

# Changes in learning behaviour

What do learners expect from their organisations and what do they want from their learner journey?



**Cathy Hoy**  
Chief Learning Officer,  
Learning Performance Institute

Marketing Manager at Virtual College, Rachel Green, met with Cathy Hoy, Chief Learning Officer at the Learning and Performance Institute (LPI) to talk about the changes that L&D professionals and organisations are seeing from their learners.

With a passion for learning and development, and a wealth of experience in her field, Cathy was perfectly poised to talk through the ways in which organisations can respond to these changes, allowing them to continue to provide compelling learner journeys and experiences. This interview is summarised over the next few pages.

How have you seen learner expectations evolve and change and what do you think are the reasons behind this?

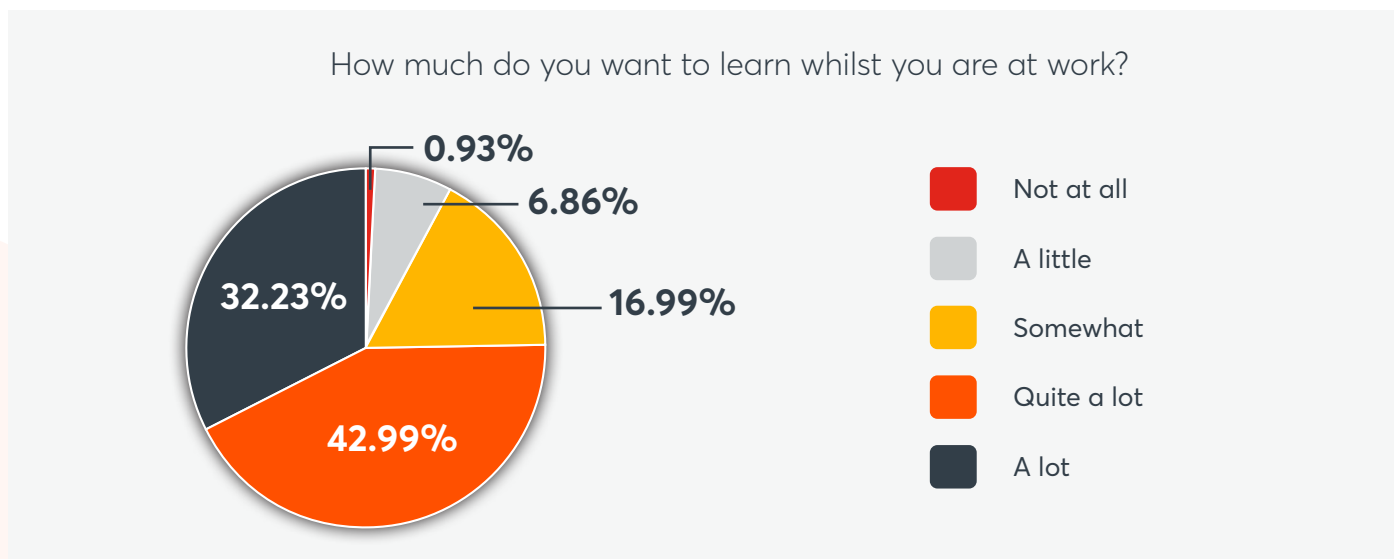
Learner expectations have been changing for a while. A big part of this is that people have an expectation now to learn at work; they want to learn. As consumers we are getting smarter and want things faster, slicker, and more immediately. However, the global pandemic has been a catalyst for many of the changes that we have seen in learners' behaviours.

**“People have an expectation now to learn at work,  
they want to learn.”**

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Cathy quite quickly pointed out that the younger generation are learning all the time outside of work and there has been a noticeable gap between their ability to consume learning outside of work compared to inside, as organisations have not been able to keep up. Companies do not always have the same technology or infrastructure and they have not invested the time in this supporting technology. In fact, unfortunately, some organisations are still treating learning as nice to have or a treat, when it is not. Learning is a necessity.

Virtual College conducted a survey with over 2,000 of their learners to better understand their requirements from learning and the findings supported this trend, with **43%** saying they wanted to learn 'quite a lot' and **32%** wanting to learn 'a lot' in their working environment.



Learning that's personalised is a definite recent shift in expectations, Cathy explained, pointing out how learners now want the ability to access what they need, when they need it, making way for a huge opportunity around self-service learning. People don't want to be 'sheep dipped' through a learning programme but want a tailored and personalised experience that works for them.

