

Meeting the Demands of Today's Digital Learner

Is L&D keeping up with how employees learn today?

Navigating New Learner Expectations

In the ongoing battle for consumer mind share, and ultimately share of wallet, CMOs and CEOs will often cite Amazon and Uber as companies dramatically resetting the bar on how a consumer defines a relevant experience with a product or brand. Brands across all industries are finding the streamlined, social, personalized experiences consumers have with one brand can very quickly become the new norm:

- **86%** of consumers say personalization plays a role in their purchasing decisions.¹
- **88%** of consumers frequently consult a peer review when making a purchase.²
- **96%** of consumers will be disloyal if they need to exert high effort for the outcomes they want.³

Increasingly, heads of L&D are finding these experiences in the consumer arena are changing not just how individuals buy products, but fundamentally how they interact with and consume

information in the workplace as well. CEB Learning & Development surveyed nearly 24,000 employees globally to investigate how these expectations translate to learning and found some distinct trends in how employees are learning differently.

Employee expectations and behaviors regarding organizational learning distinctly mirror their experiences in digital channels outside of work. This new “Digital Learner” is:

- **Empowered:** 76% of employees report that they will do what they need to do to learn effectively,
- **Networked:** 69% of employees regularly seek out new ways of doing their work from their coworkers, and
- **Impatient:** 66% of employees expect to learn new information “just-in-time.”⁴

¹ Source: Infosys, Rethinking Retail: Insights from Consumers and Retailers into an Omni-Channel Shopping Experience, 2013;

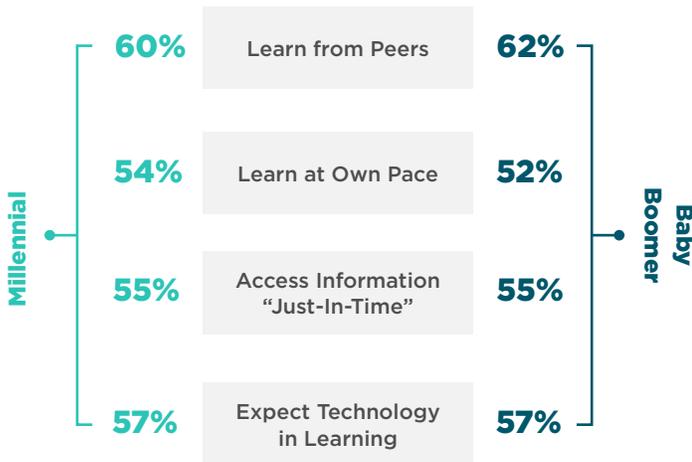
² Source: David Moth, “88% of Consumers Consult Reviews When Making a Purchase,” Econsultancy, 22 May 2012;

³ Source: CEB analysis.

⁴ n = 23,764; Source: CEB 2014 Learning Culture Survey.

While it may be tempting to attribute these shifts to millennials increasing their presence in the workforce, CEB research finds that these changes in expectations are cross-generational. The boomer generation is just as likely to espouse “digital” expectations of learning as their millennial counterparts.

It's Not Just Millennials



n = 9,071.
 Source: CEB 2016 L&D Digital Learner Survey.
 Note: Millennials are defined as ages 18-34, and Baby Boomers are defined as ages 55-70. All generational differences described on this page are not statistically significant.

Engaging a New Customer

Not surprisingly, L&D organizations are responding to these shifts in behaviors and expectations with innovative techniques to keep the Digital Learner engaged.

L&D organizations are shifting investments in the learning portfolio to:

- **Make Learning Fun:** 79% of L&D functions have redesigned learning content to make it more enjoyable in the past three years.
- **Diversify Learning Channels:** 67% of L&D functions have increased the number of learning channels they offer in the past three years.
- **Prioritize Immediate Needs:** 59% of L&D functions prioritize fulfilling immediate learning needs.

L&D is increasingly providing a wider variety of choices across channels and instructional methods to make learning attractive and heighten employee engagement with learning opportunities.

Are We Chasing What Matters?

However, to keep pace with changing expectations, the average L&D function has increased spending by 16% in the past three years. Many L&D leaders question if this approach is sustainable and whether these investments are resulting in returns for the business.

