

Mandatory Mindset Shifts: Designing Journeys for the Modern Learner



Learning and development (L&D) teams are facing the impacts of global workforce shortages, skills gaps, and talent drains. At the same time, employees themselves are having to search outside their organizations to meet demands for new skills and improved performance. What should organizations be doing differently from within to develop and engage their people in today's talent landscape?

L&D teams need to design learning differently for a workforce with modern learning needs, and embracing modern learning requires discarding deep-rooted mindsets and outdated assumptions. Learn how to design cohesive, holistic modern learning journeys and how to shift your mindset to align with the future of learning.



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The Modern Learning Mindset Gap

Between the automation of many jobs, exploding technological advancement, and COVID accelerating changes in the nature of work, L&D teams all over the globe are trying to figure out the best way to onboard, reskill, and upskill their workforce.

While it sounds simple enough, the execution of such a task is a tall order, indeed. Transforming your talent involves an enormous amount of consideration and decision-making: how do you reskill a workforce in a way that solves for industry challenges, provides learning opportunities at scale, is engaging, and is culturally and geographically relevant?



The Science Behind Modern Learning

Classroom training and eLearning are the most established learning modalities in the workplace—but neither of these gets the job done by itself, and there's scientific reason for it.

Classroom training:

- + Effective at capturing attention and for practicing skills.
- Only a portion of the information people are exposed to during full- or several-day trainings is retained unless it's regularly reinforced.

eLearning:

- + Easily scaled.
- Doesn't change mindsets or fully engage people.

This phenomenon is supported by **cognitive load theory**, which posits that people can only retain small amounts of new information at a time and that content overload reduces learning efficacy. In the workplace, this points to the need for learning to be spaced over time.

eLearning doesn't provide the ecosystem or context needed to make the learning an active versus a passive process. This is known as **constructivist theory**, and it implies that learning should be continuous and relevant. In the workplace, this means we have to provide opportunities to build experiences and collaborate with others.

And, finally, beyond both the cognitive load and constructivist theories, science has pointed to yet another piece of vital information: **adult learning theory**. This theory explains that adults specifically choose to learn where and when they need to based on urgency and immediacy. In other words, learning happens in the flow of work and at the point of need.





If we wish to retain employees and remain competitive in the marketplace, we must provide valuable learning opportunities that match the way people learn outside of work. Learning needs and expectations are changing, and we need to keep up.

We must design for scalability without diminishing efficacy, be agile in our design approaches and expectations, have the capacity to adjust and adapt our learning quickly, and design for continuous learning.



How L&D Teams Can Rise to the Challenge

How do we meet these learning needs to be continuous, spaced over time, relevant, and in the flow of work?

We must adopt an agile approach to learning to fill the mindset gap the L&D industry is currently experiencing and, to stay relevant, develop learning journeys that meet the needs of learners. Unfortunately, many organizations are terrified to take the leap because this effort demands a complete paradigm shift in the way we think about learning at work, how we design learning, and the role of learning teams.

Designing learning differently for a workforce with modern needs and embracing modern learning requires discarding deep-rooted mindsets and outdated assumptions. While this involves major change, learners themselves—the stars of the show—do this every single day. They already know how; we just have to give them the tools.



What Is Modern Digital Learning?

 **Modern learning occurs when learners are met at their moment of learning need, when there is relevance, and when learning is deeply connected to learners and their work.**

Meeting learners at their learning need is all about creating, providing, and connecting valuable training assets to learners at specific points in time.

Training assets are by far some of the most expensive budget lines for L&D teams, whether they are creating or purchasing them. It's imperative that these assets fit into an ecosystem of learning that resonates with learners. If learners cannot easily access resources when they need them most, what they learned in a training session will likely not transfer and won't be fully retained, rendering the initial training almost useless.