Aligned to this is the accessibility of this information. Organisations need to think about mobile-first, bite-size chunks of information. People's lives are busy and, actually, what works for some is the ability to learn when doing something else: listening to a podcast when travelling to work or cooking an evening meal, for example. The fact is that nobody wants to wait for information anymore. Information is so readily available these days that we expect this in every aspect of our lives.

### **"Learners have to be in the right state for learning."**

Further expanding on these changes in expectations, she went on to explain how learners don't want to feel that their learning journey is separate from their everyday world of work; it has to be done in the 'flow of work' and they have to be in the right state for learning. This can be a challenge in some industries, especially those like retail and hospitality, where they are customer facing. It can cause issues with how you train staff when they have customers to deal with. Companies don't want to look like they are still training their staff while they are doing their 'everyday job', but companies can be innovative, and new technologies can really help here.

Finally, the biggest shift has been from the younger generations, including graduates and apprentices. They want their learning to be connected to something bigger, with sight of what other opportunities this can bring. Understandably, they don't just want to feel they are learning so that the only outcome is making more money for the company that they work for, but that this learning will enable personal growth and development. They want a career plan and to have clear sight of where it is going – not just be working through ad hoc pieces of learning.

**Summarising all this, Cathy stated that learning needs to be three things:**



#### **Compelling**

To draw people in, with the need to get them wanting to learn.



#### **Constructive**

Fulfilling a purpose for company and learner, which is crucially important. Learning is no longer just a tick box exercise.



#### **Convenient**

Touch of a button feel that fits into their flow of work.

## What new behaviours have learners adopted and how has this had an impact on their expectations around their learner journey?

Learners are becoming a lot more capable of self-service learning. They are aware that outside of work they need to take accountability for their learning and understanding. For example, when using tutorials on YouTube to learn how to use your new camera, there is no need to wait for someone to explain how to use it, the information and learning can be accessed immediately. This is now being reflected in the workplace. Cathy summed this up by simply stating, "Learners are taking control of their learning." They are realising that this is something they can now dictate and manage, both inside and outside of the workplace.

### **"Learners are taking control of their learning."**

This however, can pose a risk, as accessibility of information is replacing knowledge retention power, so even though we are starting to use various resources to find things out, it doesn't necessarily mean that we now understand these things. This is a skill that needs to be taught – how learners can become self-reliant, so they can go and get the information needed, enabling them to be resilient and self-managed. However, L&D functions need to step in where there is the requirement for more knowledge and add that human element to allow for deeper understanding and context.

Aside of this, learners are looking for regular feedback and coaching opportunities, and this also needs to be considered when creating their learning journeys. Who is responsible for feeding back to these learners, and giving them the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them? It may seem obvious but, as Cathy was keen to explain, this is necessary at all levels of learning, from junior roles through to leaders and managers – we all need feedback to enable us to develop and improve.

### **"We need to focus on upskilling and reskilling."**

Furthermore, there are new roles within organisations that don't even exist yet, so how do companies prepare for these? They need to start planning for this new set of required skills by focusing on upskilling and reskilling. Presenting learners with opportunities that will help them in the future and give them a sense that they are being invested in increases their confidence and, ultimately, their commitment to that organisation.

Confirming the survey results with her next comments, she explained how learners also no longer see learning as a compliance exercise. Previously, learners felt they had to learn to do better in their role or learn so they can work towards getting a promotion – all still incredibly important, but now an element of it is about looking at the bigger picture and understanding that learning is good for their own self-development.

What motivates you to learn at work?



Respondents could select more than one answer to this question

## How have changes in learner expectations affected the ways in which organisations need to support their learners?

### **"Organisations are having to adapt faster to new learner expectations."**

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Organisations are having to adapt faster to new learner expectations, and COVID-19 has been a great catalyst for this acceleration, especially in terms of digital and technological advances. It has even helped the business case for L&D to have the investment in digital that they require, which has been needed for such a long period of time.

Organisations have looked to L&D departments in the last year and asked for help. So really, they have had no choice but to react. Cathy went on to explain that a number of organisations have had to take a short-term approach, and now heads of L&D are taking a step back and reviewing. It may be that this approach isn't suitable and sustainable moving forward. What is needed is an approach that fully incorporates digital into the learning strategy rather than treating it as a standalone element.

### **"Organisations are realising the importance of supporting a learner's want to develop."**

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One pivotal change, which Cathy has been wanting to see for a long time now, is that organisations are now valuing people development so much more. They are realising the importance of supporting a learner's want to develop. Traditionally (and understandably), learning has been implemented to support business growth and profits for the company. However, a huge part of achieving this is the growth and development of the people in these businesses, which is now being recognised so much more. A company is only ever as good as its people.

