

What Have We Learned About Learning

RESEARCH PAPER

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Introduction

The face, shape, size, and nature of the world of work are rapidly evolving, as are the skills required to succeed in it. While learning and development have always been considered important for the success of an organization, their significance today has grown massively. In the present scenario, and more importantly, in the future of work, learning, and development is essential to ensure that employees are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to meet the increasingly complex demands of the next generation of work. As every leader would agree, providing rich and well-defined learning opportunities can increase employee engagement, and drive retention (a critical advantage given the current talent scarcity and large-scale downturn), while also empowering employees with the skills needed to adapt to what lies ahead.

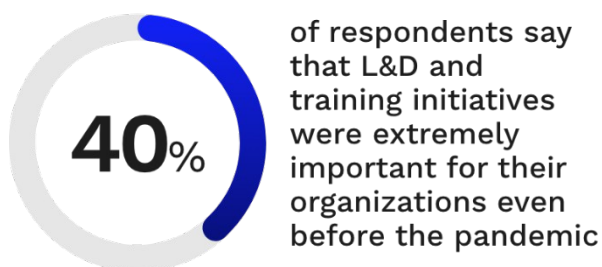
Any conversation about the future of workplaces and the learning required to prepare for this future is incomplete without taking the pandemic into account. Among the multitude of workplace disruptions triggered by the pandemic, one of the most significant is the impact on learning and how we do it. At the very least, the pandemic upended the conventional approaches and methods of workplace learning. But that's not all.

Through this research paper, we delve into the fast-growing need for learning, how the last few years have accelerated this need, and the ways in which workplace learning has shifted form.

Let's Rewind

In a matter of just a few years, the universe of work has undergone several years' worth of technological transformation. Undoubtedly, the pace of change and disruption has been hard to keep up with—even for well-established companies, as we are witnessing since the end of 2022.

FIGURE 1

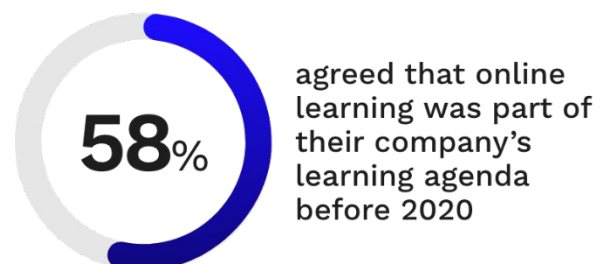


But the pandemic alone is not responsible for the increased significance of learning and development. Even before COVID struck, before people started working from home, leaders were beginning to notice the widening skill gap within their organizations.

Nearly 41% of those we surveyed, said that learning/training initiatives were extremely important in their company long before the pandemic hit. However, it must also be observed that despite understanding the critical role of L&D, **50% of our respondents admitted to still not having a well-defined learning agenda within their organization.**

While the growing technological changes in the pre-pandemic world were nudging organizations to ramp up their learning & training initiatives, the pandemic forced leaders to aggressively boost workplace learning strategies like never before. As remote operations became the norm, one of the most notable changes that followed was the shift from in-person training to virtual learning. After the first half of 2020, it became clear that HR and business leaders will benefit from having a strong employee development agenda & strategy in place. In essence, this meant that companies would need to invest in virtual training platforms, and tools, or rely on new sources to continue delivering the right quality of learning and development opportunities. At the same time, companies would also have to adopt flexible learning strategies in order to encourage more learning and allow employees to learn at their own pace and in their own time. Since the pandemic, leaders in organizations have had to be more creative in their approach to learning, using different methods—like gamification, microlearning, and more, to keep their employees engaged.

FIGURE 2



Virtual learning is not a new phenomenon. Over the past decade, online learning was progressively gaining popularity albeit not as a primary source of learning. But like most other tech adoptions, virtual learning, and development scaled only after organizations were forced to function remotely. The frequency and quality of learning initiatives increased. According to most of our respondents, learning did become a critical part of

employee engagement and for some, it was necessary to tie it with larger employee goals.

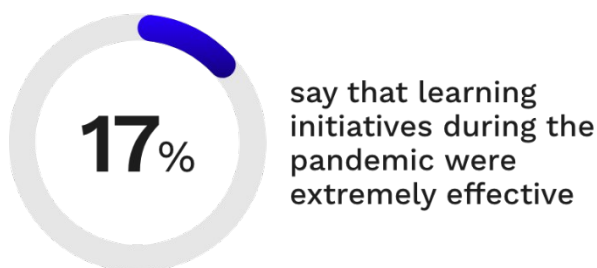
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We made learning a key ingredient in every employee’s goal plan; the focus was not just on learning core skills but other areas that they may not have exposure to, we also made learning one of the criteria for employee promotion.

- One of our respondents

Our findings lead us to the conclusion that sincere efforts were set in motion to drive a culture of learning with a strong emphasis on building skills required for the future. One organization established online learning communities that contributed to the process and culture of learning – thereby democratizing it. Another organization initiated cross-training across teams – a representative from each team led a session for the organization, sharing knowledge about a chosen topic that holds relevance. However, not every learning initiative was equally effective. Nearly 16% of those surveyed believed these initiatives to be very effective, 75% of them said they were only ‘moderately effective’, and almost 8% said they were not effective at all.