An engagement strategy may maximize employee satisfaction with learning, but satisfaction does not translate to application. While 78% of employees are satisfied with L&D products, only 37% of learning is applied on the job.

This means L&D can not only find themselves attempting to satisfy shifting demands from learners, but also that even when those expectations are satisfied, their efforts are not necessarily driving increased application of learning and subsequent impact for the business.

Not surprisingly, this can leave L&D teams feeling stretched thin and uncertain as to what investments truly drive returns.

Satisfaction ≠ Application

The instructor was really fun and engaging. What was that last point again?

Where is that training material again?

That training seems like it will be helpful for what I'm working on now.

I am not sure how this will help me prepare for my next role.

I enjoyed spending the day with my colleagues.

I just sat through the new video from L&D, but I don't really get what I am supposed to do next.

78% of Employees Are Satisfied with L&D Products.

37% of Learning Is Applied On the Job.

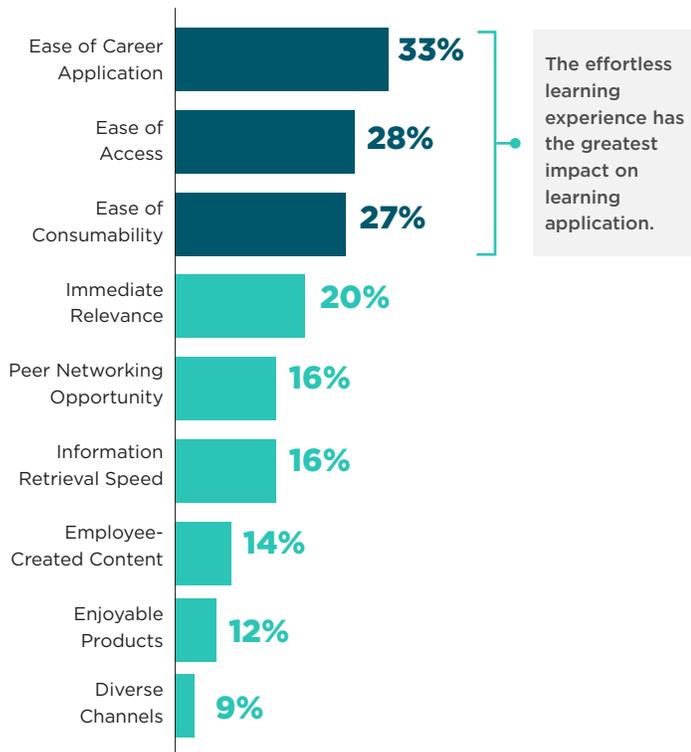
n = 9,071; 7,576.
 Source: CEB 2016 L&D Digital Learner Survey; CEB Training Effectiveness Dashboard.

What Drives Learning Outcomes Today?

CEB deployed a survey to over 9,000 employees across six regions globally in over 26 industries to better understand both what learners value and which L&D investments are driving impact. Analysis revealed that the ease of the learning experience far outweighs the impact of typical engagement strategies such as making more enjoyable learning content and providing more channel options.

Effortless Learning Experience

Maximum Impact of Different Learning Characteristics on Learning Application



n = 9,071.
Source: CEB 2016 L&D Digital Learner Survey.

Specifically, an effortless learning experience allows employees to easily:

- Access relevant learning opportunities,
- Consume learning content, and
- Determine the applicability of learning to their careers.

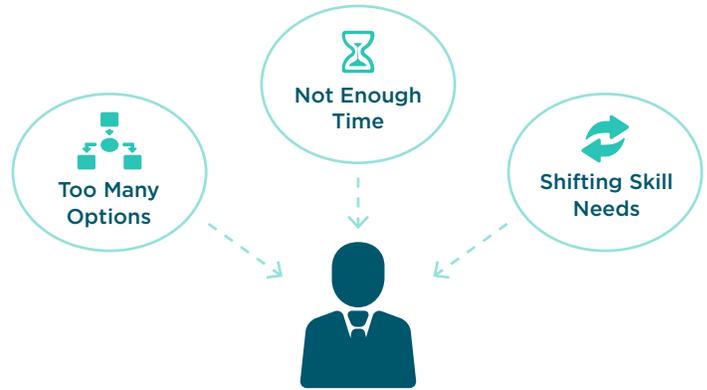
Compared to engagement-focused strategies, those focused on minimizing effort have 2.7x the impact on learning application, which corresponds to nearly twice the impact on important talent outcomes such as employee engagement (1.9x) and employee performance (1.6x).

