Who needs to learn what, and when? In this era of Big Data and advanced analytics tools, there are new opportunities to assess learners’ strengths and weaknesses, and to examine and predict trends. For example, telecommunications company Sky uses data to identify moments that matter for managers (appointment to role, initiating recruitment to their team) and the associated learning needs, in order to provide learning at the moment of need. Data and advanced analytics tools have created an opportunity to move from ‘sheep dip’, one-size-fits-all learning to learning that is targeted where, when, and to whom it is needed.
- Informing the design of learning interventions.** Our interviewees consistently told us that learning interventions are more effective when key stakeholders, such as business leaders, managers and learners, are involved in learning design. While business strategy guides the ‘ask’ of learning, and Big Data can help define gaps and pinpoint what is needed when and where, collecting evidence to understand stakeholders’ motivations and challenges is important for designing learning that might actually be effective. See [page 48](#) for an example of how to involve stakeholders in learning design.
- Evaluation.** Accurate measurement is not simple, and there are always challenges around establishing causality. But organisations can move in the right direction by shifting their focus from simple-but-irrelevant metrics such as completion rates and learner satisfaction to outcomes-based metrics such as impact on individual and team behaviour and performance or business-process improvement. For example, if a learning intervention is designed to improve psychological safety at team level, measure the degree of psychological safety before the intervention, and at timed intervals (such as immediately and at 1, 3, and 6 months after) to see if the learning had the desired impact (and if that impact is enduring). If learning is designed to build a specific skill, conduct before and after skills assessments. Demonstrating business impact is critical if the Learning function wants to stay relevant – and funded. As CRF Learning’s Nick Holley said, *“If you can’t demonstrate the value add of what you’re doing, the business will be happy to dispense with the cost.”*

WHERE TO START WITH TAKING A MORE EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH TO LEARNING

It can be overwhelming to move from wishful thinking to useful practice with regard to using evidence. So what can the learning professional do to get started?

- **Start with a problem diagnosis, not the solution.** Many of our interviewees suggested that the L&D function is often too quick to offer a 'pet' learning solution, without taking time to diagnose the problem. So a first step in taking a more evidence-based approach is to get into the habit of pausing, and use that pause to diagnose the problem. In some cases, this can mean having to push back against leaders who have their own 'gut feelings' about the problem and its solution.
- **Triangulate data when assessing learning needs.** While exciting new opportunities are opening up to use data to pinpoint learning needs with very high specificity, many organisations do not yet have access to these tools. In fact, access may be a long way off for some, but a lack of the most cutting-edge technology does not mean an organisation cannot take a more evidence-based approach. When assessing learning needs, triangulating data can help you take a more objective, evidence-based approach. For example, at First Bus UK, Hansi Jackson's team uses several data sources to assess learning needs: direct feedback from business functions, anecdotal evidence from performance and development reviews, input from line managers, and of course the overall strategic direction of the business. In recent times, this information has highlighted a learning need around commerciality and people management skills.

- **Experiment.** Experiments are a great way to collect evidence from users about learning interventions before they are more deeply invested in and more widely rolled out. Running an intervention as a pilot / experiment, and then systematically collecting and assessing feedback from users, can help determine whether the intervention is worth proceeding with, and can highlight areas for improvement. Focus on open-ended, qualitative questions that can be analysed for insight, rather than yes/no, satisfaction-based questions.
 - For example, Dstl's Pete Cooper recently ran a pilot to test a learning intervention around decision-making. The pilot's aim was to determine whether there is a business case for the intervention. Participants in the pilot were asked to evaluate their experience by answering four key questions: what was your experience of the intervention; what have you taken away from the intervention; how do you think it would land with people; and what groups in the organisation would it really serve.
- **Share results with business leaders.** As mentioned above, it is essential to demonstrate the business impact of learning interventions to business leaders. Simply creating this expectation can help learning functions that are struggling with evaluation to think about how to take a more disciplined and focused approach. If you are going to present results to senior leaders, would you be comfortable and confident that whatever data you are collecting will paint a convincing and credible picture of the intervention's value? What about the L&D function's value?
 - Stakeholder engagement goes both ways. Learning leaders should ask business leaders what impact the learning has had and whether it's addressing the business objectives set. Stakeholders' views are additional and valid data.

HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN: THE 5Di© PROCESS

Learning practitioner Nick Shackleton-Jones spoke to us about his human-centred learning design process, 5Di©.

What's the problem?

"Organisations are pouring billions into Learning & Development without much evidence of impact," Shackleton-Jones explained. *"And they are growing increasingly sceptical about L&D as a ritual. It's not that we need to do things better, it's that we need a fundamentally different approach."*

Shackleton-Jones advises shifting away from an education-based ritual, in which L&D *"scoops up topics, copies and pastes slides into a slide show, and then dumps the content into an e-learning platform where nothing happens."*

What's the alternative?

The alternative is to take top-down business priorities and translate them into performance and experience outcomes through a bottom-up, human-centred design process that allows key stakeholders to reach a shared understanding of the learning function's purpose.

The 5Di© process involves:

- **Defining** measurable business outcomes in terms of 'think, feel, do'. At this beginning stage, organisations systematically articulate the measurements the programme should achieve.
 - Shackleton-Jones shared an example around induction: *"Induction programmes are often the same – hours of e-learning content pushed to the learner. But, as one example, I sat down and talked to senior stakeholders in terms of 'think, feel, do' – what do you want to achieve? What they wanted their induction programme to achieve was to give learners a sense of belonging and a connection to the organisation's purpose. This begged the question: is e-learning content pushed to the learner the best way to achieve this, and if not, then why are we doing it?"*
- **Discover:** working with the target audience to analyse the tasks and concerns that drive everyday learning, using this data to inform design.

"This begged the question: is e-learning content pushed to the learner the best way to achieve this, and if not, then why are we doing it?"

- **Designing** resources and experiences that will enable people to shift their behaviour and alter their experience.
- **Developing** the minimum viable product version of those resources and experiences.
 - This includes determining which resources and experiences are core and which are elective, in order to personalise learning. Personas are a useful tool for this work. Shackleton-Jones explained: *"One organisation had a leadership programme, aligned with competencies. But when time was taken to talk to leaders, 40% of them did not have a team. So they were sitting through days of stuff on how to coach and team effectiveness when a simple bit of persona work would have demonstrated that this was a different type of audience segment. The solution, in this case, was to build a core / elective structure that fit this audience's learning needs. If you know who your audience is, you have a better change of designing for it."*
- **Deploying** learning products – making them visible and accessible.
- **Iterating improvements** to learning products based on an evaluation of outcomes.

What's at stake?

The credibility and future of the learning function is at stake. In Shackleton-Jones' view, L&D teams have to move away from *"doing annoying stuff off to the side."* *"L&D has aped education and education doesn't have much to do with learning. If we want to have a future as a function, and avoid retreating into the compliance space (80% of LMS usage is compliance), we have to put the audience at the centre of the learning process and fundamentally transform what we offer."*



5.0 EXTINCTION EVENT? THE FUTURE OF THE LEARNING FUNCTION

This chapter explores the current limitations and future demands of learning professionals and the L&D function.

“We rely so heavily on technology at the moment, but going back to the basics, what would L&D actually look like if we didn’t have the technology aspect? How essential are we? How essential are we making ourselves? Are we talking ourselves out of a job? How is our role evolving and changing as L&D, and how can we make ourselves strategically essential to the business?”

EMMA APLIN, LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT LEAD, BICYCLE THERAPEUTICS

A workforce that can adapt continuously, in terms of skills and behaviour, is essential to an organisation’s success in today’s challenging business environment. This should mean an elevated L&D function, integrated with business strategy and core talent processes to help the organisation learn and change at speed and scale.

But our research uncovered a sense among learning professionals that their functions aren’t currently equipped to play this role. Our interviewees highlighted the following limitations of L&D.

- Learning professionals are too focused on learning programmes and how to deliver them, instead of how the function is organised, its capabilities, and how it fosters an orientation toward learning. This perception is supported by our survey finding that over half (51%) of learning functions are primarily focused on providing tools and solutions rather than creating an organisation culture and context for learning (7%). (39% of organisations reported that their L&D functions are equally balanced between the two).
- Too many learning professionals are doing admin (booking courses, paying fees, sourcing eLearning) and facilitating (delivering learning and development, doing a bit of course design) to the exclusion of anything else. This puts L&D at *“a bit of a crossroads,”* said Sarah Horne at Oracle. *“Administration of learning can be automated, and drive self-service for learners; particularly where online learning content and videos can be shared collaboratively and in much the same way as people use social media, and this is quickly becoming mainstream. This should then allow for L&D professionals to play a more strategic role. Consider what happened to travel agents when the internet came along.”* In Horne’s view,

“L&D is really at a crossroads. One way goes to really embedding in organisational transformation and being part of bigger changes that are going on. The other way is to irrelevance and expiry. If learning remains a UFO outside the universe of the organisation, everyone is going to ignore it.”

