

KEEPING UP TO SPEED:

How a new learning
mindset is transforming
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What does workplace learning mean to you? Is it in-house training, courses and conferences? Or does it extend to giving employees the opportunities to learn, and to share their learning, in the context of their day-to-day work? While formal training continues to be important, organizations are increasingly recognizing that learning “at the point of need” or “just-in-time” is a powerful way to engage and motivate employees, while helping them develop skills to meet current and future business demands.

Why do we need to keep learning?

In a digitally connected world and workplace where information is cheap and easy to come by, the ability to connect with others and to make sense of “*information noise*” is a critical and valued skill. Learning is no longer an add-on. Learning is the work. Learning is not about demonstrating compliance or understanding of a static body of knowledge; it is about keeping up-to-date and up-to-skill. And, crucially, it is about **changing what we do accordingly**. It needs to happen in every project, in every client/customer encounter — every day.

What is learning?

Charles Jennings, a leading thinker and practitioner in learning and development, says

“Real learning ... is behaviour change. Anyone has ‘learned’ if they can do something that they couldn’t do previously, or can do it better, faster or with fewer errors. That applies to learning wherever and however it occurs—whether in a formal, directed setting such as a classroom or program, or as part of the workflow.”

(source: <https://www.702010forum.com/posts/news/70-20-10-forum-catches-up-with-charles-jennings>)

Organizations need workers to share their learning, so that the business can adapt quickly, innovate and respond to new demands or environments. The challenge for individual workers is finding ways to keep pace — whether that is about upgrading skills or forging new connections with others who are at the cutting edge of their industry or profession. Forward-thinking companies support these processes and recognize that learning is part of the job. They understand that a large proportion of learning needs to take place on the job, not away from the workplace.

This paper explores why opportunities to learn, and to share our learning, are becoming hard-wired into our everyday work. We’ll discuss why and how this is already happening in some workplaces and what your company or organization can do to nurture a “*learning ecosystem*,” which embraces learning on the job, learning from other people and learning from structured courses and programs.

The short self-life of knowledge

No industry or profession is untouched by the need to stay up to date and spread new knowledge. The basic principles of a profession may be slow to change but there is now consensus, even in the formal education sector, that a professional person — whether a nurse, an engineer or a web developer — must keep abreast of new research, approaches and technologies throughout their careers. In fact, being a professional is, by definition, someone who commits to continued learning and who challenges the knowledge base in which they have been schooled.

Sugatra Mitra, Professor of Education Technology at Newcastle University, speaking in a documentary “**The Future of Learning**” goes so far as to suggest,

"Knowing something is probably an obsolete idea. You don't actually need to know anything. You can find out at the point when you need to know it."

Outrageous as it may sound to those of us who have spent our lives in education, training and lifelong professional development, Mitra's comment points to a new mindset in how we think about knowledge and learning, which emerges from two ground-shifting trends:

#1 A shift from training to self-directed learning

The first point is that we have moved away from a 20th Century model that views the training or teaching task as being about transferring a body of knowledge from expert to novice. We are not empty vessels to be filled, nor is knowledge itself a static entity. In the 21st Century, we are moving beyond the limitations of an instructor-led, content-driven approach. Knowing how to learn in this new and connected workplace is increasingly important both to individuals and to their employing organizations. The UK-based Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) **characterizes this shift** as *"the progressive movement from the delivery of content to the development of learning capabilities as a people development strategy."*

Developing 'learning capabilities' means that individuals are expected to be more self-directed in their learning to identify for themselves what they need to know in order to do their job well. Supporting workers in their self-directed learning requires a shift away from instructor-planned, off-job training events towards a more fluid process of integrated learning. Expert instructional content is still a vital component in a wider learning strategy but we now think less about delivery and more about accessibility. Rather than delivering new instructional content as a routine part of a department-wide training program, we can now develop more personalized approaches which make very specialized content accessible to an individual at the time that the person needs to use it. Which brings us to our next point....

#2 Learning at the point of need

The second point is that, in a world where information is at our fingertips, what we need are systems and people who can help us ask the right kinds of questions at the

right time. We don't need teachers or trainers who give us answers to questions we may never encounter. We need mentors, coaches and tools that help us find the answers at the time we need them. We need access to peers who are working with the same problems and can help us out in the moment. And we need access to experts in our field through training tools that allow us to find just-in-time answers simply by searching a database. Learning at the point of need, it is argued, brings benefits to the individual and the organization. For the individual, it means improved retention of information, a better use of time and an increase in team collaboration and community. This leads to higher job satisfaction and sense of ownership over the learning process. For the organization, learning at the point of need improves workplace performance and productivity as part of a strategic response to the 70:20:10 framework (see the box below).