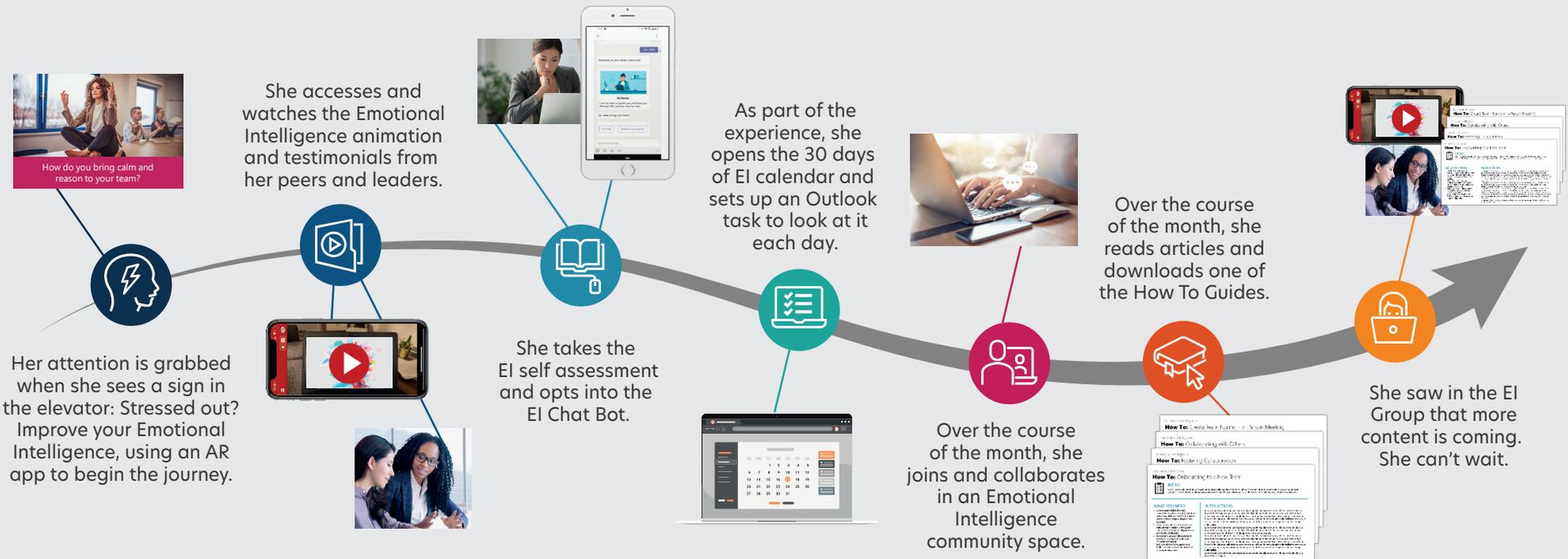


Further, modern digital learning can mean watching a video or taking an online quiz after watching a slide deck, but it can also include a combination of classroom training, gamification, 1:1 coaching or mentoring, peer support, community chat rooms, and more. Modern

learning brings modalities together in a way that makes sense and chooses technology carefully and for individual learning objectives. It's about using technology to enhance learning.

Sarah's Journey

The following is a quick summary of the learning experience. The journey is based in a curation instance and includes a rich base of micro assets and online and offline activities.



And, on top of that, it clearly brings learning right into the job, providing clear demonstrations for how learning content can be used along with opportunities for reinforcement. The choices we make when we design learning journeys enormously impact whether people actually end up

remembering and using these new skills. People are most engaged when they are the arbiters of their journey, they have opportunities to connect with others, and they can complete their learning tasks in short bursts.

The Mindset Shifts Needed to Embrace Modern Learning

The biggest roadblocks stopping organizations from adopting modern learning practices are concerns about whether they will work for their people and how these strategies can fit into their existing learning structures.

There are also other concerns, like:

- Where will we find the resources to continuously engage learners?
- What if we build it, and no one comes?
- What if we invest a massive amount of time and money in new technology and practices, but we never see a learning return on investment (ROI)?
- What if we don't know where to start?

While all of these are entirely reasonable questions, this is a battle of mindsets between the way learning has been designed and managed traditionally and what learners need now and how they actually retain information.



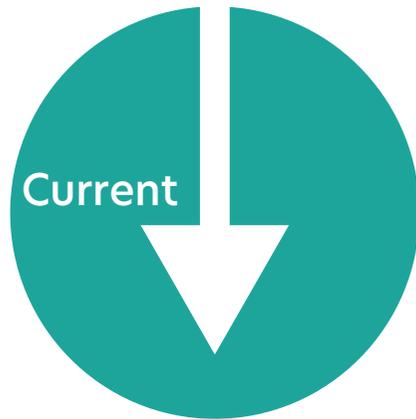


Most learning events in the workplace are mandated, top-down, synchronous events. There's a clear beginning, middle, and end, and people know how to move through it. Breaking away from this structure as the only model of learning is uncomfortable, to say the least. This scenario, however, points to something important about the way traditional learning strategies operate versus modern learning strategies.

In the traditional thought process, the first consideration is the content—what information will be delivered during the learning event. In modern learning, the first consideration during a training needs analysis is what the business and learner are most interested in. If you begin with business and learner needs instead of what content will be delivered and how, you will be able to build a modern learning experience that includes all five critical success criteria.

