



In conversation with David James

In September 2021, **Niro Sritharan**, who was at the time Partnership Development Manager at Virtual College, but has since moved on, met with **David James**, Learning & Development expert, Author, Host of the L&D podcast and Chief Learning Officer at Loop, to talk about **'The Importance of Investing in your Learners'**.

Looking to tackle this wide topic, Niro and David spent a couple of hours together discussing a number of elements associated with this question. Here we summarise their keys points with the aim of providing you with some helpful hints and tips when it comes to approaching all things related to learner investment.

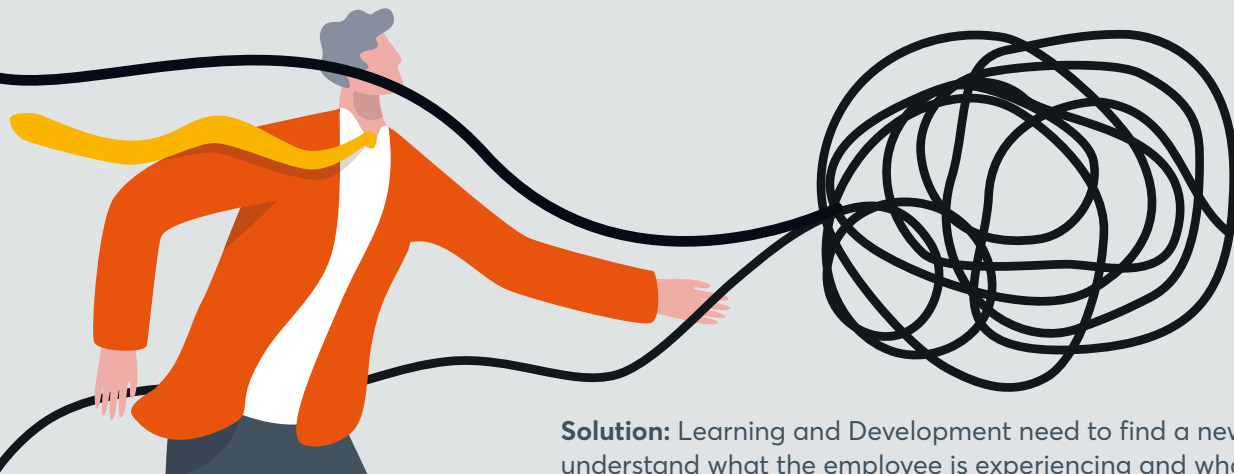


Responsibility for Learning

"Do both employer and employee share the responsibility of learning?"

"Not only do I agree, I actually think that there's loads more that both parties can do."

Problem: The way that traditional L&D is set up places too much emphasis on the individual. Providing them with content without context expects far too much from them. Relying on them to take this new content and relate it to their role and the objectives set by the organisation is unrealistic.



Solution: Learning and Development need to find a new way to understand what the employee is experiencing and what they are expected to do and then meet them in the middle.

"How can they share this responsibility so that they can both really add value to professional development?"

There is one **simple answer** to this...

Analysis

L&D teams are used to doing a 'learning needs analysis' but the issue here is that they take the 'problem' being faced by the learner and try translate this into a learning solution; however this is largely devoid of context.



Top tip

Focus on what employees are trying to do and what they are not able to do efficiently and effectively and then provide them with the tools, the insights, the know-how and the information in order to fix this problem.

Want to hear Niro and David tackle this in more detail? [View the full clip here.](#)

Engaging learners in L&D

"Companies are keen to conduct a 'training needs analysis' as a way of identifying problems, then produce a course to solve this problem, but provide no follow up and are surprised when nothing changes. What are your thoughts on this?"

"The problem is because it's not focused on what people are trying to do, it's focused on what L&D teams think people should learn and there's a massive disconnect there."

Problem: Learning and Development teams can often think all they need to do is provide the plan and programs to help people develop, but unless this is structured to actually solve a problem being experienced by the people they need to influence then people won't care!

Solution: Capitalise on opportunities when people are most open to listening:

- **When employees are new to an organisation.**
- **Are unfamiliar in their role.**
- **Or when they are expected to adapt.**

People still view L&D through the traditional lens of providing '**courses and e-learning**'; it is a dance that everyone knows. Stakeholders ask for training, learning and development deliver the training and employees go on the training, but what isn't discussed often enough is what actually changes as a result of that?

