

2022

Adopting Learning Analytics

Closing the C-suite/L&D
Language Gap



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Executive Summary

A fall 2021 survey of Chief Learning Officer and Talent Management subscribers assessing their current and projected setup and use of learning analytics showed that while organizations were familiar with the concept and anxious for its proliferation, they were still far from the point of ready adoption. A confluence of roadblocks, the most significant of which is a “language” disconnect and a resulting misalignment of needs between C-suite/upper management and learning & development, are proving difficult to breach.

This paper encourages a continued shift in the communication paradigm through L&D’s adoption of quantitative metrics as primary measures. The proposed adjustment is set up with an assessment of the current environment followed by three recommendations for initiating and supporting the shift—adopting a new language; modifying the existing learning ecosystem to collect and analyze quantitative learning metrics; and getting and holding C-suite support for the effort.

The intent of this paper is to add light to the relatively new subject of organizational (rather than academic) learning analytics. It is hoped that it will act as another catalyst to further discussion and the evaluation of efforts— good, bad and indifferent—providing links and structure for ongoing reader interaction.

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Introduction

In a number of reports we have written or participated in over the past three years, there have been two common threads:

- 1) A significant communications gap exists in the majority of organizations between the C-suite/upper management and those charged with developing talent (HR/Learning & Development), with the C-suite wanting hard metrics supporting the L&D efforts, but getting principally soft numbers; and
- 2) There has been increasing evidence of a number of credible quantitative measurement tools coming online that could change that longstanding communications paradigm. Add to that the management challenges posed by today's remote workforce and it would appear that a transition point is upon us. L&D may be at its vortex or, at the very least, one of its key players.

However, this paper is not just about the communications gap or the new quantitative tools. Rather it looks at the learning analytic structures that are in place, or should be in place, for organizations to measure, adapt and succeed in this new and different environment. It is about recognizing the current and projected need for analyzing learning metrics and acquiring and translating those metrics into actionable, organization-building steps.



Separate Target Lists

This white paper is based on findings of a 2021 survey conducted across lists culled from subscribers to Chief Learning Officer (CLO) and Talent Management (TM). Notable in survey results was that aggregate per question, responses were virtually identical across both CLO and TM groups. The greatest deviation occurred when respondents were asked the level of their L&D experience. Consistent with their profiles, 82% of CLO respondents reported more than two years' experience, with only 71% of TM respondents reporting the same.



RECOGNIZING THE CURRENT & PROJECTED NEED

Defining the C-suite/L&D Language Gap

As mentioned, in almost every research project we have conducted around similar topics has been the recognition and acknowledgement of a communications or language gap between C-suite/upper management and HR/Learning & Development professionals. At its basic level the gap comes not from a lack of communication or miscommunication, but from an inconsistency between the measurement vernacular L&D offers to upper management (qualitative data) and the language C-suite/upper management needs (quantitative data) to justify their budget allocations. While it's not difficult to see the reason — a heretofore absence of quantitative metric tools — it is difficult, with the advent of tools to measure learning's impact on ROI and other quantitative support data, to understand why the gap is so slow in closing.

The answer appears to take the form of a dilemma — L&D stumbled for a decade or more providing marginally useful qualitative data, and management came to believe that was all they would or could expect to be available. Today, though more — and more reliable — quantitative metrics are available, resources are not being sufficiently allocated for L&D to take advantage of them.

The main impetus of the problem is that the majority of L&D units have not yet convinced their upper management to invest in quantitative learning assessment personnel and/or tools. In a learning analytics survey conducted in the fall of 2021 among Learning & Development managers and developers, 93% of all respondents said skills-related data is important to their organization (with 66% saying it is very important or even vital). Those same responses reach over 96% for organizations with more than 20,000 employees. And by 2025 it's estimated that 50% of employees will need to be re-skilled^[1]. Despite that, only 27% of organizations have personnel dedicated to collecting, reporting and interpreting learning analytics data.



The Status of Learning Analytics

In assessing the current status of learning analytics, the study found 67% of the respondents' roles in their organizations reported through HR or more specifically through an L&D function, and another quarter (24%) reported through some other function within the organization. The good news was that, within the context of that organizational structure, 68% of respondents said management asked L&D to provide learning program data at regular intervals throughout the year, though alarmingly, 22% of respondents said they were not required to produce learning performance data at all.

The more discouraging news was that among those who were providing learning analytics data, only half were using the inherent, minimalist tools available through their LMS, Excel or other built-in resources. And, despite providing a wealth of data and insight, less than 14% of all respondents were using a learning analytics platform.

