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Creating a Digital Approach to MODERN LEARNING

Whether to go digital is no longer a strategic question for corporate learning departments to ponder—it's a necessity. For several years now, we've been aware of the changing modern worker and the need for L&D to also change how to support the evolving employee population. Several years ago, Josh Bersin introduced the Bersin by Deloitte infographic "Meet the Modern Learner." In it, Bersin provides a snapshot of the modern worker profile, illustrating the battle L&D must engage in to compete for the workers' time and attention to learning. As we fast-forward to 2019, much of what we know about the modern learner still holds true today; thus, the need for a digital approach to learning is not only still relevant, it's essential.

The MODERN LEARNER is:



Feeling overwhelmed and distracted

In *Insights from IMPACT 2018*, Josh Bersin shares that the average worker spends **25%** of their time on emails and checks their phone **150 times a day**. Yet, the average time an employee typically dedicates to learning for work is around **20 minutes a week** or **~1%** (Bersin 2017). This begs the question, why?



Keen to learn

In the war for talent, it's worth noting that professional development is a critically important value proposition and key to attracting and retaining employees, as it is the **#1 top reason why people want to join an organization ... or leave it** (Perring 2018). So, if the modern learner is keen to learn, why only spend 1% of their time learning?



Seeking timely and personalized content

Today's modern worker wants relevant information that is available on the go and in the flow of their schedule. With the advent of mobile smartphones, content is now timely, personalized, and under the control of the employee. A significant portion of acquiring critical knowledge at work can now be done in the very moment it is needed. And, according to Treion Muller's *7 Consumer Realities report*, in moments of need, **96% of people turn to their phones and search for the answer**.



Desiring to learn on demand ... anywhere and anytime

Employees value the ability to find information at work the way they choose to get it at home—leveraging mobile smartphones and tablets to gain the knowledge they want, when they want it, and how they want it. According to an article by James Carson, the average person spends **2 hours a day on their smartphone**, which increases to **3 hours for those 18–24 years old**.



Preferring learning to be through on-the-job experience

Despite the popularity of mobile smartphones, the modern learner still places a premium on learning **through on-the-job experience (94%)** where they can take knowledge they've gained and apply it real time. This was the finding in user research conducted by Jane Hart, Director of the Centre for Modern Workplace Learning and the Founder of the Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies (C4LPT), one of the world's leading websites on learning trends, technologies, and tools. The results from her research continue to show that, for modern professionals, the **least valued ways** to learn at and for work are the traditional workplace learning activities: classroom training and eLearning (**DIDACTICS**). **The most valued ways** to learn for work are through the experiences and activities that happen as part of daily work (**DOING**), interaction with people (**DISCOURSE**), and the use of informal web content (**DISCOVERY**).



“ 94% of modern learners place a premium on learning through on-the-job experiences. ”



Modern learners EXPECT modern learning experiences

Assuming one agrees that the aforementioned attributes of the modern learner remain relevant today, then it follows that L&D must undergo its own digital transformation to fully leverage this technology and all the intriguing current and future disruptors emerging from it, which will reshape the value proposition of corporate learning for today's employees.

In fact, given the speed of this evolving technology, I believe we've already moved way past the notion of "going digital" to now asking ourselves what is necessary for "being digital." Being digital from an L&D perspective to me means that learning is no longer a single event or destination but rather a diverse set of continual educational experiences from a variety of sources. While there continues to be a valuable place for traditional, instructor-led training (ILT), it will be less the norm as digital online learning platforms support just-in-time, bite-size, on-demand learning leveraging AI, machine learning, augmented reality, and other evolving technologies to enhance the learner experience.

L&D organizations are increasingly depending on online learning solutions to appeal to a more diverse, multigenerational workforce. According to LinkedIn Learning's 2019 *Workplace Learning Report*, 59% of talent developers surveyed say they spend more of their budget on online learning than they did 3 years ago, and 39% say they spend less on ILT. Online learning platforms can help organizations improve how they identify, assess, and measure skill gaps and benchmark them against similar organizations; increase learner engagement; and develop career frameworks.

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Digital Learning TRANSFORMATION

So, if we think we understand the characteristics of the modern learner and the value this modern worker places on an engaging, modern learning experience, then all that's left is to simply build a modern learning environment. Oh, if it were only that simple! In my experience, the L&D department must overcome significant hurdles when considering creating a digital approach to learning:

1 Gaining the company's commitment to digital transformation – The good news is that many, if not most, organizations are either planning, experimenting, or executing some form of digital transformation. From an L&D perspective, that is good news because you don't have to necessarily solicit buy-in from the C-suite or major internal stakeholders on the value of digital. Also, you can and should develop your L&D digital transformation strategy in complete alignment with the organization's goals and skill gaps, supporting the broader company transformation.