While tactics intended to drive engagement certainly do not detract from learning application, for over-stretched L&D functions responding to diverse demands and preferences, these findings clearly guide where to prioritize efforts to achieve the largest impact—reducing effort.

Delivering an Effortless Learning Experience

Data shows a significant opportunity for L&D to improve the effort it takes to learn in their organizations. Only 19% of employees benefit from an effortless learning experience, meaning there is tremendous opportunity for L&D to understand where employees are meeting resistance across the learning experience that can be minimized or eliminated.

Examples of Sources of Employee Effort



n = 9,071.
Source: CEB 2016 L&D Digital Learner Survey.

For example, activities like identifying personal learning goals and objectives or investing the time needed to learn a given skill requires effort to produce outcomes for the learner. On the other hand, employee effort to overcome barriers to learning (like finding available learning, determining its relevance, and weighing the right learning opportunities for their goals and aspirations) can and should be minimized to result in greater learning application.

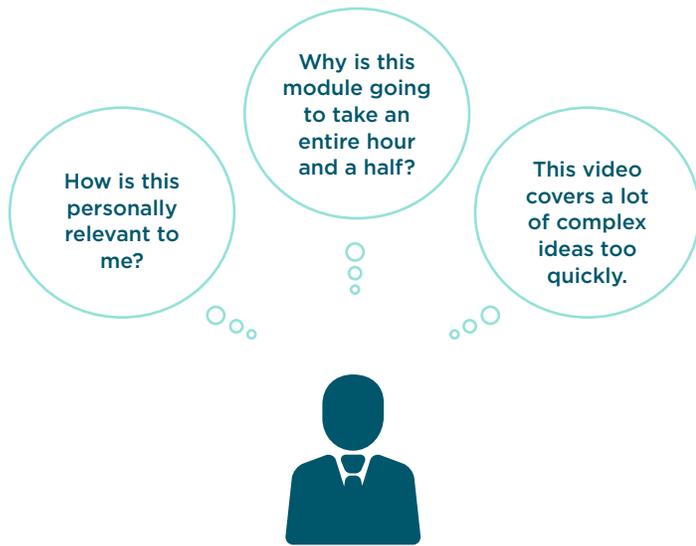
This approach to delivering an effortless learning experience requires four significant shifts in how L&D delivers learning today:

- 1. Design Around Learner Values:** To make content easily consumable, design learning solutions based on learner values and behaviors, not learner enjoyability.
- 2. Prioritize Learning Placement:** To improve ease of access, place learning solutions when and where employees can access them most easily, not across a diversity of learning channels.
- 3. Boost Career Applicability of Learning:** To increase ease of career application, help employees recognize the relevant learning opportunities for their career aspirations; don't just respond to immediate learning needs.
- 4. Equip L&D Staff:** To deliver an effortless learning experience, develop L&D staff to create experiences, not just products.

Design Around Learner Values

A major frustration for many L&D teams is simply driving employee participation. It can sometimes seem that the biggest challenge L&D faces today is just getting employees to use the learning that is available to them. However, this focus on driving learners to engage with our content may be masking an underlying issue: only 26% of employees report their L&D function delivers learning solutions that are easy to consume.

Employees Often Have Difficulty Understanding and Relating to Learning Content



Only 26% of employees believe their L&D function is effective at delivering learning that is easy to consume.

n = 9,071.
Source: CEB 2016 L&D Digital Learner Survey.

In light of this, it is not enough to drive employees to use our learning content; we have to make it easy to consume when they do.

While L&D continually strives to create a good learner experience, we may fall short of creating easily consumable content for a variety of reasons:

- We may not fully understand how employees define the value (and therefore, relevance) of learning.
- Competing priorities (and pressure) from the business can overshadow learner needs.
- Superfluous features intended to drive engagement can inadvertently impede easy navigation.