From a more granular perspective, the variety of learning analytics that were sent to upper management, albeit principally qualitative, were fairly equal between:

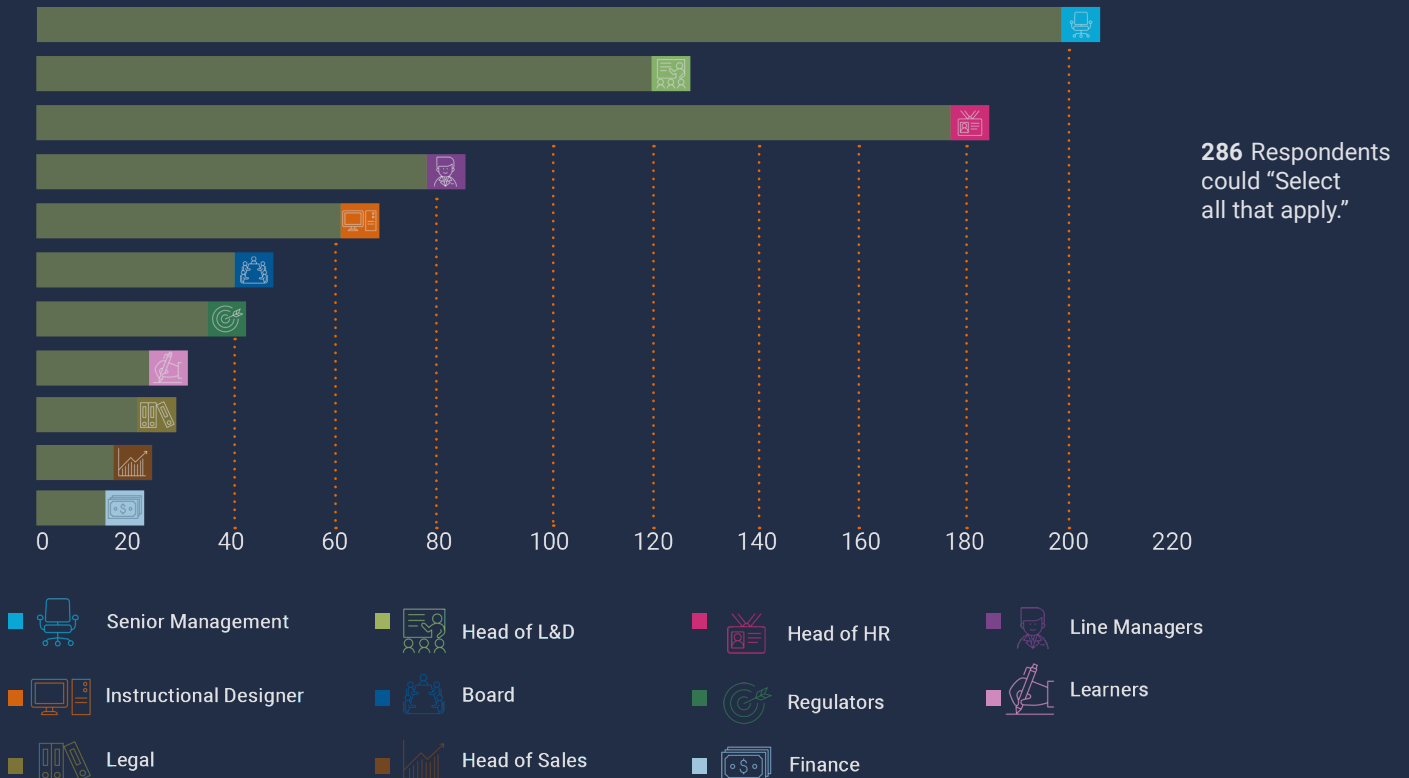
- Learning experience — about a specific learning activity (59%);
- Learning programs — about overall learning programs and curricula (55%); and
- Learners — about individuals and groups of learners (44%).

When asked for a top-down perspective, the overwhelming majority (71%) indicated their information was going to senior management, and the top three categories of data being requested were:

- Knowledge gained and skills acquired (63%);
- Completions (60%); and
- Usage (56%).

Overall, survey responses indicated that over 45% of organizations are getting, at best, a very basic, fundamental look at the learning and development that occurs in their organizations — essentially peeping at their world through a pinhole.

Who are the people in your organization requesting learning data?



What reports are they asking for?



Moves in the Right Direction

The evaluation of respondents organization status was confirmed when 73% of responses indicated their organizations were at “Basic Measurement” or “Data Evaluation” levels, the lowest two rungs on the learning analytics scale. Only 19% felt they were at an advanced level and about half said they were planning to change their technology stack, with many shifting from Excel to a learning analytics platform.

