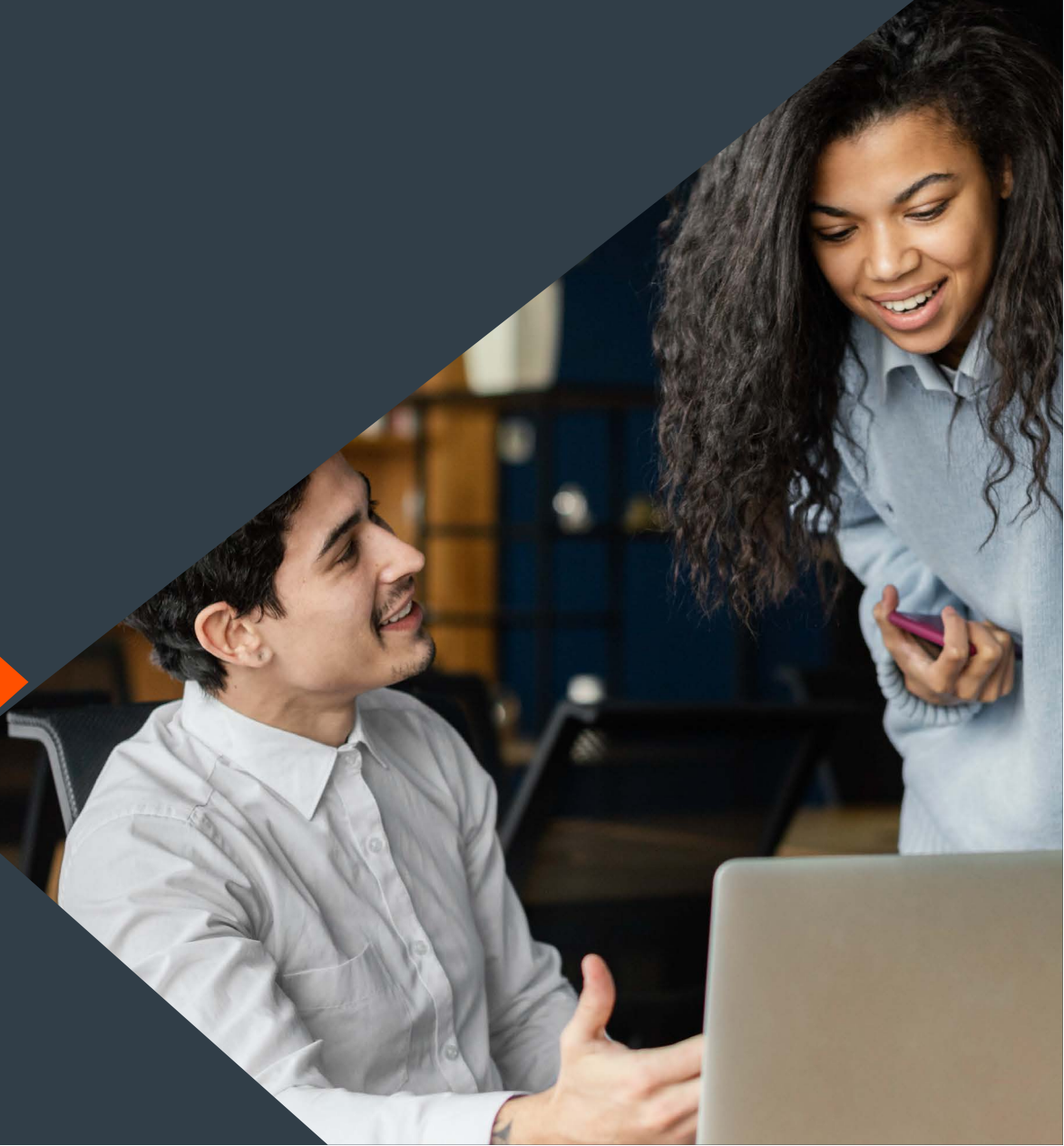


# The Future of Learning & Development



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# Foreword

The world has witnessed a lot of change in these last 18 months. In fact, it is almost two years since the pandemic struck and, in that time, we have seen many changes in both our personal and professional lives. This final report in the **Evolution of L&D** series looks at how technology has become an enabler for some of these changes and how new technologies have given the Learning & Development (L&D) professional the opportunity to push boundaries around learning & development.

One of the biggest challenges experienced by many was the shift to remote working and, more latterly, the hybrid style that has been adopted by many. This has forced a new, more learner-centric approach to learning as opposed to the more classic, trainer-centric style, which most organisations would have had in place previously. However, now we have entered a new normal, L&D teams need to work out how to strike a balance between the two to create the most compelling L&D programme that they can for their learners. Part of this report delves into how L&D teams can do this in an insightful article written by **L&D Consultant, Jez Anderson**.

**Nicole Horsman, Director of Sales & Partnerships** here at Virtual College, also conducted an interesting interview with **Nick Bate, Co-Founder & Director of Blue Eskimo**, a leading specialist recruitment company who focus on servicing the UK learning sector. They looked to discuss how L&D teams have to operate both now and in the future in relation to understanding organisational change and skills demands, with some interesting outcomes...



**"Organisational change is a big part of L&D, along with leadership & management, behaviour change and digital transformation – making it a huge role"**

**"Many job roles and functions of today won't even exist in 10 years' time so the pressure and demand on L&D teams to reskill and upskill is probably higher than it has ever been."**

This report also looks into the following:

- A new perspective on learning: how to create training to suit the learner and what investment is needed from the organisation to instil this learning.
- How to use communication tools to maximise learning & development.
- Blended learning: what is it?
- Are the ways in which L&D deliver training in the modern workplace fit for purpose?

Based on the last few years, who knows what changes are around the corner for L&D, and what challenges these will bring? But what is clear is that through it all there have been some fantastic opportunities to improve the L&D function and the experience offered to learners. Place, time and technology have all played their part and will continue to do so, but making sure your learners have a voice and, more importantly, are listened to, will help ensure that you continue to create compelling learning experiences for them to engage with.

# A new perspective on learning

## How do you create training to suit the learner and what investment is needed from organisations to instil this learning?

We've learnt a lot in the last year. Our L&D survey has shone a light on the many ways learning at work has rapidly developed and evolved lately, from both a learner and a training provider's perspective. When asked if digital learning had been introduced into their companies in the last 12 months, **59%** of our learners said yes, **27%** said no and **14%** said they didn't know. This suggests that a large majority of companies have undergone a change in their training programmes, introducing digital learning, potentially in replacement of or in support of more traditional face-to-face methods.