NIGEL PAINE, CEO, NIGEL PAINE.COM LTD AND PRESENTER, LEARNING NOW TV

there is a continued need for learning professionals to deliver and design, but *“people need to be really sharp and targeted around leveraging data to inform strategies around the skills and capabilities they need to build for the future – strategic workforce planning 2.0 if you will – and few L&D professionals have nailed that. There is a real gap here.”*

- The depth and breadth of skills and experience among L&D professionals tends to be limited. The future of learning, according to research by McKinsey, will see a convergence of multidisciplinary actors working together to create *“rich new applications that change not only the channel and conditions of learning, but also the impact.”* This means that L&D needs to be more imaginative about who is in the team. L&D isn’t just for pedagogists, but for data scientists, AI specialists, psychologists, and perhaps computer gamers too.
 - Nigel Paine suggests that organisations should be more active and creative about job rotations into L&D. *“People who spend time in an L&D team have the ability to understand profoundly the difference that learning can make and can be an ambassador for it,”* he explained.
- L&D, as a function, too often is in the business of trying to control and give permission to learning. As Nigel Paine explained, *“L&D needs to give learning back to the organisation. It shouldn’t be ‘we publish, we control, we give permission’. It should be co-creation and support. The business wouldn’t launch a new product without thinking about customers – L&D shouldn’t either. Give people the learning that will change their lives, not just stuff they say they want.”*

The message from our research was that L&D must ‘evolve or become extinct’. Later in this chapter (see [page 55](#)) we look at what this means for how the function is organised; here we consider what this means in terms of the strategic skills and capabilities that learning professionals (and the function as a whole) need to develop. Several themes emerged from our research.

PERFORMANCE CONSULTING SKILLS

We conclude that L&D professionals need to develop their performance consulting skills. This means maintaining ongoing discussions with business leaders to determine the real learning needs, and a willingness to push back when necessary, rather than just giving leaders what they ask for.

As SABIC’s Sofian Lamali explained, *“Learning professionals need to have the ability to sit with the business, speak their language and understand their reality, and translate this into real learning needs and interventions. Not in a mechanical way, but by understanding what the business is, its challenges and direction, and how L&D can support that. We have to be critical, ask powerful questions, and respond to feedback. It’s not about engaging once at the beginning of the year because of the budget cycle – engagement should be continuous. Learning professionals should be creating venues for continuous dialogue with the business so that both sides can exchange information about what’s going on.”*

A good performance consultant has several qualities, including commerciality, curiosity, and self-confidence.

- **Commerciality** – not ‘commercial acumen’ broadly, but a fascination with their organisation and how it’s going to create sustainable value. This includes a deep understanding of customers, competition, and its sustainability agenda.
- **Curiosity** – includes being curious about the organisation, and about what’s going on outside the organisation (for example, what’s happening in the industry, what’s happening demographically). Curious people tend to be good at pattern recognition – that is, they are often systemic thinkers who can spot patterns and think of things as part of a system rather than in a linear way. They are *“close to the business, they feel the climate, they are talking to leaders and the front line all the time,”* explained Nick Holley.
- **Self-confidence** – to ask challenging questions, to challenge proffered explanations and solutions. Having self-confidence means not being driven by being liked, and it means being willing to dispense with learning jargon when necessary. As Dstl’s Pete Cooper explained, *“L&D professionals often try to impress with their cleverness by talking about theory – the learning cycle and so on – but your key stakeholders don’t need to know that. Speaking in the language of the business leads to more open, authentic conversations, which leads to ongoing dialogues.”*

"In ten years' time, will there be a need to do research into corporate learning? The concept of an L&D function in a corporate environment is going to get looked at again and again. Is the L&D function equipped to re-invent itself? It needs to land on its true purpose and role. In my view, the future of L&D is as change enablers, supporting organisation agility and change for employees and companies."