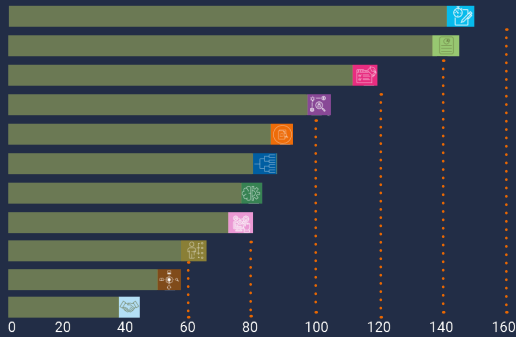
Organizations appear to be building momentum behind efforts to collect and utilize skills analytics, with 40% of respondents indicating their organization had begun moving in that direction and another 46% saying they were aware of the need. 89% of respondents said the need for skills-related data has become more or much more important over the past two years.

Taking corrective action has been difficult. While the pandemic has had a strong influence, it does not wholly account for less than 2% of organizations feeling they could fill their skills gaps from purely internal resources, with nearly two-thirds feeling the mix of new talent would come from a combination of outside and inside resources, skewing in favor of outside.

In separate inquiries, the survey asked respondents what they were currently using learning analytics for and what they wished they could use learning analytics for. Beyond the reported numbers, it was the differences between current and wished-for uses that were most impactful:

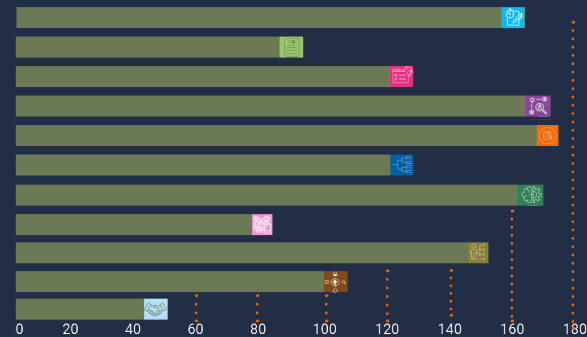
	Current	Wished for	Difference
• Correlate learning performance with skills data	26.4%	63.0%	+ 36.6%
• Learning program analytics — use advanced analysis to optimize future learning pathways	33.2%	70.3%	+ 37.1%
• Correlate learning performance with business KPIs to measure effectiveness	37.2%	72.4%	+35.2%
• Performance and learning — individual and group KPIs and competencies	42.4%	71.5%	+29.1%
• Compliance reporting	56.0%	37.0%	-19.0%

At present what do you use learning analytics for?



239 Respondents identified
Top 5 uses for Learning Analytics

In an ideal world, what would you like to use learning analytics for?



243 Respondents could "Select all that apply."



Compounding the Challenge

L&D's shift to more quantitatively oriented measurements would likely be happening much faster were it not for some compounding challenges. First, 54% of respondents indicated "less time to look for external talent" combined with their "high investment in current personnel" slows the process. And secondly, more than half (58.8%) of respondents used the limited measurement tools provided through their LMS and more than a third could not use robust quantitative metrics due to the mediums through which their learning and training were being delivered (37.8%).

The bottom line was that while respondents saw the potential in using learning analytic platforms for learning performance and usage measurement and reporting, the combination of internally and externally imposed roadblocks prevented a swift uptake.

ACQUIRING & TRANSLATING LEARNING METRICS

Fortunately, roadblocks can be cleared. Recognizing that every organization looks at this issue from a different perspective, there are some basic steps that, when tackled, can start any organization down its desired path. Three are offered here, but we recognize we're not the only voice and would like to start a dialogue around learning analytics — its status and developmental progress. We encourage those with hands-on experience to offer their own positions in learning analytics — where your organization is, where you would like it to be and what's being done to make it happen. [Learn more.](#)

1. Adapting to a New Language

Unfortunately, “new language” doesn't mean C-suite and L&D will find some middle ground. In the 1990s marketing was in a position similar to L&D in providing the C-suite with qualitative metrics around their advertising expenditures — mostly qualified reporting. The adjustment was marketing's adoption of quantitative measures which led to the direct and timely tracking and correlation of advertising dollars out to revenue dollars in.

Among those organizations furthest along in adopting quantitative measures in the learning analytic translation process, 62% of survey respondents indicated they are using Happy Sheets, Kirkpatrick or Net Promoter Scores to gather and report metrics.

But getting a quantitative metric tool is just the first step. While the initial search data gained is valuable, useful information also comes in trend data, and that requires time and tools.