The 70:20:10 Framework

Based on empirical research, the 70:20:10 framework argues that improving workplace performance happens through three kinds of activity:

- 70% is experiential learning – learning and developing through day-to-day tasks, challenges and practices.
- 20% is social learning – learning and developing with and through others.
- 10% is formal learning – learning and developing through structured modules, courses and programs.

The numbers are shorthand to show formal and structured learning is only one part of organizational learning. A whole workplace strategy has been developed on the basis of this model, which you can find out about on the **70:20:10 Forum**.

Implementing this holistic strategy, the Forum claims, results in:

- A high performance culture.
- Increased speed to productivity.
- Organization agility and resilience.
- Increased employee engagement.
- A strategic and responsive learning function.

- Increased impact and efficiency of learning.

An ecosystem for workplace learning

The new world of workplace learning is about redefining relationships, creating new opportunities, supporting existing practices (that workers themselves are already using) and enabling innovation to flourish. To do this we need to attend to different ways of learning: experiential, social and formal. Rather than traditional training —that's delivered "top-down," is instructor-led and driven by static content—many organizations are now looking at the whole work environment in which learning takes place. Efforts are more concerned with developing and supporting an environment that encourages and rewards learning. As the organization grows and changes, so must the learning environment. So the leadership challenge becomes how best to nurture an ecosystem that allows workers to define their own learning needs and to develop their learning capabilities in ways that will bring added value to the business.

Nurturing a learning ecosystem

An ecosystem grows and changes over time by interacting with internal and external influences. Nurturing the learning ecosystem is a delicate balance between creating the conditions for experiential and social learning, as well as providing resources and courses at the point of need. Although each organization has to develop a strategy in the context of its own business objectives and specific circumstances, there are some common elements to consider as part of a robust learning ecosystem.

A robust learning ecosystem might include:

- Collaborative platforms where workers can form communities to share best practice and case studies with their peers both inside and outside the organization.
- Opportunities to build personal and professional learning networks both inside and outside the organization.
- Simulation e-learning, where workers can practice knowledge and skills in a hands-on way as a response to relevant scenarios with low-risk consequences.
- Expert-reviewed instructional e-learning content to guide people through new skills as required.
- Easy access to courses and resources to prepare for new roles and responsibilities.

- Access to search engines that find targeted information fast.

- Instant messaging (i.e. via discussion boards) to experts, peers or mentors to ask questions at the time of need.
- Encouragement to blog, reflect and build learning portfolios.
- Push technologies that use email and/or other reminders to reinforce and extend learning or to send out job/performance aids at the time they are needed.
- Mentors, coaches and facilitators who support workers in their learning and development.
- Managers who understand that "learning is the work" and encourage workers to engage with the opportunities above.

How people prefer to learn at work

In considering which components of your learning ecosystem need developing or strengthening it helps to understand how people prefer to learn at work. There is no point developing e-learning that is too long to be used or putting up forums where people feel constrained in their freedom to post. We have already discussed the shift towards a more self-directed approach to learning but what else do we know about how people prefer to learn at work?

Jane Hart, a leading commentator on workplace learning, identifies six ways in which modern learners prefer to learn, in contrast to traditional training practices, summarized here **(you can read the full post on her blog, which explains how each preference contrasts to traditional practices):**

• Autonomy

Modern learners choose what they want to learn as well as when and how they want to learn it.

• Small and short

Modern learners tend to make use of short, bite-sized pieces of content – both instructional and informational (that perhaps take 15-20 minutes to consume) – as well as have brief interactions with others.

• Continuous

For modern learners, learning is a continuous process, a constant drip-feed or flow of information.

- **On demand**

When faced with a learning or performance problem, modern learners look for quick and easy solutions by searching themselves for an answer or asking their PLN [Personal Learning Network] to recommend a resource.

- **Social**

Modern learners are highly social. They learn with, or alongside, others and from others in terms of resources, ideas, experiences and thinking that have been shared.

- **Anywhere, anytime, on any device**

Learning is happening all the time, whether consciously or unconsciously, intentional or accidental. It may happen face to face, on a laptop, tablet or smartphone.

What can these learning practices look like?