BRIAN MURPHY, SENIOR DIRECTOR, EMPLOYEE SKILLING, MICROSOFT

Kevin Moore at Mott MacDonald described being approached by a business unit General Manager (GM) who was concerned about how his leadership team was functioning. The GM thought he 'needed some team building'.

Taking a performance consulting approach, Moore and his team ended up doing a three-month piece of assessment and development to map the team dynamics. This led to working with the GM to coach his leaders.

As Moore said, *"We in L&D have to have the courage of our convictions, to push back, to say, 'let's explore what you need', instead of just saying 'here is another e-learning course'. Because nine times out of ten another e-learning course is not what they need."*

"L&D needs to establish strong, authentic relationships with key stakeholders that can then be leveraged for culture change to solve real business problems, rather than transmitting what we in L&D think is the next great thing."

PETE COOPER, LEARNING AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT LEAD, DSTL

DESIGN SKILLS

We use the umbrella term 'design skills' to describe a variety of collaborative creation skills that interviewees highlighted as essential for L&D professionals, including human- or user-centred design skills and co-creation skills.

We share three key points with regard to design skills.

- Design skills includes 'design thinking', 'human-centred design', 'user experience design' and other methodologies that involve learning professionals collaborating with users and other key internal stakeholders (managers, senior leaders, etc.) on the design of learning interventions. For example, at Bicycle Therapeutics, senior leaders who champion learning have also been involved in the co-creation of learning interventions. One caution is to avoid going to the same people over and over again – while the design thinking methodology specifically emphasis designing with your 'extreme users' (outliers from the norm) in mind, it is good practice to co-design with a diverse and regularly refreshed pool of collaborators.
- Design skills can and should also be used with external actors, such as learning vendors, training providers, or pedagogists in executive education programmes. Only a few of our interviewees described working with external suppliers to maximise the impact of learning. As SABIC's Sofian Lamali explained, *"The ability of L&D to get the best out of vendors is often not maximised because they don't know how to co-create. Lots of L&D functions look at cost and time, and then take it off-the-shelf – it's a very transactional basis. It can be very messy at the beginning, to co-create, but you end up with a solution that is completely contextualised to your culture, yet also has the outside-in thinking."*
 - In addition to co-creation skills, L&D professionals need to have confidence (for example, to challenge experts and not be over-awed by them), modesty, and a partnering-oriented attitude. It's also useful if the organisation sets an expectation for co-creation.
- By design skills, we do not mean instructional design (ID) skills. We encountered some disagreement among our interviewees about whether ID skills should be an in-house capability. There was broad agreement that great instructional design is essential, and that much of the ID we see today isn't living up to its potential. As Nick Holley said, *"it's possible to do a Master's or a PhD in instructional design. Some people are creating really immersive and challenging learning interventions that take people out of their comfort zones and make them really think. But we don't see much of that."* While great ID is fundamental to the future of learning, is it essential to have that capability in-house? Perhaps not. As Jamie Ward at Channel 4 explained, *"in the recent past, with the move to e-learning, some organisations have sought to bring ID talent in-house. My view is that we are now moving beyond that – there are so many good suppliers out there for instructional design, so why would you do it in house?"*

A discussion of collaborative design methodologies is beyond the scope of this paper, but see CRF's Post Meeting Notes, [Design Thinking for HR Leaders](#), for a closer look at one such methodology.

CASE STUDY: SPOTLIGHT ON DESIGN SKILLS

One learning leader described how their team has leaned into co-creation and human-centred learning design. Trained in the agile 5Di methodology (see [page 48](#)), the team is now applying it to their ways of working, how they develop themselves, and how they design learning.

Here are some examples of how the team has applied its new skills.

- Within the company, there is a business unit that sells training to the broader industry. Pre-pandemic, 80% of the unit's portfolio was classroom-based. The L&D team partnered with the business unit to help them revamp their portfolio, transforming the learning into high-quality virtual learning: *"We used the 5Di methodology, which we had only recently learned, to help the instructors in that unit re-design their programmes. It was an opportunity to test the methodology – and we saw that it really made a big impact."*
- A recent strategic learning priority has been to upskill people managers, with a focus on building the capabilities required to be a leader in this company's context. When it was time to design the learning intervention, the L&D team sat down with the business – *"we never develop anything in isolation."*
 - A group including L&D, HRBPs, selected people managers, and direct reports sat down together in a design sprint. Applying the 5Di methodology, they worked together to define what a good manager at their company has to do (role) – such as manage team, care, manage performance, and develop the team for success.
 - *"Then we got really granular – for each category, we asked, 'what does that really mean?'. At that point, we identified behaviours like building collaboration with other departments and effectively setting team goals and priorities."*
 - With a good definition of the tasks managers need to perform, the next step was to identify where things aren't working well.