The bad news is that L&D is typically seen as a cost center and not intuitively linked to the realization of a successful corporate digital transformation. In this case, the first critical step is establishing benchmarks and conducting voice of the employee surveys and digital transformation skills assessments. These tools help to better understand what it will take for your company's successful digital transformation and the recommended role of L&D supporting that journey. If done well, this approach will help you overcome the first and most critical hurdle—securing sponsorship of the CEO and/or key C-suite stakeholders as well as the senior HR leadership team. They will discover why a digital transformation for learning is important to the organization's overall digital transformation.

2 Defining digital transformation – When my L&D leadership team and I first began developing a global digital learning strategy, I randomly asked colleagues to define what digital transformation meant to them. Interestingly, for every 10 individuals I polled, regardless of tenure, title, or division, I would typically receive at least 6 uniquely different answers. Not surprisingly, for many the answer predominantly centered on technology. This was also true for many within our L&D department.



dig·i·tal trans·for·ma·tion

The investment in and development of new technologies, mindsets, and business and operational models to improve work and competitiveness and deliver new and relevant value for customers and employees in an ever-evolving digital economy.

But no matter how it's defined, what is most important is that the definition is consistent across the organization. In an article published by CMS Wire, Noreen Seebacher refers to the definition of digital transformation that Brian Solis, principal analyst at San Francisco-based Altimeter, a Prophet company, wrote: "The investment in and development of new technologies, mindsets, and business and operational models to improve work and competitiveness and deliver new and relevant value for customers and employees in an ever-evolving digital economy." I tend to gravitate towards this definition because it speaks to the value proposition from a business lens yet references the concept of mindset and customer/employee experience that L&D can help foster.

Next, and perhaps most critical in creating a digital learning approach, is working closely with internal business stakeholders, IT, the Legal department, and HR. Collaborating with stakeholders leads to identifying the competencies required and infrastructure needed to help support the organization's digital transformation and the specific role L&D can play in this process.

3 Embracing the shift in culture and mindset – Having a common definition is a helpful start, but to fully begin the transformation, you have to embrace the need for cultural change and shift in mindset to move from the notion of "going" digital and "doing" digital to "being" digital. This is because digital transformation is as much about people and organizational behavior as it is about technology and infrastructure. In fact, according to Gartner research analyst Aashish Gupta, "Many organizations forget to address the necessary cultural shift needed to change the mindset of workers, without which no digital transformation project is going to succeed."


In my experience, a significant investment of time is required to develop the cultural mindset shift within the L&D department before effectively marketing new strategic direction across the enterprise. We must be comfortable with the idea that creating a digital learning landscape will ultimately challenge, if not threaten, conventional learning roles and responsibilities. We need to surrender control of learning to its rightful owner—the employee. We must embrace the reality that certain L&D roles will likely evolve from delivering learning to helping facilitate and enrich the learner experience. Traditional positions in L&D need to make room for new competencies such as cloud architect, content curator, digital content developer, and experience designer.

4 Developing a dynamic digital learning platform – It's no revelation that many L&D departments have been increasingly frustrated over the past several years with their traditional learning management systems (LMSs). LMS shortcomings have been illuminated by the emergence of more dynamic, digital online platforms. When my L&D team set out to modernize how we learn at our company, we sought to create a single, enterprise-wide, digital learning platform. This platform would ultimately enable an employee to share in the accountability for curating content and customizing their learning needs based on when, where, and how they prefer to learn.

Creating a digital approach to modern learning is no small investment and requires the sponsorship of senior leaders and the collaboration of a broad, interdisciplinary team of professionals across the company. It requires breaking down organizational silos and supporting a cultural shift toward a growth mindset that recognizes and values digital resources as a conduit for delivering a continuous learning experience. I highlighted a few of the opportunities and challenges that exist in pursuing this path—but I have no doubt you could share others.

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About the AUTHOR

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After nearly 35 years of service within the Pharmaceutical Industry, Marvin retired from Merck in the Fall of 2018. Although the vast majority of his experience was within the commercial operations side of the business, his most recent role prior to retirement was as the Chief Learning Officer for Merck's Global Learning and Development department.

In this role, Marvin led a transformational initiative to modernize Global L&D and strengthen Merck's position as a High-Performance Learning Organization by building people capabilities through relevant, continuous learning experiences that are personalized, adaptive and easy to find, consume and apply.

Marvin is now a valuable member of the GP Strategies® Advisory Board, bringing his expertise to represent the voice of GP Strategies' customers when it comes to designing business initiatives, innovating services, crafting corporate strategy and leading our industry into the future.

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