To illustrate Hart's points, here are some examples of how these preferences can translate to practice:

Autonomy

Example: linking up to "communities of practice"

Online communities are a place where people exchange ideas, ask questions, solve problems and help each other out. This can be a quick and easy way to get instant answers. For example, if a developer is in the middle of building an app and can't figure out how to test his AngularJS directives, he may visit a site like StackOverflow to see if someone else has had a similar problem or to pose it to the community.

Similarly, some e-learning providers offer forums or discussion boards alongside their e-learning modules where learners can post questions in real time and get quick responses from experts or peers.

Small and short

Example: challenge of the week

The Articulate e-learning community has a "challenge of the week," which asks the community to showcase and share their skills by using the Articulate authoring software. A challenge is set (for example, create a quiz that tests learners on an instructional design principle, model, researcher or theorist) and then all entries are posted and shared. Participants get the kudos of peer appreciation, the opportunity to practice skills in a low-risk environment and the fun of trying out new approaches.

"Small and short" also works well for instructional e-learning. An e-learning platform that offers ready access to short and relevant modules, designed to meet specific work problems or skills deficits at the time of need, is more use to employees than sitting through a long course to find a single answer.

Continuous

Example: learning flow micro-activities

Hart has experimented with "micro-activities," where discussion and learning activities are incorporated into the workflow based on weekly themes. For instance, an IT team might focus one week on the topic of security issues and the following week move on to discussing virtualization. In this way, content is used to enable, rather than drive, the social learning experience.

On demand

Example: Twitter and Tweetchat

Putting a question out on Twitter to a network of like-minded people can often bring quick and easy answers. A more structured and specialized approach is an organized Tweetchat where regular chats are conducted at set times by following a hashtag. For example, primary year educators around the globe who are delivering the International Baccalaureate have a regular chat session to learn from, and with, each other.

Social

Example: social learning to support exam entrants

A group of 40 employees from JLT India used Chatter, an internal collaboration platform, over an eight-week period to help achieve success in their professional exams. They created an exam community to discuss progress with the exams, share tips and answer questions. They had offline meetings once a week to discuss key learning experiences. Gaming techniques such as leaderboards and rewards added an element of fun and competition. Read the **full case study**.

MODERN WORKPLACE LEARNING

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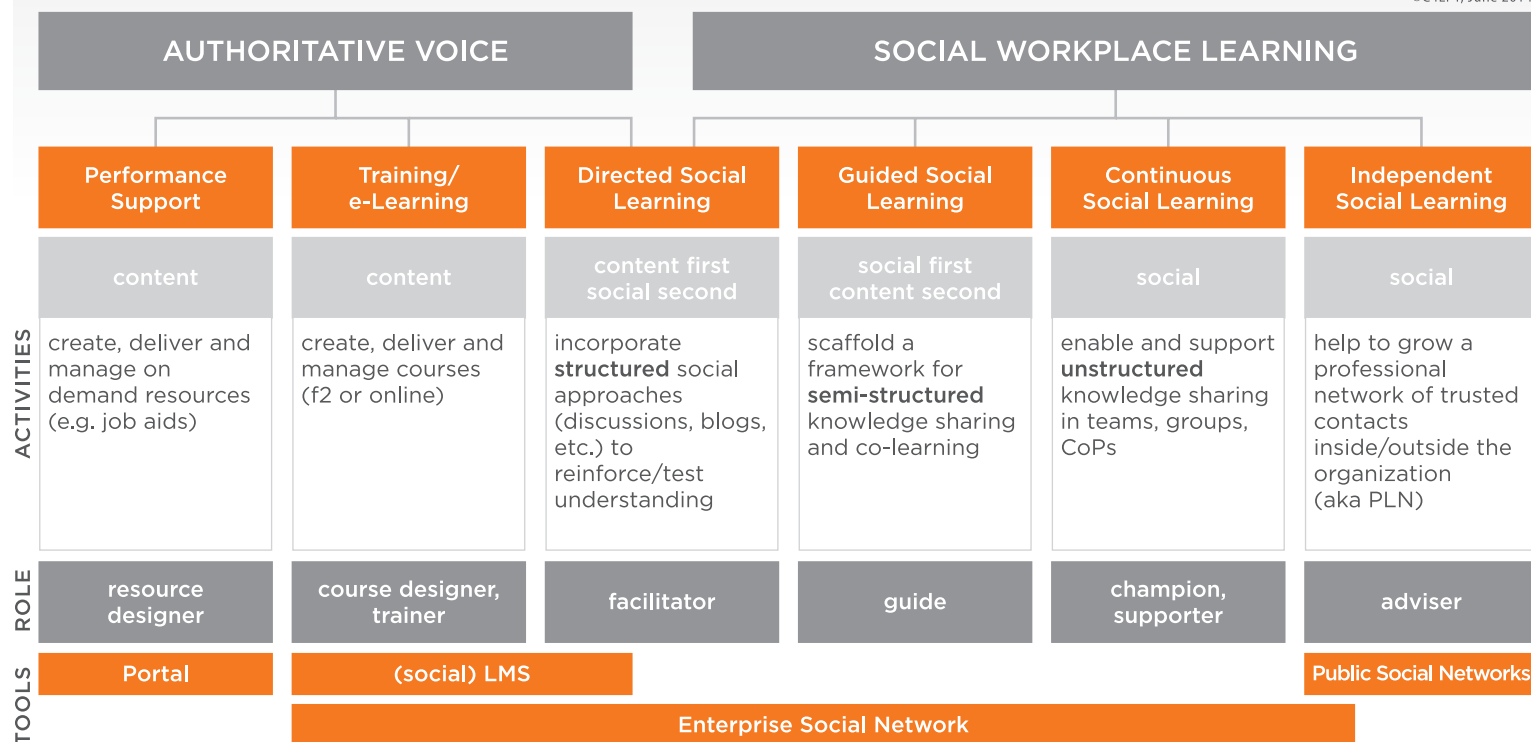