Psychology research shows it is easier to consume messages when they connect to our existing values. This raises the question: how can we understand what's important for our learners and use that understanding to make our learning environment easier to consume?

Our research indicates three primary tasks to make content easier to consume:

- Understand what learners value in learning.
- Put the learner at the center of the design process.
- Guide learners through the learning experience; don't just enable self-service.

To get started, CEB Learning & Development Leadership Council members can use the [Empathy Mapping Toolkit](#) and [Ethnography Toolkit](#) to better understand learner values and learning behaviors.

Ideas In Action

WESTPAC

Westpac realized that to incorporate learner and business values into L&D solutions, learning design strategy needed to shift to incorporate the learner at every stage.

Specifically, Westpac:

- Conducts a learner-centric needs assessment to understand what employees, not just the business, will value in learning that L&D can help deliver,
- Uses its learner-centric needs assessment to answer concrete questions about how learning should look and feel for employees, and
- Uses employee-centric messaging, prototype experimentation, and emotional language to help build a rational and emotional commitment to learning.

CEB L&D members can access the full profile of [Westpac's Future-Proofed L&D Strategy](#).

Illustrative Learning Strategy Analysis



	L&D Question	Today?	In the Future?	How?
Business Needs	What business needs should learning address?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New financial services industry requirements • Change management for new leadership. 	Changing customer expectations	Work closely with business leaders to consult on emerging business issues and needs.
Learner Needs	What personal learning value should learning create?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employability • Future career readiness • Technology savvy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change agility. • Sustained industry relevance 	Conduct regular employee value analyses to understand how to address shifting values.
Learner Experience	How can we ensure effortless learning access and consumption?	Roll out new learner-centric portal.	Learner-directed activity and content ratings drive growth points for L&D strategy.	Use robust behavior analytics and point system data mining to understand where to naturally embed learning.
	How can we make learning experiences personalized to employees?	Employees select interests and needs within learning portal	L&D as curators and moderators orchestrating learning experiences based on just-in-time needs and interests	Establishing a true social learning ecosystem
Organizational Context	What are our L&D strengths?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional design • E-learning and virtual delivery • Classroom facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curation • Digital delivery • Advanced facilitation focused on building core skill mastery 	Offer staff development opportunities in emerging skills.
	Where do we not want to play?	Mobile learning content creation	Web interface design	Work with vendors.

Source: Westpac; CEB analysis.

Prioritize Learning Placement

The challenge to make learning content easily accessible is not new but has become more urgent as the range of technologies employees use daily has expanded. In response, 67% of L&D functions have increased the number of learning channels they offer in just the past three years to engage learners in preferred channels.

While channel diversification is typically intended to make learning more accessible, it can sometimes do just the opposite. Not all channels are equally appropriate for the learning task or employee context, and too many channel choices may actually mask the easiest path to access. To make learning easily accessible, L&D must first understand where, how, and why employees struggle to find or use the learning and only then prioritize the channels that best overcome those barriers.

Investments in new technologies may still be necessary, but L&D can ensure they deliver learning at scale and how it is most easily accessed:

- Identifying and analyzing employee barriers to learning,
- Investing in learning channels that allow access, and
- Where needed, using relationships with line partners to embed learning in employee workflows.

Members of CEB L&D can review delivery methods for their potential to address barriers using the [L&D Innovations Bullseye](#), which maps L&D methods and their impact for peer organizations.

Learning Access Barrier Checklist



Physical Barriers

- Do employees have the required hardware to access learning?
- Do software and network permissions allow employees to access the information they need?
- Are employees in geographic proximity to learning resources?



Behavioral Barriers

- Are employee habits aligned to where learning is placed?
- Is task-relevant learning available where work tasks occur?



Time Allocation

- Can employees quickly search and find relevant learning solutions?
- Do employees have time in their day-to-day work to access learning solutions?



Awareness

- Do employees receive communication about where learning solutions can be found?
- Are employees aware of available learning?



Proximity/Availability of Peers

- Do employees work in close proximity to their peers?
- Do employees have enough time to invest in peer learning?