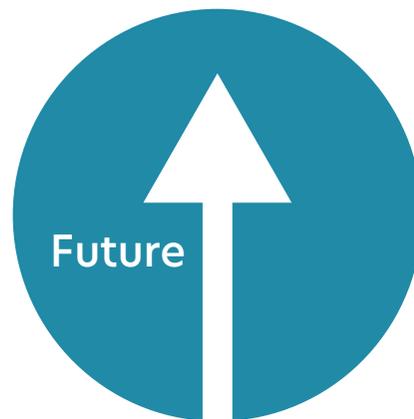
It Starts with Mindset

Top-down, instructor-led, mandated, synchronous events



TNA > **Content** > Modality > Results > Measurement

Self-directed, continuous, asynchronous, in-the-flow-of-work



Business > Learner > Measurement > **Content** > Modality > Results

The Elements of Modern Learning

There are several elements of modern learning that should be fueling the design of our learning experiences and that help drive engagement.

5 Characteristics of Modern Learning Design

At every turn, these five questions and characteristics should be top of mind during the design phase of a modern learning journey:

- Self-Led:**
Can the learner continue on this learning journey mostly independently, without major facilitation?
- Continuous:**
How does this support consistent learning, and is it easily accessed in the flow of work and at the time of need?
- Micro:**
Are these learning tasks digestible and small enough to actually be retained?
- Spaced over time:**
Do the objectives and activities involved allow for learning over a reasonable period of time that won't interfere with the learner's day-to-day duties?
- Social:**
Are there opportunities for the learner to make connections with colleagues, discuss questions and ideas, and receive feedback such as coaching and mentorship?



5 Critical Success Criteria of a Modern Learning Journey

One of the loudest hesitations to developing and providing modern learning journeys to employees is that they can't get people to be engaged. Well, the five characteristics of modern learning design demand new critical success criteria, and they underpin everything and can drive very high levels of engagement. Before you can pull in gamification and the latest, cutting-edge technology, you have to make sure you meet these criteria:

1 Ruthless Relevance

Relevance is an enormous factor for engagement—no one is going to be engaged with content that's not just irrelevant, but content that's not ruthlessly connected to their job roles and needed skill sets. If the content you provide isn't ruthlessly relevant to your learners, they won't come back unless it's compulsory.

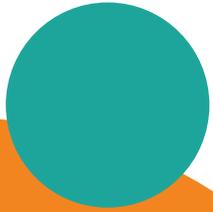
There are three layers of relevance you and your learners should be able to identify quickly:

1. What is it, and why does it exist?
2. What does the learning require of me, and why does it matter to the company?
3. How do I complete this learning within the context of my role, and why does it matter to me personally?

2 Create Connections

The next important factor to creating engagement is whether your learning opportunity creates connections. Does the opportunity connect to the learner's job, as well as to the skills they need now and in the future? Does each learning activity clearly tie back to an overarching, easily identifiable theme? Does the opportunity connect learners to each other?

Creating connections between learners and learning experiences helps to generate a powerful "why." When learners feel connected, and that their learning experiences are connected to one another and are building to something greater, engagement follows.



3 Respect Time

People are busy. Every one of us has something else we could be doing. If your learning solution is relevant enough and creates connections, it also needs to be mindful of the time people need to dedicate to it.

People will make time for learning that makes sense to them, but time is still an essential factor. Conduct some research and determine how much time—realistically—you can expect learners to spend on the learning opportunity, whether that's 15 minutes a week or 15 hours a month.

4 Generate Pull

If you have made content that is ruthlessly relevant, creates connections, and is respectful of your learners' time, you will generate pull naturally. Engagement and generating pull in modern learning is a persistent process that occurs over time—it's not necessarily one sweeping gesture that all of a sudden generates high levels of engagement and interest. Generating pull is a culmination of many things.

Outside of designing for the above critical success criteria, pull can also be built into the design of a program. For instance, if you have a cohort of 200 individuals, you might split them up into six to eight teams and have each team create a name and a charter, and even have them set up their own messaging group for internal communication (and connection).

You may have a moderator (who is managing the experience) send out an email every week to show team scores and levels of engagement and update a leaderboard that praises the top performers in the cohort. Oftentimes, if people see their disengagement is bringing down their team score, they will be more motivated to fit some extra time into their schedule to complete their learning tasks and engage further.



5 Collect Data

It is critical to collect data about all learning initiatives, and the measurement of learning, especially for professional and leadership development, has been notoriously difficult for consulting firms and L&D teams alike. Of course, there are ways to measure the effectiveness of a learning program—like using the Kirkpatrick Model and moving beyond level-one “happy sheets,” for instance. But other possible modes of measurement include implementing pre- and post-skills surveys and looking for shifts in relevant business data such as employee engagement results or sales performance.

However, when it comes to modern learning specifically, you also need to be measuring the user experience, which includes aspects such as duration, focus areas, how people are responding to gamification, signs of learner avoidance for certain activities, and so on. Depending on the design and whether/what kind of technology is supporting a learning experience, collecting, analyzing, and reacting to that data is not only possible but also essential for success. The power of collecting data lies in the fact that if you have plenty of it, you can constantly adjust your processes as needed and embrace the power of being agile.