Figure 1: Modern Workplace Learning (Published with permission. Hart, 2014. [See original version here.](#))

Anytime, anywhere, on any device

Example: apps for paramedics

Phone apps can be a great way to deliver anytime, anywhere learning. For professions like paramedics they can be life-saving, providing instant information in unusual situations or the ability to calculate complicated medical dosages in a crisis.

Anytime, anywhere learning is not just for crisis situations, however. Any reputable e-learning provider knows it is essential to provide multiple mobile apps to give users access to their online training library on the go, whether users are connected or need offline viewing.

Integrating formal and social learning

As the JLT India example illustrates, social and formal learning can work in harmony. In *Figure 1*, Hart shows how formal and social learning are part of a continuum. Rather than being in opposition to each other they serve complementary and different purposes.

Formal, authoritative workshops and courses continue to be important for providing essential guidance,

instruction and for demonstrating competence to practice safely and professionally. They are often needed at critical points when an individual needs to upgrade his or her skills for a new role or when new processes or technology are being introduced. Occasionally, structured courses require intensive attendance outside work hours but more often we are seeing the use of ongoing part-time courses and self-paced e-learning.

“Phone apps can be a great way to deliver anytime, anywhere learning.”

Formal but flexible

Although formal in the sense that any of these courses may be assessed against standards or competencies, they can still be designed to be flexible, to connect people in communities of practice and to meet the needs of workers as they arise. Rich learning experiences available at the point of need can be created by integrating small bites of learning content with webinars, chat sessions, forums and other activities that connect people with similar expertise or interests.

The next generation of e-learning

When people talk about e-learning, they generally mean self-paced, bite-sized learning units that often incorporate narration and screencasting together with interactive elements such as quizzes or scenario-based learning.

e-Learning has had a meteoric rise in the past decade and has had to grow up fast. The early days of “click next” PowerPoint slides are largely over and gone are the days when each company produced its own e-learning with huge development teams to support it. Today, there are large companies wholly devoted to developing high quality e-learning for specialist and niche markets, so L&D departments can augment their own offerings by buying in modules that have been created to a high specification to meet particular requirements of teams as the need arises.

This solution can be particularly useful when there are teams with existing high levels of expertise who need to upgrade their understanding in very specialized areas. For example, suppose a team of developers is building and supporting several versions of one app to support different operating systems. The team identifies that they need to learn more about new cross-platform development technologies, which could save them hours of work and maintenance costs. There are two ways the team can learn. One is by teaching themselves through trial and error and sharing the learning with other team members as they go. This can be effective but may be costly in terms of time and it could also involve some risk of project-drift or, more seriously, project errors during the learning process. The other is to use a specialist e-learning provider for technologists that can offer the team targeted expert-led courses that address this niche topic. This solution is capable of drilling down to the

detail that the team needs for their live project. If there are still questions unanswered by the e-learning they can go to the accompanying forum and post their questions there to be answered by the expert community.