We are helping them stand in the shoes of the learner, go through the learning journey, and then apply that learning to re-design their sessions to be more interactive, meaningful, and impactful."

- Once definitions and challenges were solidly agreed, and a core / elective format selected (managers would be required to take mandatory masterclasses, but could choose others for further personal development), the team went to market to build specific learning sessions. *"We took a multi-vendor approach, selecting the provider that was best at each topic. We worked with each vendor, using the feedback from the sprint sessions and also from an employee engagement survey, to make sure the content was relevant to our context, using real scenarios from our business, and so on. And then we wrapped it all together to feel like a programme – in terms of marketing and communications, it all looks and feels the same."*
- The L&D team has been doing more internal consulting to help individual managers and leaders improve their learning design skills. *"Often what they have is a long, boring presentation and everyone is multitasking during it. So we've been helping them learn how to frame things, how to consider the target audience, how to remove the excess information that isn't needed for that audience, getting them to reflect on where they are encountering problems and where they are getting the most questions. We are helping them stand in the shoes of the learner, go through the learning journey, and then apply that learning to re-design their sessions to be more interactive, meaningful, and impactful."*

“Sometimes HR people are so in love with what they do, that ends up being their purpose and they ignore or mildly factor in the business priorities.”

SOFIAN LAMALI, GLOBAL HEAD OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND EXECUTIVE SUCCESSION PLANNING, SABIC

“L&D needs to be really well-connected within HR – not ploughing their own furrow. They should see HR Directors and HRBPs as their most important clients, not robot arms to sell their training into the business. They should be listening to them and picking up what’s going on.”

NICK HOLLEY, DIRECTOR, CRF LEARNING

MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Many of our interviewees named marketing and communication skills as a key future capability of the learning function. As BP’s Ameet Thakkar said, “You can have the best learning offers in the world but if no one knows about it, it’s pointless. We also live in a world where people are bombarded with internal and external messages, so our marketing has got to be engaging, positive and relevant. It needs to engage the organisation, in a relevant and consistent way that builds the brand of learning and helps people quickly access the main learning channels and offers, at the point when they read the communication.”

With respect to marketing, the challenge is to spark people’s curiosity and get them into discovery mode. It’s about the framing of learning, so that it doesn’t sound like a chore or a burden. As Nick Holley put it, “What you don’t want is someone learning and their little inner voice is going ‘why am I here? Who is this person? Oh god, it’s online. Well I’m busy, I can still do emails’. L&D has to do the work to create the desire to learn – otherwise the learning will make no difference. The question is how do we make the horse thirsty, not how do we make it drink.”

With respect to communication, there was wide agreement that L&D professionals need to get better at communicating how learning benefits the business, why people should share learning opportunities with each other, and what business impacts learning is having.

CASE STUDY:

USING MARKETING TO CREATE CONTEXT AND RELEVANCE FOR LEARNING AT SWISS RE

Satoshi Probala, Head of Learning & Development at Swiss Re, described how they successfully integrated marketing strategies into their L&D function: *“it’s never been easier to create, curate and share content, but it’s never been harder to get attention. We need to reach our audience with learning that is relevant for them in their moment of need and support the adoption of a growth mindset. To do so, we took inspiration from related fields such as digital marketing, change and community management. We looked at what we could learn and apply to our own context”*

Probala and his colleagues focused on context and timing, which they perceived as more powerful than personalised, out-of-context recommendations from a learning platform. *“We should be present whenever an employee has a learning intent and meet them where THEY are, rather than expecting that employees will come and visit our Learning Management System or Learning Experience Platform.”* Consequently, they applied inbound marketing strategies such as integrating their LXP content into their Intranet so people did not need to visit the LXP anymore to find learning – they can now conveniently search and filter the Intranet.

Another example is how the team reinforced people’s financial and business acumen: Right after the company published its business results, the team organised an informal learning session for employees to help them better understand the financial results and the key drivers behind them. Adding topicality made it much more tangible and relevant compared to other generic finance training courses and helped reach a much wider audience.