### What learners really want

Our first report '**Creating training to suit the learner**' helped us to recognise that there has been a real change in learners' behaviour and expectations. In particular, in relation to the greater need for learner autonomy. Learners now want:

- The **freedom** to learn at a time and place that suits them.
- **Flexibility** to learn in the 'flow of work'.
- More **control** over their learner journey.
- Learning to be **constructive** and have a **purpose** for both them and the company.

When asked "What elements or aspects of digital learning do you enjoy?" we discovered that learners want...

85%

To access it at any time

85%

To complete it at their own pace

57%

Downloadable resources

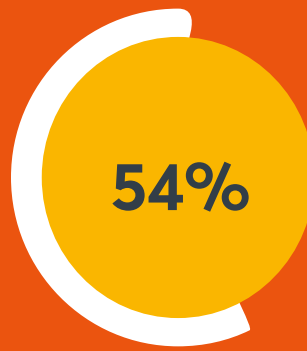
55%

Interactive elements

49%

Practice questions

We also asked "What puts you, as the learner, off completing training at work?", which highlighted the barriers sometimes experienced...



Having no time to learn



The length of the learning



It's not interesting



It's not relevant



It lacks purpose

## 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.

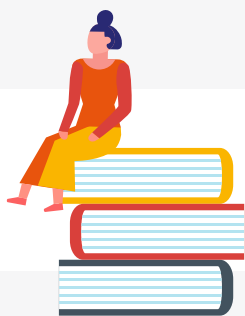
### Convenient

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

**Cathy Hoy**  
Chief Learning Officer, LPI

## Listening to your learners

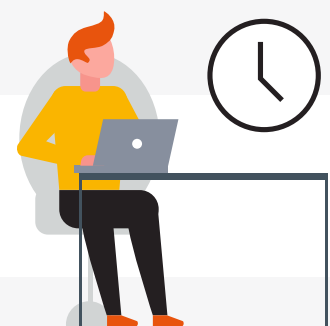
The best and most proactive way to ensure that learners are essentially 'getting what they want' is to include them in the training programme process. This will help you better understand:



What they want to learn



How they want to learn



When they want to learn

L&D teams can often think all they need to do is provide the plan and programmes to help people develop, but unless it is structured to actually solve a problem being experienced by the people they need to influence then people won't care.

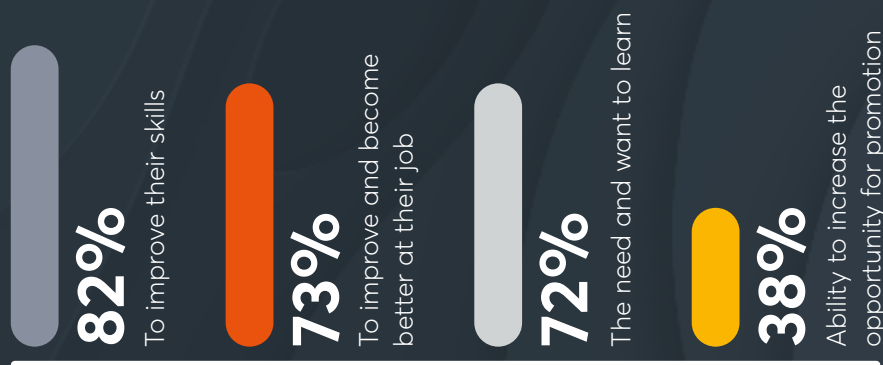
**David James**  
Chief Learning Officer, Loop

## Understanding the benefits of learning

As explored in our second report, 'The importance of investing in your learners', learning at work is no longer seen as a tick-box exercise. Its shift into being recognised as a useful resource to benefit the employer and employee means it should have an important role in your organisation.

Treating learning at work as an investment, and putting the time, effort and commitment into developing the right training programme means businesses can gain the rewards afterwards.

Through our survey, our learners shared their main motivations for learning at work, and there were many that benefit both the employer and employee. These included:



Learners want their learning to feel relevant to their work and their problems, be engaging enough to encourage them to keep learning, feel like less of a chore and more of a choice, and to be fulfilling and worthwhile. Incorporating learners' ideas into training programmes and creating training that really does suit the learner can then lead to better performance, greater improvement, and higher employee engagement.

## Developing your learning culture

Another part of getting the best out of your learning programme is to develop a learning culture. This means creating a safe and comfortable atmosphere where learning is encouraged, and learners can, and want to, be involved, which is a great way of promoting learning in the flow of work.

In our survey we also asked, "how does your employer support your learning development?", discovering that:



The responses suggest that the encouragement of staff training in organisations is there, but a large proportion of learners are still just being allocated training with little support. There is still a need for improvement when it comes to supporting and encouraging staff to learn at work, as employers should no longer be viewed as just people who allocate the training, but as those who inspire and nurture their staff throughout their learning & development.

## Looking forward

Now that we've established that we need to nurture our learners – and incorporate a learning culture – we need to look to the future, and think about what we might need to consider to ensure that learning at work continues to be an asset and not just a compliance exercise.

# The changing face of Learning & Development

The global pandemic had a huge impact on many industries, but how was this impact felt in L&D? And how should these teams operate, both now and in the future, in relation to understanding organisational change and skills demands?

Nicole Horsman, Director of Sales and Partnerships at Virtual College, met with Nick Bate, Co-Founder and Director of Blue Eskimo, a leading specialist recruitment company which focuses on servicing the UK learning sector. They met to chat about the role that L&D plays in organisations, how it has developed in the last 18 months, and how L&D teams need to lead on identifying skills gaps of the future.



**Nicole Horsman**  
Director of Sales & Partnerships at Virtual College



**Nick Bate**  
Co-Founder & Director of Blue Eskimo



Here we sum up the key parts of their discussion, but to watch snippets and discover further insights, click on this icon wherever it appears.



## What's changed in the last 18 months?

The best place to start this discussion was obviously to chat through **what changes have been seen in the industry as a whole in this last 18 months**, and early on Nick quite rightly pointed out, "It's not just the extent of organisational change, it's the speed as well."