This creates an opportunity for L&D professionals to explore learners' willingness to invest in themselves. Businesses need to think of learners as consumers and recognise that, if they don't get the information that they want and need to consume then, ultimately, they will go elsewhere. This is a definite new consideration when looking at L&D solutions and strategies.

Putting the learner at the centre of learning really requires a significant shift in a company's approach to learning. Explaining how an L&D perspective requires a completely different attitude when looking at learning design, she stated that, instead of considering the company to be at the centre of this, it should now be the learner who is central to these plans.

This does mean that there needs to be changes in processes and a requirement to invest in systems to meet these new demands from learners but, ultimately, both the organisation and learner will benefit from this new level of support.

## What impact has new technology had on the learner journey?

Now is a really exciting time for technology and learning because COVID-19 has allowed L&D teams to experiment and fast track advancements. L&D teams have been waiting for the technology revolution. Digital opportunities have been talked about for years but have not progressed quickly enough to allow for new ways in which companies can deliver learning experiences.

### **"L&D teams have been waiting for the technology revolution."**

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Virtual classrooms, for example, have been incredibly popular and utilised so much more in the last twelve months, and people are now reaping the benefits of this technology. Cathy pointed out how the LPI have been leading the way with virtual classroom training for several years now and have experienced an increase in demand over the last 12 months. Moving forward, organisations will be open to trying new things, such as VR, particularly for learners that can't be together, as it allows them to experience something in a virtual space with others.

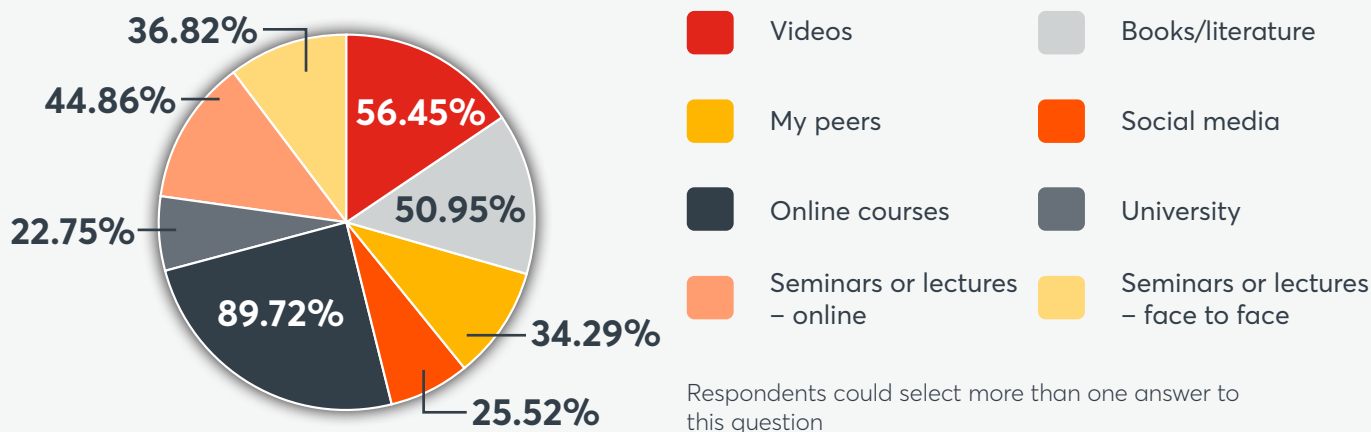
There is a feeling that we have been waiting for VR to show something practical in the corporate world, i.e. the ability to run manager training, or for a member of the team to practise coaching skills, and this is now possible. New technologies allow for learners to stop, practise and make mistakes in a safe environment before moving on.

### **“New technologies allow for learners to stop, practice and learn from mistakes.”**

Having these new technologies means that there is little or no negative impact in the real world. Customer-facing staff, for example, can really benefit from this, as they no longer have to go through awkward role play situations when practising their customer service skills. This new style of learning can be done in a safe environment, giving people a level of confidence in their learning experience.

This is also just the start of it; there will be some big shifts in the next couple of years, with even further digital advances in learning. However, there is a call to consider blended learning approaches, as the survey still shows that people do like to consume learning face to face, or in a classroom, as well as embracing new technologies and utilising digital.

When looking to develop a new skill, in or out of work, how would you choose to learn?



Concluding the interview, Cathy commented on how the landscape of L&D is certainly changing, with the evolving expectations of learners and with companies investing further in their learners and the journey they want to offer them. It certainly is a 'watch this space' moment in L&D!