Last year, Swiss Re also launched a nudging campaign for newly appointed line managers. Probala explained that *“newly appointed leaders are busy, have lots of questions and need immediate support. The old way we would reach them was by pulling a list of new managers from our HR system every quarter and informing them about our offerings via email. This meant that some leaders had already been in the new role for almost three months by the time they received the email; and in the worst cases, it could take another three months until the training would actually start. Hence, some leaders could end up waiting up to six months before they could attend a training course in leadership.”*

Inspired by marketing automation, Probala and his colleagues designed an email campaign with a series of simple and actionable weekly nudges for newly appointed leaders. These emails are automatically triggered based on changes in the HR database, meaning a new line manager receives the nudges in the moment the promotion is entered into the HR system.

These examples show the positive impact embedding cross-functional skills such as Marketing into learning can have.

DATA LITERACY

As discussed in [Chapter 4](#), there is a sizeable gap between where most L&D functions are, and where they could be, with regard to using evidence to drive decision-making, design, and evaluation of learning. One contributing factor to this gap is the limitations of many learning professionals' data skills – yet data literacy is a key future-fit capability. As Oracle's Adele Pickerill said, *"for L&D functions, it will keep coming back to the need to be more data-driven and able to make evidence-based decisions, not driven by feelings."*

The L&D professional of tomorrow will need basic data literacy skills such as:

- an understanding of how data is used in decision making.
- the ability to make compelling business decision cases using data analytics.
- a good understanding of the learning technology landscape, how different technologies impact learning, and the confidence to make sound purchasing recommendations/decisions.
- a good level of internal networking that enables learning from other data-driven functions (such as marketing or finance).
- the ability to combine data from different sources to inform decision-making.

Combined with the design skills discussed above, this should allow for a more systematic approach to analysis of learning needs, design of learning interventions, and impact measurement.

Nigel Paine points out that learning professionals also need to change how they measure their own performance: *"The future requires new skills and new alignments of L&D. Functions won't need dozens of instructional designers; they'll need people who can do design thinking. They won't need to administer the LMS – that can be handed off to IT. And they will need to measure their own impact differently – 'what have we done to change the organisation?', not 'how many courses did we put on the LMS?'"*

PRODUCT MANAGEMENT SKILLS

As one interviewee vividly told us, *"Sometimes, learning functions have built up a warehouse of crap that no one is using."* Like a dusty garage, these warehouses need to be cleaned out. Learning professionals need to have a good standard of product management skills that will enable them to iterate products, and, importantly, to de-commission those things that are no longer supporting learning.

As Dstl's Pete Cooper put it, *"It's an important skill to know when to retire things. To recognise when we can stop doing something because the evidence for its effectiveness is dodgy or because it's being done out of tradition rather than because there is evidence to support it."*

FUTURE-FIT L&D: WHAT'S THE OPERATING MODEL?

It's not just learning professionals who need to evolve for the future; according to research from McKinsey, the organisation of the function itself requires a rethink.

The problem with many L&D functions in large organisations is that they are overly stable – too rigid for today's fast-paced business environment. Typically, staff are dispersed across different departments (instructional design, platform support, programme delivery, etc.) and have their own performance indicators, which may not be linked to overall business goals. For example, instructional designers may be evaluated by the quantity and speed of content they produce, not its quality or impact; while learning facilitators may be evaluated by the number of people in the classroom (efficiency). Technology can be a barrier too – McKinsey finds that people in L&D can be 'reluctant to change systems that worked well in the past but that do not support next-generation learning'. Cumbersome platforms, long project life cycles, clunky processes, and a strategy and budget that are set annually slow the function down and inhibit its ability to respond quickly to changing business needs. L&D professionals consequently remain disconnected from each other, and from broader organisational goals.

The solution? McKinsey suggests that the function must undergo a transformation, adopting an agile operating model that strikes a balance between stability and dynamism. Stability (the backbone that ensures efficiency and consistency) and dynamism (the flexibility to rapidly respond to the organisation's changing learning needs) should be built into every element of the function – its strategy, structure, people, processes, and technology. Only with such an operating model can L&D obtain an intimate understanding of organisational needs and the ability to predict and respond quickly to them.