There has been the necessity to innovate, to look at systems and programmes and reinvent how they work. Through this, L&D teams have stepped up and played an even bigger part in digital transformation and organisational change. Companies have had to review their strategies and initiatives and make them relevant for the time and place, and quickly!

Unfortunately, a lot of sectors have experienced inequality in terms of pandemic effects, with some industries feeling it more than others. However, regardless of sector, obviously the dramatic shift to remote working was felt across the board and this is where L&D teams had to respond.

All industries have been forced to change, and for the L&D industry this change has actually brought around a number of benefits. In fact, it gave L&D teams the opportunity to create really good, engaging L&D programmes to make sure that the changes were embedded properly into the organisations.



## Organisational change and the role of L&D

Following this, Nicole and Nick debated **"Is the role L&D is playing in organisational change more important now than ever?"** They looked at how organisations change and develop continuously, and how many are responding to this by implementing 'Organisational Development' (OD) teams to foster and champion these changes. Where that facility isn't available, the L&D function have increasingly stepped up and taken on this role too.

As well as this, with the change in working patterns and shift towards a more hybrid approach to work, Nick stated that "L&D teams needed to look at the barriers people are facing when trying to work and learn remotely." This significant change, adopting a more hybrid style approach, has made some businesses realise the importance of L&D teams being involved in business transformation programmes to help facilitate these changes across all teams and departments.

Linked to this, Nick broached the subject of needing to attract and retain staff, and how the younger generation in particular value the opportunity for professional development. It is no longer enough for organisations to provide one-off training; employees need to see the learning journey they are about to take and understand how this will benefit them both professionally and personally. They want to feel valued within their organisation and feel that they can contribute to real change and improvement.



## The increasing pressure on L&D to reskill and upskill

Nicole posed the next question, **“How adept are L&D teams in recognising the skills demands within their business?”**

Being quite frank on the topic, Nick stated that many job roles and functions of today won't even exist in ten years' time, so the pressure and demand on L&D teams to re-skill and up-skill is probably higher than it has ever been. Having this ability to plan for the future will enable these organisations to remain competitive.

In fact, the emergence of the **'business partner'** role is helping some organisations ensure they stay ahead of the game. A crucial change is that the L&D business partner has the ability to align themselves with different functions in a business to better understand their challenges. This closer working practice allows L&D teams to really structure the learning they implement to answer the problems these individuals are discovering and fill these skills gaps.



## Can L&D teams influence leadership teams?

Discussing the ability to recognise skills gaps also moved the conversation on to **“Whether L&D functions are able to influence leadership teams”**. The answer to this question came in two parts, the **value of the people** and the **value of the training**.

Nick commented that “There is an increasing opportunity for L&D teams to influence leaders, as fairly recently these leaders have recognised that the development of their people has a direct impact on their bottom line.” Therefore, investing in people ultimately results in an investment in the business. Recognising this shift has opened up the opportunity for many L&D professionals to evidence the need and requirement for a robust training programme to encourage this development further.

Similarly, for L&D functions to continue working closely with these senior leaders, they need to be able to demonstrate the value that this training programme brings. Collating evidence and stats and linking these to business change is a great way to demonstrate this added value.



As well as influencing leadership teams, there is growing importance in the need for them to engage with other key stakeholders across the business to avoid being kept out of the loop. In fact, remote working has enabled this, as it has taken away the physical barriers once encountered as leaders, like everyone, had to learn how to use and master systems and solutions to enable remote working.



## The roles and skills that have been required

Drawing on Nick's experience, Nicole was keen to ask **"From Blue Eskimo's perspective, what roles/skills have been needed in the last 18 months?"**

The impact of COVID has varied according to industry, and unfortunately the L&D sector was hard hit across various roles throughout 2020. What was unclear at first was how the industry would react in 2021. Having been 'paused', it now seems that 2021 was the start of a new beginning.

As we all know, the lockdown meant businesses needed to look to digital to keep going and, with this, there grew a demand for skills in this area. Number one was digital learning design skills, and not just content developers but instructional designers too: roles that needed to look at incorporating blended learning and the journey and experience this could offer learners. Obviously, the increase in digital skills also requires people who have platform skills and can play a role in digital transformation programmes, something a lot of businesses have been going through. Aligned to this are client success managers who play an important role in understanding these transformation programmes and how to make them successful.



## The changing landscape of L&D

Bringing the chat to a close, Nicole's last point was **"Organisational change is a big part of L&D, along with leadership & management, behaviour change and digital transformation – making it a huge role,"** with which Nick completely agreed.

The landscape of L&D has changed and will continue to change. Things have been discovered since the pandemic, such as skills gaps and the need for businesses to undertake a competency framework to keep on top of where there are potential shortfalls. If L&D haven't got the skills to identify all this, then the business will suffer.

If you want to listen to the whole conversation, you can do [here](#).





# Technology and the rise of the enterprise system

Written by Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant

Since the industrial revolution, learning in the workplace has been a highly structured and managed process. Organised, formal learning has taken precedence over more situational and informal styles. Whilst some shifts have occurred in training pedagogy, (see Malcom Knowles – Andragogy vs Pedagogy) many of the practices and processes around workplace learning & development echo our strong and established educational delivery methods.

Our systems for managing learning have been built with this underpinning philosophy. A philosophy which situates the power and the choice for learning not with the learner but the employer. Our learning systems have traditionally reflected what the great South American philosopher and educationalist, Paulo Friere, would describe as the 'banking model.'



**"The teacher is a lecturer, and the students are containers that need to be filled by the teacher. The more he puts into the container, the better a teacher he is. And the meeker the containers let themselves be filled, the better the students."**

However, as the technological revolution continues to gather pace, the changes it's driving have been felt across every aspect our lives, and how we all access information and acquire knowledge is no exception.

With the shift in how technology serves our needs, our expectations of how we learn shifts too. The democratisation of learning (both personal and professional) is under way. All anyone needs to access a world-size repository of information and knowledge is a click of a button to the internet. Gone is the middle-man – the teacher, trainer, instructor...learning has become a consumer-driven industry.

Towards Maturity (now Emerald Works), in their pre-pandemic report **Back to the Future – Feb 2020**, heralded consumerisation of learning as the key influence in how organisations will be shifting their strategic approach to how they support learning & development, recognising the shift in ownership of learning and democratisation of learning in the workplace.