Developing a new language that upper management can use isn't an “if” requirement — it's a “when,” so beginning the transition process is an upfront requirement.

2. With Change, a Chance to Grow

Are your employees back in the office five days a week, two thousand hours a year? Will they be? If they're not, your organization will be among the majority looking for new ways to manage.

Managing the new work environment will be a major challenge L&D will be a key driver and learning analytics will be their GPS. Your organization may have the resources to tackle the challenge alone, but if not, there are organizations that can help both with the restructuring and gathering and interpreting of learning data. There aren't many though, and finding one that fits your organization's requirements may be difficult. Getting moving sooner than later is key. If you don't have the resources to get moving soon, get help.

3. Getting C-suite Support

The last recommendation may be the most important, but will inevitably follow the first two. You've learned a new language and you're producing valued metrics; the conclusive step is gaining C-suite support to secure the resources needed to continue moving forward. Here are a few suggestions:

- **Find a champion and outline your plan** — look for someone in upper management with the vision to see where learning analytics can take your organization — someone who recognizes the changing environment. Concede any C-suite/L&D communication issues that may exist; identify changes and the ways they can be accommodated; ask for specific metrics needed; and identify the solutions your area could provide.
- **Develop internal communication channels** — the challenge will be as much about marketing as it is about personnel. Find or create vehicles that will communicate programs to the audiences that will ultimately use them. You may face skepticism regarding L&D's track record in this area. If there is experienced marketing help available — use it.
- **Set, track and align L&D goals with business outcomes** — two years into the pandemic, many L&D managers didn't know what they didn't know. That's changing, and L&D is becoming an increasingly critical part of the management team. In some organizations it has been pulled out of HR to function on its own. Metrics need to be aligned and set, and benchmarks need to be established. By linking learning performance to business KPIs, L&D can help address the language disconnect and empower the C-suite to understand the business impact of their learning programs.

Learning a new language doesn't happen overnight. In many situations it will feel more like turning an ocean liner than turning a jet ski. Regardless of your starting point though, recognizing the issue (learning to develop, train and manage employees using metrics aligned with business outcomes), understanding the need (providing useful measures and analysis of learning and development performance), and developing and executing a viable plan is the surest path to get there.



CONCLUSION

Survey data suggests that while learning analytics may not be new to folks in HR or L&D, it: a) is not yet widely employed (though many wish it was); b) is encumbered by language and operational roadblocks; and c) will show exponential growth in the coming years as forward-looking organizations work to adopt. With the need today being great and growing, providing the C-suite with the language and metrics they've been looking for will be the hallmark of successful organizations.

Employees at organizations with internal mobility stay almost 2x longer^[2]. Building skills is what drives mobility, and learning analytics is what keeps it all on track.



Appendix

Additional resources

Learning analytics in academics began in 1927, and while a good deal of theory applies to its application in management, finding it requires significant time to. Below are resources specific to the learning analytics discussed in this paper:

- Corporate Learning Analytics For The Global And Digitized Age; Shubhi Tangri; Apr 19, 2021 elearningindustry.com
- Society for Learning Analytics Research - solaresearch.org
- [Watershed - Five Steps to Get Started with Learning Analytics](#)
- [Bellevue University - Human Capital Lab: The State of Corporate Learning Measurement Today](#)

^[1] LinkedIn – Jay Desko, Ph.D., Executive Director, The Center Consulting Group, Mar 2, 2021

^[2] LinkedIn – Gopika Maya Santhosh, "Where Internal Mobility Is Most Common Since COVID-19: Top Countries, Industries and Jobs," Oct. 28, 2020



Contributors

watershed

Founded in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2016, Watershed is a Learning Analytics Platform that lets you measure and prove the business impact of learning. Watershed is a customizable SaaS-based solution that collects, aggregates, and standardizes data from across your learning ecosystem. By matching this with other data sets such as HR, IS or other performance data, Watershed's reporting lets you assess the effectiveness of your learning programs, learner performance, and vendor effectiveness.

Watershed enables organizations to maximize their investments enabling the continuous improvement of learning and development. Since its founding, this young, high-growth organization has developed a portfolio of Fortune 500 global clients—such as Visa, Verizon, Caterpillar, and more. Watershed is part of Learning Technologies Group plc's award-winning group of specialist learning technology businesses. To learn more, visit watershedlrs.com



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Contact sales@betterworkmedia.com today to discuss solutions for performance-based knowledge gaps.

David Denz, Author

Dave has assisted organizations operating in evolving data-driven markets using data analytics to better understand the challenges and needs of current and future employees. He has become an established, forward-looking learning and performance resource for organizations looking to support and bolster their L&D efforts.

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