McKinsey summarises what agile L&D might look like opposite. The idea is to keep the best of what stability has to offer – such as direction and consistency – while taking every opportunity to build movement into the function. For example, there is still a learning strategy, integrated with business strategy, with a roadmap and a budget. But a more dynamic governance structure – perhaps a steering committee that meets quarterly – regularly reviews, updates, and adapts the strategy, roadmap, and budget in light of new business developments. With respect to technology, there are integrated, high-quality systems, but external partnerships are leveraged to ensure that reliance on those systems doesn't impede access to cutting-edge learning technologies. For example, a partnership with an external provider might bring a virtual-reality based learning intervention to a targeted subset of learners (instead of making an expensive investment in VR hardware and software for the whole organisation that might subsequently collect dust).

For a closer look at McKinsey's research, including advice on how to get started with an agile L&D transformation, see their article, [A Transformation of the Learning Function: Why It Should Learn New Ways](#).

| | DYNAMISM | STABILITY |
|----------------|---|--|
| STRATEGY | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continually assess the capability needs of the organisation; align learning priorities accordingly Regularly shift budgets and people to address priority needs, based on value Measure and review key performance indicators daily and weekly; take action where needed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Articulate a clear vision and mandate for the learning function Develop an integrated learning strategy that includes a budget and digital-learning road map Ensure standardised and transparent metrics – some should be jointly owned with the businesses and focused on value creation |
| STRUCTURE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish an internally shared pool of resources that can 'flow to work' Cultivate internal and external learning networks and partners in key areas (e.g. design, content, delivery and technology) Facilitate mobility within the learning organisation to encourage continuous development and knowledge sharing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish multilevel governance on business imperatives, not business units Ensure a simple organisational structure that has clearly delineated accountabilities (e.g. by function, business unit, or content area/learning journey) Formulate clear and transparent roles and responsibilities |
| PEOPLE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan resources and reserve capacity for irregular demand cycles Cultivate a culture of continuous improvement Integrate agile coaches to support new ways of working | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop internal capabilities in value-adding specialisations (e.g. strong functional design expertise) Ensure knowledge sharing; reduce unwanted attrition by recognising employees' contributions Build trust, accountability, and professionalism in the learning function |
| PROCESSES | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish cross-functional project teams that have end-to-end ownership and decision-making authority Work in iterative sprints with rapid learning and improvement cycles, focussing on modularised content Regularly review the efficiency and effectiveness of processes, adapt when required | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Automate data-gathering and administrative tasks Standardise handovers across teams and departments Adopt consistent templates for learning design and curriculum |
| TECH / SYSTEMS | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build Learning Record Store capabilities to support algorithmic and artificial-intelligence-based recommendations and decisions Leverage partnerships with learning providers to ensure cutting-edge delivery capabilities (immersive, adaptive and multimodal) Adopt an innovation/R&D agenda that promotes continuous product improvement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a dashboard that gives a clear overview of resource allocation and project intake Enforce a standardised content-management system to avoid duplication and overlap Integrate learning-and-development systems with others in the organisation; avoid manual work-arounds |

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THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

CONCLUSIONS

6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter sets out the key conclusions of our research and highlights recommendations for evolving learning at your organisation.

- ▶ Digital transformation, innovation, the business transformation to sustainability, multigenerational working, adaptability to change, leading in a hybrid workplace – huge demands are being placed on organisations and their workforces. High performance requires that companies attract and retain skilled employees and exceptional leaders capable of building and evolving complex knowledge to meet these demands – at the same time that the lifespan of knowledge has shortened. Learning is a key strategic lever that organisations can pull to meet these demands.
- ▶ Yet corporate learning traditionally only caters to a small portion of learning – the formal mode in the shape of training courses. The pandemic has accelerated the opportunity to rethink how people learn, and to expand the scope of corporate learning. We are already seeing organisations rethink learning post-pandemic, with a focus on experimentation, broadening and improving learning modalities, improving the link between learning and business strategy, and building learning cultures.
- ▶ The reshaping of corporate learning faces formidable challenges. In a business context marked by economic and geopolitical uncertainty, budgets and headcount are declining, time for learning is scarce, and people are burned out.