Josh Bersin has been describing this democratisation too. His coining of the expression 'learning in the flow' in a 2018 blog post **A New Paradigm For Corporate Training: Learning In The Flow of Work – June 2018** has attracted the interest of learning & development professionals and technologists alike. Bersin's vision has been brought to life with the emergence of new tools such as Microsoft's Viva, a tool which will place curated, open source and learner directed content right on your computer's desktop. Along with other new 'learning enterprise and experience systems', the potential to shake-up to the more traditional structures and process of workplace training is very real.



So, what if this new development is not just another learning technology 'fad' but is the start of how new workplace learning will be organised, managed and delivered?

Of course, the use of learning technologies is not new, the majority of mid to large size employers use some form of learning technology to support their learning & development strategies already. However, things have quickly changed. After all, its only 15 or so years ago since digital learning was written and stored on CD-ROM and the Learning Management System (LMS) was in its infancy.

Whilst learning delivery systems have been developing rapidly, things like VR and AI are becoming more commonplace. For many years, L&D's overall adoption and use of learning technologies has been mixed at best. However, as we all now know, the global COVID-19 pandemic has changed that. As the expression goes, 'necessity is the mother of invention', and the necessity to rapidly shift from traditional learning delivery methods to those that are digitally enabled created a need to rapidly digitise workplace learning.

For some, this change has been a challenge, not only having to get to grips with using technology personally but also adopting new methods and approaches for delivering training and learning remotely. Organisations with existing technological capacity may have fared better than those with more limited access and expertise. But what is true for all is that, as a result, the headlong dive into digital has forever changed how workplace learning is supported.

### **"What does this new landscape look like, and what does it mean for the Learning & Development profession?"**

The traditional focus of training has always been about courses, and the need to deliver content in a way that meets the learning objectives of the organisation. Not too dissimilar to the arguments eloquently offered by Sir Ken Robinson in his classic RSA lecture **Changing Education Paradigms**, looking at our education systems.

If workplace learning has, for decades, been structured to provide a 'standardised' learning system that was geared towards fulfilling the needs of homogenous job competencies then what will the effect of today's preference for individualisation, consumerisation and democratisation be?

Of course, a balance between a completely learner-centric and classic trainer-centric approach is required. Organisations and their learners will still require formalised, structured learning pathways and training that is designed to meet specific role and performance needs. But what is also required is that learning is seen as something far more accessible than a course – even a short one. As a result, learning & development professionals should start to think differently about their roles, a point recognised and illustrated by Josh Bersin in his article **The Disruption of Digital Learning – ten things we have learned.**



By managing the training process (from analysis through to evaluation) the main power and control lies with L&D and, as a result, they control the tap of content by defining what is delivered, when, how, and where. Whilst many still take the recognised and traditional approach to how workplace learning is managed, this is not necessarily compatible or congruent with a learning strategy that is digitally enabled and reflects the shifting democratisation of knowledge-based content.

There is increasingly an argument to say that L&D teams need to be not only more digitally savvy, but recognise the fundamental cultural shift in workplace learning that is taking place. As 'learning in the flow' takes hold, and not just as a concept, but in technological reality, the ability to think differently about how learning is supported is required.

Whilst most people recognise that change is required and the shift towards digitisation is well and truly underway, learning technology is just one part of the equation of the digital learning transformation process. If Learning & Development teams are to succeed in the future, they must not only get comfortable with using digital in the best way, but understand how their learners' expectations and behaviours are changing as a result of their relationships with technology.

Of course, there are no silver bullets and, probably, more questions than answers. So maybe a good starting point is to reflect on some of the following discussion points to help define some of the areas that you may need to think about as you navigate your way through your digital journey.

### L&D is the learning enabler

L&D should be seeking to use modern technology delivery platforms to enable learners to access the knowledge content they need, when and where they need it. By letting go of some of the control around what learners learn, and where and how they learn it, L&D should seek to enable learners to seek out and use what they need to know, when they need to know it. Explore how your learning platform can deliver a more learner-centric, in the flow learning experience.



### Resources not courses

There is nothing new in that expression but, more than ever, technology can support its realisations. Courses, and curricula of courses, provide necessary structure to meet specific needs. But consider how you can maybe break down your existing courses and learning content into bite-size, re-usable chunks that you can use in multiple settings and your learner can better access 'in the flow'.



### Define what it means to 'go digital'

So much more than delivering the same content over Zoom or Teams. It's okay to be on the journey, and look to those who have already paved the way. Going digital doesn't have to mean massive budgets, just clever use of the technologies you may already have.



### Curation is a new skill requirement

Think about how a museum curates a new display, it's not just a matter of lumping all exhibits together that start with the same letter. Curating digital content will require an ability to understand need, as well as how to locate and manage both self-generated and third-party content.

### Get serious about evaluation

For many in L&D 'evaluation' is a bit of a unicorn. That is 'wouldn't it be wonderful if it existed'. Adopting digital means access to data. Even the most basic LMS can generate information that will help you understand what's working and what's not.



### Outcomes not output

Most training strategies are output focused; seriously review the outcomes you wish to support and how you'll measure them. If you are to consider and adopt a 'learning in the flow' approach within your strategy, consider how you'll measure its effectiveness.

### Learner preference is front and centre

The learning experience should come first. From design through to hosting, engaging modern learners is no longer just about the content, it's about how it's accessed, how flexible it is, how easy it is to find, and how relevant it is to the learner's day-to-day job.



# Using communication tools to maximise Learning & Development

As many businesses have introduced a **'hybrid working'** model, which allows remote working and office-based working, communication tools remain vital to encourage learning in any environment.

Social communication channels can be used effectively to encourage discussions, share knowledge and become a hub of resources within organisations. Some of these channels include:



Zoom



Microsoft Teams



Google Hangouts



Facebook Workplace



Whereby

## Benefits of social communication tools in L&D



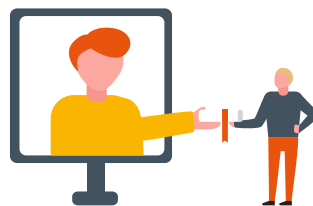
Improves team collaboration



Employees are more engaged



Ensures rapid knowledge transfer



Cultivates a culture of success



Brings learning into the flow of work

It can be simple to implement these tools within an organisation but **how do we create and foster a positive learning culture to support and encourage learning & development?**

### How to encourage enabled learning

- Enable employees to have the time to learn.
- Take employees' feedback into account.
- Schedule in learning sessions.
- Provide tailored recommendations and consider learners' choice.
- Encourage self-directed learning.