Companies then focus on the externalities of this training and reason:

"It's good for engagement"

"It's great to bring people together"

"It's a positive experience"

"L&D teams need to be more intentional in addressing the actual problems. So instead of learning and development being an unsophisticated dance like a conga line, where everyone jumps on board, L&D at the front and everyone kicks their legs and feels great immediately afterwards, but nothing actually changes, they need to think about what people are actually trying to do and if we are going to relate it to a dance, perhaps it should be a Waltz or Tango instead of a Conga Line."

Want to learn more about the L&D Waltz or Tango? [Listen to what David had to say here.](#)

Changes to L&D Approaches

"How can organisations make learning more appealing?"

"Rather than making learning more appealing, the last 12-18 months have focused on making learning more relevant – this is key."

With the impact of COVID-19 L&D teams quickly changed their approach to support remote working and remote management and then immediately changed focus to supporting the wellbeing of employees. It wasn't something they did to make it more appealing, by making it more interactive or animated, it was just about providing people with what they actually needed to allow them to work in this new way.

Lightbulb moment

During the COVID-19 pandemic, L&D teams focused on the biggest problems facing employees at that particular time, and because of this there was incredible takeup. This proves that learning doesn't necessarily have to be made more interactive, it just needs to be made more useful and closer to the point of need, and that way teams will see a higher level of engagement.

Useful steps for future planning using this model:

1. Find ways to get closer to the point of need of employees.
2. Use this insight to guide and support performance.
3. Allow employees to determine what's useful and when it's required.
4. Seek data to support these needs and solutions.
5. Learn from these solutions.

Want to review this section of the interview? [Click here.](#)

Engaging Stakeholders

"How can L&D teams look to rebrand themselves so they are seen as more than the team you go to when you want to do a course?"

"First of all it's just about being outcome focused. There isn't a rebranding exercise that needs to be done before action, L&D teams need to try something in a new way and have conversations about what needs to happen as a result of an intervention and not what should be included or how that should be presented."



Top tip

L&D teams need to speak to stakeholders differently to improve their 'service', so when a stakeholder requests some training they need to ask questions such as:

- **What do you want to achieve as a result of the training?**
- **What's not happening now?**
- **Who specifically do we need to influence?**
- **Who is responsible for the way the work is done and therefore the results?**

This shows that as a team they are interested in making a difference.

Once L&D teams have this insight they can produce a more focused training solution to the problem that it is less risky and will ensure that the outcome addresses the initial difficulties these stakeholders are facing. This means that L&D teams start to solve real problems, one at a time.

"This shift will see L&D teams moving away from being order takers to being consultants with the ability to help drive real change."

Hear David expand on why he thinks L&D teams don't always take this approach by [clicking here.](#)

"There can be a lot for L&D teams to think about when pulling together the L&D plan so how do they manage 'upwards' in terms of the senior leaders in the business?"

Having the confidence to engage in a conversation about outcomes will increase the credibility of the team as a function. Once you have this buy in, it is easier to get employees along on this journey.

"What seems like the best response is that you say 'Yes'. You take the order."

It's a simple equation:

L&D teams have conversations with senior stakeholders and learners about the desired outcome.



They then provide the learners with what they need to resolve this problem and achieve the outcome.



Learners who can predictably and reliably perform in their role and fulfil their potential.

The most resistance doesn't come from the senior leaders but actually from within the L&D teams themselves. They don't often wish to engage in performance conversations just in case the learning suite of solutions don't match up. However, engaging in these types of conversations with stakeholders can help give teams that insight and, therefore, the solution becomes more apparent.

[Hear David and Niro discuss this in more detail here.](#)

Investing in L&D for the Future

"What are the ultimate benefits in organisations investing in their learners, for both parties?"

"You have employees that have trust in both the organisation and the learning and development function, to do what is important by them, and then as an organisation, you're not losing good people."

It comes back to the same point, understanding what both parties are trying to achieve and working together to create a solution that efficiently and effectively helps them do that. It's not hard, it's just a very different approach.

L&D teams need to expect more from themselves. Rather than just being responsible for providing content and delivering programs, they need to prove they understand what is required of them through conversations with stakeholders, backed up by the solutions that they provide, giving people what they need in the context of where they work and when they actually need it.

[View the final part of this conversation here.](#)