FIGURE 3



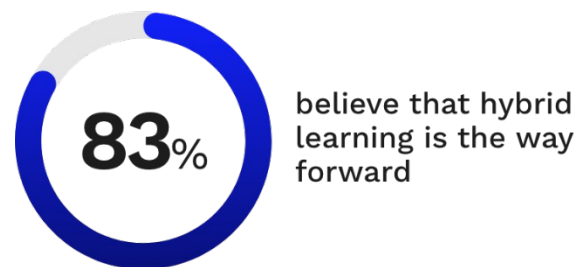
The pandemic also put the spotlight back on traits that were once considered ‘good-to-have’; like empathy, active listening, compassion, and communication. As a result, it soon became necessary to incorporate these into training agendas. Today, emotional intelligence, leadership, and teamwork, are sought-after qualities in employees, regardless of their designation. If one looks at the current scenario, where a large part of the global business world is battling one crisis after another, it is easier to understand why.

The Post-Pandemic Outlook

In the post-pandemic world, life and learning have both changed dramatically. Economic shifts, geo-political tensions, individual fears related to the threat of global recession, inflationary risks, and the growing challenge of climate change — each of these factors have moulded the decisions and actions of leaders across the world.

In the face of these challenging times, will employee development take a backseat? Will this learning momentum drop? Based on what we have learned, we can say that now, more than ever, learning and development will take precedence for businesses, leaders, and employees alike. So, what will be the way forward for workplace learning?

FIGURE 4



Hybrid learning has proved to be an effective, practical, and efficient way to provide employees with the learning and growth opportunities they need, and it is here to stay. According to 83% of our respondents, hybrid learning—a mix of online and offline learning tools and opportunities—is the future of L&D in the workplace. Close to 17% of those surveyed also believed that virtual learning is not only here to stay but will grow to be the only form of learning available to employees in the coming years.

As workplaces evolve, it is clear why organizations would choose to adopt a hybrid learning model. One of the key benefits of online learning is greater flexibility. For employees, this might translate into self-paced learning, more autonomy, and a sense of feeling valued as an individual. For employers, virtual learning offers the flexibility to customize an employee’s learning experience, meeting their specific needs and ensuring that their tailor-made training strikes a balance between the organization’s and the individual’s goals. At the same time, the unanimous opinion is that there is truly no replacement for in-person training opportunities. Many spontaneous and niche learning pockets are created only in face-to-face interactions. Keeping that in mind, leaders should focus on enabling such relevant opportunities, like candid one-on-one

sessions, or an ‘ask me anything’ interaction for employees to learn from the company’s senior leaders.

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Online learning is a powerful tool, but the pandemic has demonstrated that in-person engagement opportunities are far more captivating and better facilitate everything — from information retention to team bonding and collaboration. The main benefits of online learning may be in the forms of cost, scale, and automation, which can be helpful for more routine learning requirements, but to see a meaningful impact, it is best to appeal to the social necessity of the human condition.

- One of our respondents

What is the Takeaway?

Organizations, regardless of their sector, must focus on building and nurturing a culture of continuous learning. Given the rapid pace of technological advancements and the changing nature of work, it is essential that employees continually update their skills to remain relevant in the workplace. **An organization is its people. Leaders need to invest in lifelong learning programs, encourage employees to pursue every source of learning, and be proactive about collaborating with all types of trainers and training platforms—but more importantly, all leaders should lead by example.**

It is clear from our survey that HR and business leaders have realized that it is not enough to have internal employees as trainers. While intra-organization knowledge-sharing must be encouraged, it is also beneficial to tap external sources. Qualified external trainers, whether it is individuals or professional training companies, can help add value by broadening the learning horizon for employees.

FIGURE 5



About the Authors



Anil is a seasoned Human Resource professional with the experience of working a significant amount of his career in scaling startups ground up. He brings more than 19 years of deep hands-on and consultative experience across

Human Resources. Throughout his career playing multiple roles, he has been deeply involved with VC investors, founders and executive leaders in the area of people practices which have helped organizations grow seamlessly. His key contributions have been in:

- Talent acquisition across the hierarchy and functions.
- Creation of frameworks for performance management and talent engagement.
- Develop frameworks which enable in building diverse, high potential and performing teams.

In addition to his successful stints with large organizations like GE Capital (now GENPACT) and Avaya, Anil has had impactful stints with start-ups as well where he has scripted success stories for each one and helped them scale quickly and seamlessly. His stints have been with Tavant Technologies (Software Solutions), Mu Sigma Inc (Data Analytics – Sequoia & GAP funded) and SuperProfs (EdTech – Kalaari funded). In his last role, he played the role of CHRO at Innoviti Payments (Fintech - a Catamaran, SBI & Bessemer funded company).

Anil's deep experience spans functions, industries and geographies. His first principles-based approach to problem solving and thought leadership is deeply valued by clients and leaders alike.

About PeopleAsset

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