### How to support the use of social communication tools within L&D

- Provide training and guidelines on the use of communication tools.
- Make sharing content easy via social tools.
- Provide high-quality content via content curation.
- Choose the right platforms for your business.
- Identify intrinsic motivations of employees and work with them to identify these themselves.

**250**  
million



daily active users  
on Microsoft Teams  
(September 2021)

**59%**



of people use social communication  
tools within their organisation  
(VC Learner Survey 2021)

**15%**



of people use Facebook  
for Business  
(VC Learner Survey 2021)

# 'Let's blow their socks off!': a look at blended learning

We spoke to four of our experts here at Virtual College who have been immersing themselves in the world of blended learning. A relatively new concept, they were keen to share their insights with other L&D professionals in order to try and increase their understanding and encourage them to consider using this approach in their own training programmes. These insights included how blended learning has developed, where it's heading and how it can best be used.

## The past, present and future

Though it feels like 'blended learning' has become a buzz phrase this last year, as a concept it has been around for a while – around twenty years, in fact.

Traditionally, blended learning approaches had a clear split between learner-directed learning (such as digital content or workbooks) and tutor-led or facilitated learning. But last year, the pandemic hit and blew everything out the water. It brought about changes to our professional lives that L&D teams had no choice but to consider. Take hybrid working as an example. Its growth in popularity has changed the way we view what we can do virtually or face-to-face – it's become topsy turvy. but having said that, and now that time has passed, limitations have come to light. Yes, it's great that we can use Microsoft Teams to create a virtual classroom, but it's not the same experience and doesn't require the same skills and tools as face-to-face. We've also realised that we can't always rely on self-directed learning, that it's a struggle to get everyone together, and that we might have tight budgets to consider. And traditional learning methods can't solve these problems.

**So, what does this mean for blended learning?  
It means we have to take a new approach.**

As Sarah Baker, Chief Learning Officer explained, "It isn't about purchasing assets anymore. We're now looking at how to use the skill of educational technologies in a much more sophisticated way to blend whole programmes, whether in a series of lessons or resources, and to use technology and other methods seamlessly. It's a different skill and requirement, and L&D teams should be demanding that of their educational technology suppliers."

Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant agreed. **'We need to change how people view blended learning. The phrase has certain connotations now, so we need to broaden their views and challenge them. We need to show them what a true blend can do.'**



**Jez Anderson**  
L&D Consultant



**Jamie Ashforth**  
Head of Sales



**Sarah Baker**  
Chief Learning  
Officer



**Jade Pullan**  
Learning Technology  
Consultant



## What does this mean for the L&D professional?

Jamie Ashforth, Head of Sales, believes it's all about a change in perception. "Going forward, we definitely need to change our perception of training and how we think about it and approach it."

There is a unanimous agreement that we need to shift our focus onto the learner. Jez explains, "Historically, we have had a learning approach that has been led by the tutor, teacher or organisation, and they have decided what learning the learner needed. But we're now shifting toward a different approach – a heutagogy – where the learner leads the way. So, going forward, the training needs to reflect the learners' needs, which means they need to be considered first and foremost."

Jez believes that blended learning is now about creating a learner experience, and technology is the enabler, or the "lens we look through when considering the learning".

The use of technology has been on L&D professionals' minds. Jamie, alongside colleague Jade Pullan, Learning Technology Consultant, who are both part of the Sales team here at Virtual College, recently attended Learning Live. "We had numerous conversations about technology and how it can underpin training, and everyone admits that its role has changed. It can now be used to encourage and empower", Jamie explained.

Jez agrees, explaining how this has affected the L&D role. "It's no longer about managing learning, but enabling learners to find what they need, when they need it. L&Ds need to consider when the learners want to learn, why they want to learn, how they want to learn and where they want to learn and the content needs to reflect this."

But to get this right, it's all about the learning design, which Jez thinks is of the utmost importance. "No matter how blended it is, or how much money you've spent, if it isn't designed well, if it doesn't meet the needs of the learner or organisation and it doesn't inspire and engage, then it won't work as a piece of training. It still needs good learning design. We need to ask ourselves these questions: what are we trying to achieve? What are the learners' needs? What's the best way to meet them?"

There is also a consultative role that is gaining momentum, which Sarah and Jade are both excited about. "There needs to be more focus at the start of the project, which we're calling 'the discovery phase', Sarah explained. 'It's about taking the time to understand the learners, the organisation and the context of training and discover what actions are needed – it's only then that you can design and map technology around it.'"

Jade expanded. "The discovery phase informs the whole project and process of developing it. You have to understand where the customer and their learners are on their technology journey before you can decide what they need. You often need to start right at the beginning before you can consider the all-singing and all-dancing solutions. What can they work with? Are there any barriers, such as firewalls, that could stop them? What are the learners comfortable with? What devices do they already use? What's available? It's only once you've delved into this that you can start to see what training solution will really work for them."

But there is a skill to this, and Sarah predicts that there'll be more investment in these phases and consultation work. "With the advances in technology and the ease of access to content on the internet, learning is becoming democratised. As a result, what becomes rare and more valuable are the skills required to fully understand the human elements which are needed to design the best blend, and understand the technology needed to create that winning solution. It's a combination of an art and a science, about knowing how to take the best of digital and the best of face-to-face and create something powerful – that's the skill L&D professionals need right now."





Thanks to advances in technology, we can sum up blended learning in one word – flexibility. Though it is often best used for something long-term, such as programme-based learning or a curriculum, blended approaches can scale up or down and be adapted to different budgets; they can either be digitally or face-to-face led. Here are a couple of approaches that can enhance a blended solution.

## Curation

"There has been a lot of talk about curation, and drawing on how we learn outside of work," Jamie shared. "This means that L&D teams don't necessarily need to create the content themselves, nor does it have to be perfect. It could change things a lot."

And thanks to the internet, there is a lot of content out there, and there will be learners who use it to find what they need and share it with others. But to ensure consistency across the company, it is a good idea to curate the content yourself.

### **But, again, it's a skill. To get the quality you need, consider:**

- The aims and outcomes.
- What type of content will best meet these aims.
- Where the content will be housed.
- How the learner will access it, and how it'll pull together so it works.