Questions to ask if you are buying in e-learning:

- Does the content meet the needs of the intended users?
- Is the content easy to navigate?
- Is it original?
- Is it up to date? How often is it reviewed and updated?
- Has it been developed and reviewed by experts in the field?
- Does it offer a wide enough variety of content to address needs at all skill levels?
- What support is available?
- Is there a clear learning path? (In other words, can workers easily find and enter at the right level of expertise for their needs?)

What changes might benefit your organization?

To help you think about how learning is valued and supported within your own organizational context, take a few moments to reflect on how you stay ahead of the game in your job:

- How do you keep up to date with what is going on in your organization?
- How do you keep up to date with what is going on in your industry/profession?
- Thinking back to a recent problem at work, how did you solve it?
- Where did you go first for your information?
- Who did you ask to help?
- If it involved new skills, how did you acquire them?
- Was it during work, the evening or weekend?
- Did you share what you learned with anyone in your team/organization?
- If so, how? If not, why?

The chances are that your answers reflect a combination of strategies: some face-to-face, some online,

some personal and individual and some social and collaborative. Formal training may play a role but this may only be part of the picture. If you felt compelled to acquire the skills you need to do your job outside of work hours, what do you think this says about your workplace? How many of the learning strategies used were actively supported by your organization? The answers to these questions may give you some clues about the extent to which learning is embedded across your organization. If you return to Figure 1, do you see one part of the continuum that is supported better than another?

How can you nurture a learning ecosystem?

An ecosystem consists of dynamically interacting parts and communities, each of which adapt in response to changes in other parts of the system. Here are some suggestions for ways that people in each part of the organization can contribute to, and nurture, a healthy learning ecosystem.

Leadership's role

- Encourage, and meet with, managers to support micro learning and weekly challenges.
- Develop or source good content for job-specific skills development.
- Quality check all e-learning that you buy in (see Box 3).
- Create clear signposts and learning paths, so people know how to find content for their level of ability and how to build on their skills. (It's a common issue that more advanced skills are less well catered for.)
- Make it easy for people to find the right content (see Box 3).
- Put on webinars to fit with issues as they arise. Facilitate chat sessions.
- Be creative about delivery – you don't have to have all learning activities in one go. Space them out in bite-sized chunks.
- Help set up and support online communities then step back to allow the pace and agenda be set by the community.
- Offer platforms for people to share their work in blogs, videos etc.

- Provide incentives for individuals to make their own plans for learning and development and help them access the resources they need when they need them.
- Provide support and training for mentors and coaches.

Individual contributor's role

- Expect change and plan for it.
- Be proactive in finding solutions to work problems.
- Think about developing a portfolio to reflect on what you are learning day by day, to keep evidence of your progress and to plan for future development.
- Share what you do ('narrate your work') through blogging, Twitter and participating in online communities.
- Build, and use, personal and professional networks.
- Mentor others who are coming up behind you.
- Don't be afraid to admit what you don't know. In a world of change, learning is the work.

Managers' role

- Recognize that learning is more than courses and conferences. It embraces experiential, social and formal learning.
- Support learning in the workplace.
- Help teams connect and problem solve together.
- Support individuals in accessing the learning and development opportunities that they need.

Many of the ideas presented here will be familiar to you if you have worked in Learning and Development. Indeed, the concept of the "learning organization" was first explored by Peter Senge and his colleagues as long ago as 1990 in their groundbreaking work "**Dance of Change.**" What's exciting today is that the impetus for change is coming not from CEOs or even from Learning and Development (L&D) Departments. It is rising up from the expectations of employees themselves who are living and working in a digital age where the only constant is change and where knowledge obsolesces quicker than we can absorb it.

The internet and learning technologies afford us choices that were unimaginable when Senge was doing his research over 20 years ago. These technologies offer organizations many options for providing access to specialized expert content and for coming together in local and global communities of practice. The balance of power has shifted away from top-down delivery mechanisms in favor of crowd-sourced solutions and bottom-up approaches, where individuals can dictate the pace and speed of their own learning in ways that fit their work and lives.

The thrill of the internet is now over: for this generation it is just a way of life. It is how we use the tools and technologies at our disposal that counts. And to do this well, we need to adopt the mindset that values the contribution of each person in the organization and supports every individual to play his or her role in a healthy learning ecosystem.

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