Manager Support

- Do managers lack the time, motivation, or ability to help their direct reports access learning?
- Are managers aware of their responsibility to help their direct reports access learning?

Source: CEB analysis.

Boost Career Applicability

“Future applicability” is the characteristic that employees value most from learning and is the strongest driver of application. Yet, over half of employees (54%) report it is difficult to apply learning to their careers. This is a particularly troubling finding, as a “lack of perceived future career opportunity” is the top reason (42%) for employee attrition.

Employees Often Have Difficulty Understanding and Relating to Learning Content



Employees' career paths are **no longer linear.**

Employees are **uncertain** what they want from their careers.



The pace of change makes it hard for employees to know what skills to **prioritize for the future.**

n = 12,612.
Source: CEB 2015 Departure View Exit Survey.

This employee uncertainty is largely linked to the changing structure of careers. Traditional career paths often illustrated a series of positions clearly linked in a linear fashion, with the focus on the destination and an implicit promise of ongoing promotions. In today's environment, this progression is unrealistic and inflexible in the face of constant change and flattening organizational structures.

In this ambiguous environment, L&D can help employees see the career relevance of development opportunities by emphasizing the importance of key experiences (that might not be positions) that will build capabilities necessary to the business and that therefore, enhance that individual's overall “employability” rather than just their “promotability.”

To help employees recognize career-relevant learning opportunities and experiences, L&D must:

- Explicitly connect organizational strategy to employees' career development,
- Provide employees with transparency into the shifting value of skills and experiences, and
- Teach managers to hold career and employability conversations.

To get started, members of CEB L&D can use the [Manager Employability Conversation Guide](#) to enable managers to discuss career-relevant experiences rather than just managing performance.

Ideas In Action

CISCO

Responding to a rapidly transforming business, Cisco realized formal development paths couldn't provide the business with the talent it needed and satisfy employee expectations for growth. L&D developed a social career-development platform that arms employees with insights into capabilities and skills that are growing in value to the business and their personal employability.

Specifically, Cisco:

- Partners with leadership to connect corporate strategy to career and development implications,
- Taps the perspective of SMEs to create immediate transparency into emerging skills to guide employees toward high-value development opportunities, and
- Provides visibility into career-development activities in lateral communities of practice to help employees envision and pursue cross-functional career-development opportunities

Members of CEB L&D can access the full profile of [Cisco's Career Connect Platform](#).

Communications Best Practices for Leaders



Ensure Communications:

- Share industry and growth strategy drivers behind shifting talent needs.
- Introduce implications for employee capabilities growing or shrinking in value.
- Model desired development behaviors for employees.
- Acknowledge unanswered questions that may undermine employee confidence.
- Direct employees to SMEs and peers for support and knowledge sharing.

L&D provides best practices to focus communications on enabling employees to help each other adapt and acquire new skills, not just buy into strategy.

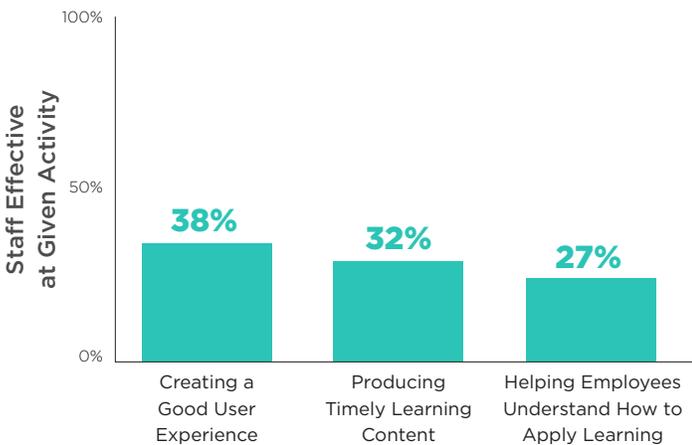
Source: Cisco Systems, Inc.; CEB analysis.

Enable L&D Staff

In light of shifting employee expectations and L&D delivery methods, heads of L&D are examining the staff skills and experiences that will set the function up for success in years to come. A survey of over 100 L&D leaders globally revealed that very few rate their L&D staff as effective at the activities they see as most important to delivering experiences that drive impact with today's learner.