Overall, if the learners know your content is contextualised, that it's correct, easy to access and engaging, then they'll turn to your content first instead of going to the internet and sourcing it themselves.

## Social learning

Social (also known as informal) learning is a great example of the learner driving the learning and, as learners can share content they've found useful, it is closely connected to curation. As a result, it can be a fantastic and effective method of peer-to-peer support.

Jez believes that the key to the success of social learning is allowing it to grow organically and making sure the problems that learners are trying to solve are kept at the centre. "In the early years of social learning, communities would grow out of an interest in a shared problem," he explains. "Someone would ask for help, and others interested in the problem or with a solution would answer, and over time a community developed. What makes social learning interesting is the fact that it isn't controlled, structured or managed, and as a result it can often collapse when control is imposed on it. It is not a case of 'if we build it, they'll contribute'."

But there are a number of barriers worth keeping in mind when trying to bring in social learning. Do they have the motivation? Can they be bothered to put the effort in? Do they worry about being exposed? Do they trust the company? Essentially, it's important to create a learning culture that allows the learners to feel comfortable and safe.



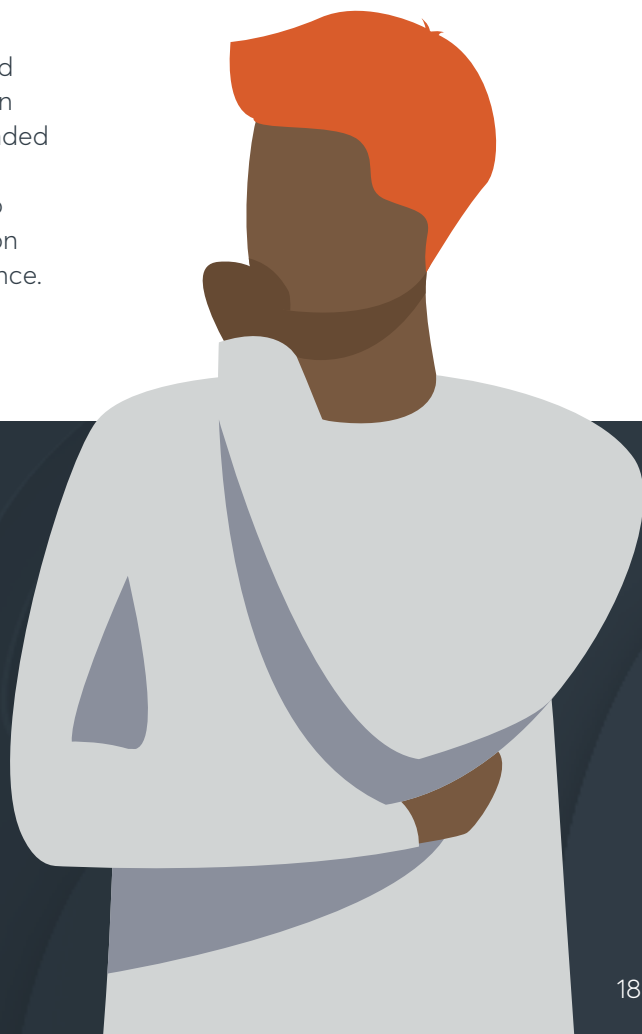
## Four stages to designing a learning programme

When it comes to designing a learning solution, there is no 'one size fits all' answer, as each training solution will depend on your outcomes and aims. But to give you a good starting point, Jez recommends keeping these four stages in mind.

- 1. Engage:** Take the time to consider what will engage the learners and how that can be achieved.
- 2. Content and knowledge:** Create or curate the content which will provide the knowledge they need.
- 3. Contextualisation:** Contextualise the learning to help the learners embed the knowledge. It's an important stage that is often missed, but a good blend will allow this to happen. Ask yourself, what is best to help learners take what they've learnt and embed it in the real world? How do you create experiences that will allow them to practise, experiment, fail and get feedback? It can include: coaching, mentoring, feedback, space to reflect on the learning and assess whether they need to go over anything again, or spaced rehearsal, where they are provided with new pieces of content over a period of time.
- 4. Measurement:** Assess whether the training works. Try and find out if the learners have changed their behaviour, taken on board the knowledge and are putting it into practice.

But despite all our excitement and enthusiasm for blended learning, it's worth keeping in mind that this isn't the answer to everything. Don't overcomplicate the training or use it for the sake of it; where the answer is a short piece of learning, PDF or video, try not to be tempted to create a fancy blended solution or a whole array of courses.

Remember, if you consider the learner, their needs and the outcomes of the training, you can't go far wrong in discovering the best approach. You'll figure out if blended is the right choice, or if you need to go in a different direction. At the end of the day, it just comes down to good learning design. Master that and you'll be well on your way to some training that really makes a difference.



## Blended learning in action

How Virtual College have provided blended learning solutions.

### Digital blends

We recently created a purely digital blended training programme for sustainability charity WRAP (see our [second report](#) for our case study). They wanted to help the hospitality industry reduce food waste and form new habits around measuring and capturing food waste data. We designed a programme that included a range of different resources, from podcasts and case studies to e-learning – whichever was best for the learning outcome – and was supported by surgery sessions, which were held over Microsoft Teams. This helped bridge that gap between the digital and the face-to-face, allowing learners to still have opportunities to discuss, support each other and meet experts in the industry. And, as it turned out, it was the perfect solution for a pandemic!



### Face-to-face blends

Another project we designed was for a large train-operating company who was looking for a customer service training solution that would 'blow their socks off'. We designed a full end-to-end blended approach that was completely seamless, and a great example of technology supporting and enhancing the learner experience. There were nine modules, delivered face-to-face over the course of two days, with a variety of technology in place to support. Whether that was videos to bring concepts to life, a digital learning game that was played in person, or a digital self-assessment to evaluate where learners were, each one was carefully chosen to help meet the learning aim.

The training had to be empathetic and drive real, beneficial change, which is where the technology really came into its own. Take a 360 video we created, which was a realistic train carriage with various types of customers in it – the type of setting the learners would be more than familiar with. The learners had to explore the carriage and discuss initial perceptions of the customers with each other before it was revealed who the customers actually were, uncovering qualities that may not be apparent, such as hidden disabilities. Drawing from real-life stories from steering groups, the video was designed to be an immersive and thought-provoking way of challenging the learners' perceptions of customers and how that affects their treatment of them, and technology was paramount to its success. Can you imagine how different the effect would have been if it was delivered over the usual slide deck?