▶ The future of learning is strategic. Too often, learning is delivering the wrong things at the wrong time in the wrong way, and for the wrong reasons. Learning leaders can address this by better aligning learning strategy to business strategy, identifying and enabling the capabilities the business needs to succeed tomorrow and beyond. A strategic learning function also uses the learning process to generate new ideas, ensuring that both the productive learning required to optimise today and the generative learning required to build for tomorrow are taking place.

▶ The future of learning is collaborative – with pairs or groups solving problems, completing tasks or learning new concepts with and from each other, thus capitalising on everyone’s skills, knowledge, and resources. The future of learning is also continuous – with individuals, teams, and organisations ‘always on’, banking, applying, and refining what they have learned. A learning orientation, technology, and line managers are key mechanisms that should be leveraged to support the new imperative of connected, constant learning.

▶ The future of learning is evidence-based, but there is a sizeable gap between where many organisations are and where it would benefit them to be. Gut feelings are still driving the assessment of learning needs at many organisations, and evaluation of learning, when it happens at all, is usually focused on the immediate evaluation of learner satisfaction. Lack of time, skills, and resources are some of the barriers to taking a more evidence-based approach to learning.

▶ The pressing business need for learning at speed and scale should mean an elevated L&D function, integrated with business strategy and core talent processes. But many learning professionals and their functions aren’t currently equipped to play this role. There is still too much focus on learning programmes and how to deliver them, admin and facilitation, and controlling rather than enabling learning. Learning professionals and functions need to broaden and deepen their skills and capabilities, especially around performance consulting, design, marketing and communication, data literacy, and product management.

RECOMMENDATIONS

▶ **Connect learning to business strategy.** Does your organisation have a settled and specific business strategy? Are you clear about the role and purpose of the Learning function in delivering it? Is the function prepared to rapidly shift learning strategy and initiatives as the business strategy evolves? Work in close partnership with business leaders to ensure these linkages. One mechanism for enhancing partnership is governance. A governance structure, such as a learning board or council, in which L&D and business leaders meet frequently to define, review, design, and fund learning strategy is essential to keeping learning and business strategies aligned.

▶ **Build strategic relationships throughout the organisation.** For example, L&D professionals will need to work much more closely in partnership with talent acquisition in future, so there’s better linkage between what’s being learned and opportunities to put learning into practice on the job. Strategic relationships with Analytics and Marketing colleagues can help L&D professionals begin to build the improved data and communications skills that they will need to be future-fit.

▶ **Build a learning orientation at all levels – individual, team, and organisational.** Helping individuals and teams develop learning habits is a key mechanism for building this orientation. Learning habits centred on being curious and making time for reflection are key.

▶ **Deploy social technologies to foster collaborative learning.** Technology is influencing the format and channels for learning in unprecedented ways. Let go of the impulse to monitor and control, and instead unleash social technologies such as Slack, Teams, and Miro, to connect and enable people to create and share knowledge. Go with the energy around how people collaborate and get work done, and integrate learning there, rather than creating a separate dedicated ‘space’ for learning that people won’t use.



Equip line managers to support their teams' learning. Managers have a key role to play in setting the tone for learning, facilitating access to learning, and helping their teams and individual reports embed and evolve learning. Are you selecting and developing line managers with the necessary skills? Do you teach line managers how adults learn – and the actions they can take to create a good environment for learning within their teams? Do you reward and promote managers who are skilled in helping their people grow and develop? Review your communications strategy to ensure it's sufficiently focused on giving managers information about what learning is available and how they can support their team's learning.



Be deliberate when you design learning. Start with the learning objectives, and then consider the best blend of learning modalities. How can you deliver the right content in the right way, at the right time (and in an efficient and cost-effective way)? Don't start with the modality, and avoid creating a two-tier learning track, where high potential individuals receive more thoughtful and higher-quality learning than others.



Evaluate. Do you have a process for evaluating learning? Are you clear about what information key stakeholders need and how you will gather the data? Remember that evaluation starts before learning is designed or delivered – at the stage of assessing learning needs. Do you have a defined process for assessing learning needs? Does it feed into your process for evaluation?



Invest in the capabilities of the Learning function. Does the Learning function have the capabilities you will need to deliver your learning strategy – today and tomorrow? Do you have sufficient strategic thinking capability? What about design, consulting, communication, and product management skills? Does your Learning team collaborate sufficiently with other key teams, such as Communications, Analytics, and OD, and are there strong mechanisms to facilitate this collaboration?



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