L&D Staff Ineffective at Top Three Activities Most Important to Heads of L&D

Heads of L&D Rate Staff Effectiveness



n = 112.
Source: CEB 2016 Head of L&D Digital Learner Survey.

Roughly two-thirds of L&D leaders feel their staff is ineffective at activities like creating a good user experience, producing timely learning content, and helping employees understand how to apply learning. As a result, many are experimenting with a combination of developing current staff, hiring/contracting nontraditional talent, and cross-functional partnerships to transform the capabilities of their function.

Heads of L&D are recognizing that meeting the needs of the Digital Learner requires not just transforming technology but transforming the skills and mind-set of staff by:

- Identifying the L&D staff capabilities required to deliver an effortless learning experience,
- Building L&D staff capabilities by providing them experiential development opportunities, and
- Closing L&D staff capability gaps through a blended build/buy/partner strategy.

To get started, members of CEB L&D can use the [L&D Staff Competency Assessment](#) to prioritize areas for staff development.

Ideas In Action

WIPRO

Rather than just educating their L&D staff on new learning trends and technologies, Wipro realized they also needed to focus on developing capabilities and mindsets to prepare their L&D staff. To meet this goal, Wipro developed experiential “workout” sessions that build capability, confidence, and buy-in of their L&D staff while also setting new expectations.

Specifically Wipro:

- Facilitates experiential learning “workouts” to provide experiences that allow L&D staff to apply skills in their own context to build capability and confidence,
- Enables staff to experience the employee value by incorporating real-time employee feedback into the workouts rather than solely communicating the importance of transformation, and
- Sustains the expectation that the way L&D staff deliver learning should change through altering performance management and assignments.

Members of CEB L&D can access the full profile of [Wipro's Staff Workouts](#).

L&D Staff Transformation Required

Traditional L&D Staff Profile

Facilitation, product creation, public speaking



Skills

Use existing processes and proven methods to approach learning solutions



Mind-Sets

Think success is based on learner engagement with new learning products



Accountabilities

Work closely with the L&D team and respond to business requests



Work Environments

Wipro's Digital L&D Staff Profile



Visual thinking, animation, ethnography, experience design, business acumen

Use a flexible and creative approach to learning, placing learners' needs and the learning experience at the center

Think success is based on business and employee outcomes

Work closely with the business and employees, operating as a learning consultant

Source: Wipro Ltd; CEB analysis.

Conclusion

The Digital Learner is undeniably demanding different learning experiences, leaving L&D looking for solutions that both meet learner expectations and drive impact. L&D is under pressure, pursuing too many preferences, expectations, and channels. The good news is that delivering an effortless learning experience drives the outcomes we care about more than delivering more engaging learning experiences alone.

To focus the L&D strategy on not just engaging learners but also minimizing the effort required to learn, L&D must undertake the following steps:



Effortless Consumability

Design for Learner Values, Not Just Enjoyability

- Understand what learners value in learning.
- Put the learner at the center of the design process.
- Guide learners through the learning experience, don't just enable self-service.



Effortless Accessibility

Deliver Learning Where It Is Most Accessible, Not Across a Diversity of Channels

- Identify employee barriers to accessing learning.
- Invest in learning channels that solve for access barriers.
- Leverage relationships with line partners to embed learning in employee workflows.



Effortless Career Applicability

Demonstrate Career Applicability of Learning, Not Just Immediate Applicability

- Connect organizational strategy to employees' career development.
- Provide employees with transparency into shifting skill profiles.
- Teach managers to hold career and employability conversations.



Equip L&D Staff

Develop L&D Staff to Create Experiences, Not Just Products

- Identify the L&D staff capabilities required to deliver an effortless learning experience.
- Build L&D staff capabilities by providing them experiential development opportunities.
- Close L&D staff capability gaps through a blended build/buy/partner strategy.

Members of CEB L&D can access the full [Action Plan for Delivering an Effortless Learning Experience](#) and additional tools and resources on the [The Digital Learner: Delivering an Effortless Learning Experience](#) microsite.