These next methods can be used as part of a blend as they are very much learner-focused. But, equally, they can stand alone as well.

# Are the ways in which Learning & Development deliver learning in the modern workplace fit for purpose?

At our recent roundtable event, members of the Virtual College team and 20 external L&D professionals got together to debate and delve deep into what the landscape of modern workplaces now looks like and what impact this is having on the Learning & Development profession. Read on to find out more...

After breaking the attendees down into two groups, each group debated a number of questions linked to the changes in delivering L&D and, unsurprisingly, there were many similarities between the two conversations.

## Has organised formal learning taken precedence over situational and informal styles?

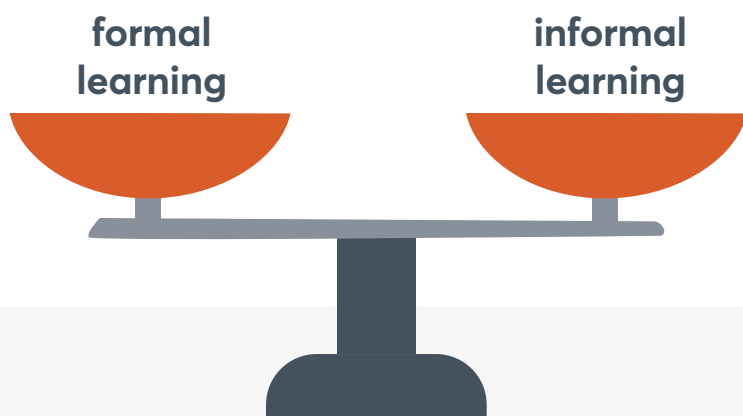
This was a hotly debated point, which overall saw participants stating that there is a need to question and challenge what learners' perspectives of learning really are. Learners think they prefer organised learning, and in a world where learning is so much more accessible, perhaps it's understandable that learners judge organised, formal learning as pre-prepared. But what they don't realise is that learning is continuous and is happening all the time through our experiences, in everyday situations, and even while chatting with colleagues. Yet the only learning they see as 'official' is that which is done formally.

Aside from this, the perspective of what 'formal' learning is can differ between the learner and the organisation. For example, there is always an element of formal learning when the company tries to control how people learn. Learners will also feel there is an element of formality to their learning if they are asked to learn something new, which they have not requested themselves.

"There is always a level of formality when it comes to learning. In our company they control what people learn but class it as 'informal' learning once it's delivered via our LMS."

"Surely we can merge the two? Have organised formal learning events, but provide online forums and discussion areas to enable continued learning."

"We try and blend the two. As a company we set the agenda around what needs to be learnt, but the learning itself is often led by the learner."



Does this therefore mean that the 'formal' side of learning is viewed as the creation of the learning, packaging up the solution into a means to deliver it, and the 'informality' comes from the fact that learners have the ability to access this learning at a time and place that suits them? Perhaps there is no 'one size fits all' solution and, instead, there needs to be that blend of both formal and informal learning for it to work for both organisation and learner?

## **The democratisation of learning (personal and professional) is underway. All we need in order to access a world repository of knowledge is a click of a button on the internet. What experiences have you had of this type of learning?**

This opened up the conversation to a big topic of the moment – curating content – where a common theme was the problem of vetting the content's quality and making sure it is both correct and able to provide the learner with the relevant information. To this end, a number of participants discussed trying to stop people from relying on search engines (which can bring up many different answers to the same question); however, it is evident that knowledge sharing is always happening and, if a company can see what people are liking and sharing, then they can actually use it to their advantage and take inspiration from it for training ideas.

The suggested solution was that L&D teams should now curate their own content. This will allow them to still use content that is recommended by learners, but also set up a process to check that it meets their requirements before it is put in the resource bank.

But with so much information available at the click of a button, it almost takes away from the fact that L&D teams were previously the fount of this knowledge, and many now feel that their role has now changed to facilitating this by using external resources, encouraging collaboration and providing a tool for learners to share their learning.

There is also a nervousness from senior teams about the use of such social learning, with concerns about the lack of control and whether people will be putting the wrong information out there, or information that doesn't tie in with the organisation's approach. However, it can't be denied that it creates an opportunity for these senior teams to get close to their learners, understand where the knowledge gaps are and create a training programme linked to both their and the organisation's needs.

## **Josh Bersin coined the expression 'learning in the flow of work' which coincides with the emergence of Microsoft Viva, a tool which will place both curated and learner-directed content on your computer's desktop – will this type of tool enhance or disrupt workplace learning?**

There is a general feeling that hopefully this approach will complement rather than directly replace more traditional ways of learning. Some organisations are finding that their learners are using resources such as YouTube videos and guides, which they've found themselves, and then asking the question as to why these types of resources aren't made available in the office. This is inspiring L&D teams to consider new formats to include in their resource bank.

At this early stage, L&D teams need to be given the opportunity to fully understand the new functionality these solutions can provide and how they will integrate with existing technology currently in place.

'Learning in the flow of work' is a culture change for many, and something that companies need to master before rolling out to their learners. Many have found that time is a huge barrier to this, where learners, and in some cases the L&D professionals, have struggled with managing their time in this new remote working world. They are booking out their diaries back to back, not leaving any time in between to schedule their learning.



In circumstances where you had face-to-face learning, you would turn up early, maybe prepare some notes in advance. But as many organisations are still working virtually at home, people are not allowing themselves the time to prepare before a session like they would have done previously. If people are asked to prepare something for a training session, or asked to do a piece of e-learning, there is often a lack of urgency, and some learners don't even complete these.



The bottom line here is that platforms should enable learning, not restrict it, and currently there are mixed feelings around this. Many companies introduced virtual learning and sessions online for the first time, as different organisations have different appetites. When implementing this the first time, there's a risk of taking a 'sheep dipping' approach, and only through testing and learning will these resources improve. Early adopters of the learning in the flow of work approach are likely doing very well, as they've had chance to learn and adapt. Newly adopted companies aren't there yet and this will take time.

Another big topic area for discussion was **DATA!**

### **"We still don't use data well in Learning & Development."**

As L&D are finding themselves in the early stages of new technologies, one expert was keen to point out that he feels teams are struggling to conduct useful evaluations due to the lack of baseline data to evaluate against. This can cause problems when L&D teams are trying to evidence the success of learning programmes to senior teams, as they try to gain further investment in the programme.

Does this show though that evaluations need to change? Do they need to reflect the learner behaviour change? If the business is going to trust this learner-led approach, they need to be able to effectively capture the success.

In this way then, evaluations probably need to be unique to the organisation as they need to reflect their aims and outcomes.

However, to counter this, another good point was raised suggesting that perhaps it isn't the lack of data that is the problem, but the lack of clear problem identification? Maybe a better understanding at this stage, and development of training to tackle these problems, would naturally ensure that the data evidenced the learnings and required behaviour change?

**BUT ...** should learning & development be a numbers game? Surely it should be less about a tick-box exercise and more about how this learning can create real change, solving real business problems.

## In summary

To try and bring the session to some form of conclusion (although this was a topic people could have talked about all afternoon) Jez Anderson, L&D Consultant talked about theory regarding how self-learn (heutagogy) is the new way forward. Could this be the solution to modern day workplace learning?

As we move through the L&D cycle, it seems that we have gone from a traditional teacher-led learning phase (pedagogy) through to a mid-point where it was self-directed learning but under the facilitation of a teacher, into what is now learning determined by the individual.

However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have any structure whatsoever. As one participant quite rightly asked, **"but how do they know what they don't know?"**. Therefore, structure and organisational input is still needed to make sure learners get the skills they need to fill the gaps they are experiencing.

Culture needs to change. It's often the case that learners are given a 'menu' of learning and are able to pick what they want. If they aren't given a menu, they don't know what they want. But what if something's not on the menu? It doesn't mean it's not offered, you need to ask the waiter, so to speak! It should be less about pushing content, and more about problem solving, giving stakeholders the information to see the value of investment.

BUT we also need to think more about how we present the learning. Think more about how learners learn, and how we can best use technology to enable this learning. It isn't about using the fanciest things all the time, it's about deciding what is best for that piece of learning and for that individual learner.

We need to acknowledge the different ways people learn and the different scenarios in which they require learning. An e-learning course may work in one scenario, but in a scenario where they need to quickly pick up some tips or advice, a 30-minute course probably isn't best solution, but a video or PDF may be.

So can all forms of learning work together? Do they all still have a place in learning? Do L&D professionals need to assess what works for their learners and their organisations to create a tailored experience to suit the needs of both?

Josh Bersin, global research analyst and advisor, sums it up quite nicely. **"As I study technology markets over the decades, I've learned that the obstacles to growth are not always technical, they're in our own minds. We don't really use technology well until we change the way we think."**



# Final word

**L&D has experienced lots of changes over the past couple of years, which have been accelerated by the pandemic. Sarah Baker, our Chief Learning Officer, reflects on what these changes mean for L&D.**



**Sarah Baker**  
Chief Learning Officer

## Let's start with the learner

In this report, we've explored terms such as 'democratisation of learning', 'learning in the flow of work', and 'heutagogy' – all of which describe the shift in learning power dynamics from the facilitator to the learner. This means that the learner is now not only in control of how they learn, but they can also determine their own learning requirements and the activities that work best for them. Learners are now consumers.

This change has been underway for a while, but, as Nick Bate explained, it has been accelerated by the pandemic and the changes in organisational culture.

This growth of learners as consumers, with all of the power that brings, is great news for the learner, but can put organisations and L&D teams on the back foot. Where do you start? How do you go about making choices available for learners, creating resources and tools that are meaningful, and ensuring learning in the flow of work becomes a cultural norm in your organisation?

But, of course, consumerisation brings its challenges for learners too. Organisations with a learning culture are looking for curious employees, those driven enough to determine what works best for them, and who learn from mistakes and can adapt to change. In fact, 'learning to learn' is becoming an increasingly important skill for learners, and one that is now in demand from employers.

However, learners, of course, have the ultimate say. The 'Great Resignation' is rocking the labour market, and HR and L&D teams (not to mention the organisations themselves) are feeling the heat. If an organisation is not offering an employee the experience they need, they will vote with their feet and move to one that does.

## What about the role of L&D?

L&D teams, then, are faced with increasing challenges. How do they:

- Support learners to learn in changing environments and in the 'new normal' of hybrid working?
- Design programmes that put learner choice and engagement at the centre?
- Support and underpin organisational change?
- Understand skills gaps within their organisation and broker solutions that work for learners?
- Support reskilling and upskilling demands within their organisation?
- Make sure that their organisations are attractive to employees, and offer great inductions and opportunities for ongoing learning?



In our interview, Nick highlighted the importance of the L&D team as a business partner with the leadership teams. L&D teams need to increasingly stand in the shoes of different parts of the business, including learners, to understand skills gaps and shortages and to identify solutions that will be effective.

What might these solutions look like? Whilst the pandemic has accelerated digitisation, it isn't, as Jez Anderson pointed out, a silver bullet. L&D teams need to be increasingly reflective, and to work out innovative ways to match shifts in the consumerisation of learning, shifts in workplace practice and culture and changing skills requirements, all the while checking that learning remains relevant and effective.

The good news is that the pandemic has supercharged technical advances; things that were once niche, such as AI or VR, are becoming mainstream, and tools such as learning experience platforms (LXPs) are supporting the embedding of learning culture throughout organisations.

It's a great time for L&D professionals to make real change in their organisations. L&D professionals are enablers, curators, implementers and influencers, often standing in a unique position to implement change in their organisations.

## And from a provider's perspective...

So, it's a great time to be a learner. Consumerisation empowers choice for learners, and more and more organisations are cottoning on to the importance of providing a culture in which curious learners are enabled and rewarded.

It's a great time to be an L&D professional. The pandemic has accelerated changes in learning as much as it has changes in workplace culture. L&D professionals are no longer procurers of training, but partners in organisational change.

From my perspective, it's also a great time to be in EdTech as a provider. Our customers' requirements have changed over the past year, and we have also seen the shift toward a more considered and thoughtful approach to content development, and the platforms used to employ it. For us, this shift has been towards an embrace of human-centred design. It helps us put the learner at the centre of development, and has allowed us to work with our customers to bring their projects to life, ensuring a meaningful and impactful learning experience in a way that their learners expect and demand.

So, yes, change can be unsettling, but I say let's embrace this change. I invite you to grab the opportunity with both hands and show your business just how creative, innovative and effective L&D can be.



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