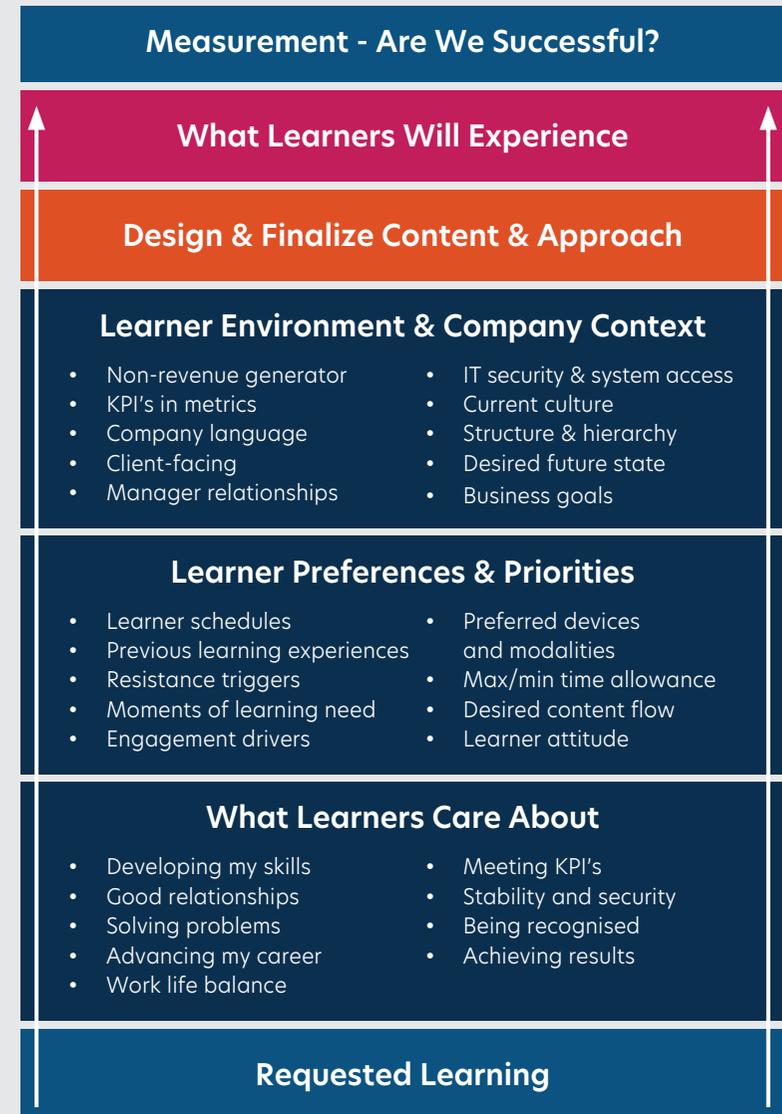
These final two critical success criteria—generating pull and collecting data—are only possible when the first criteria are in place. If learning takes too long, people won't come back. If it isn't clearly relevant and doesn't seem to connect to job roles or needed skills, they won't come back. Design learning opportunities that make it easy for your learners to get excited.



How to Design a Modern Learning Journey

Traditional learning journeys typically begin with a training needs analysis, and then content is considered. After that, the modality of learning is decided, as well as how results will be gathered and how efficacy will be measured. A modern learning journey, as we briefly touched on earlier, does things a little differently.

The real magic of a modern learning journey happens in the dark blue space—the area focused on what learners care about, their preferences and priorities, the learner environment, and the company connection. It's not until after those three steps have been seriously considered that defining and finalizing the learning content and approach even begins.



What should design look like?



If you approach the design by completing a training needs analysis and immediately source content and roll it out, you're going to miss building relevance and connection. You're not going to find out how to respect the learners' time, either. You will miss out on all of the opportunities available to you to build engagement. This is the traditional mindset and approach that has bred so many negative experiences and perceptions about workplace learning. This out-of-date approach is the reason there is such a deep-rooted discouragement in the L&D community surrounding the ability to build engagement. If we just shift our mindsets and our process, learner engagement will naturally follow.

And, if you analyze business and learner needs before creating content, your end result will become much more specific, tailored, and successful.



Embracing Modern Learning: Key Takeaways



Change your definition of digital learning and modern learning.

Moving to a modern, digital strategy is about improving the efficacy of learning, not diminishing it. Digital learning doesn't need to be a sacrifice anymore.



The science supports the concept of modern learning.

Provide short bursts of learning that are continuous, spaced over time, and shared with others, and you and your employees will reap the benefits.



Move from a content-first approach to a learner- and business-first approach to design.

The modality learning is delivered through is far less important than identifying what the business and the learners actually care about.



Follow your new critical success criteria for modern learning.

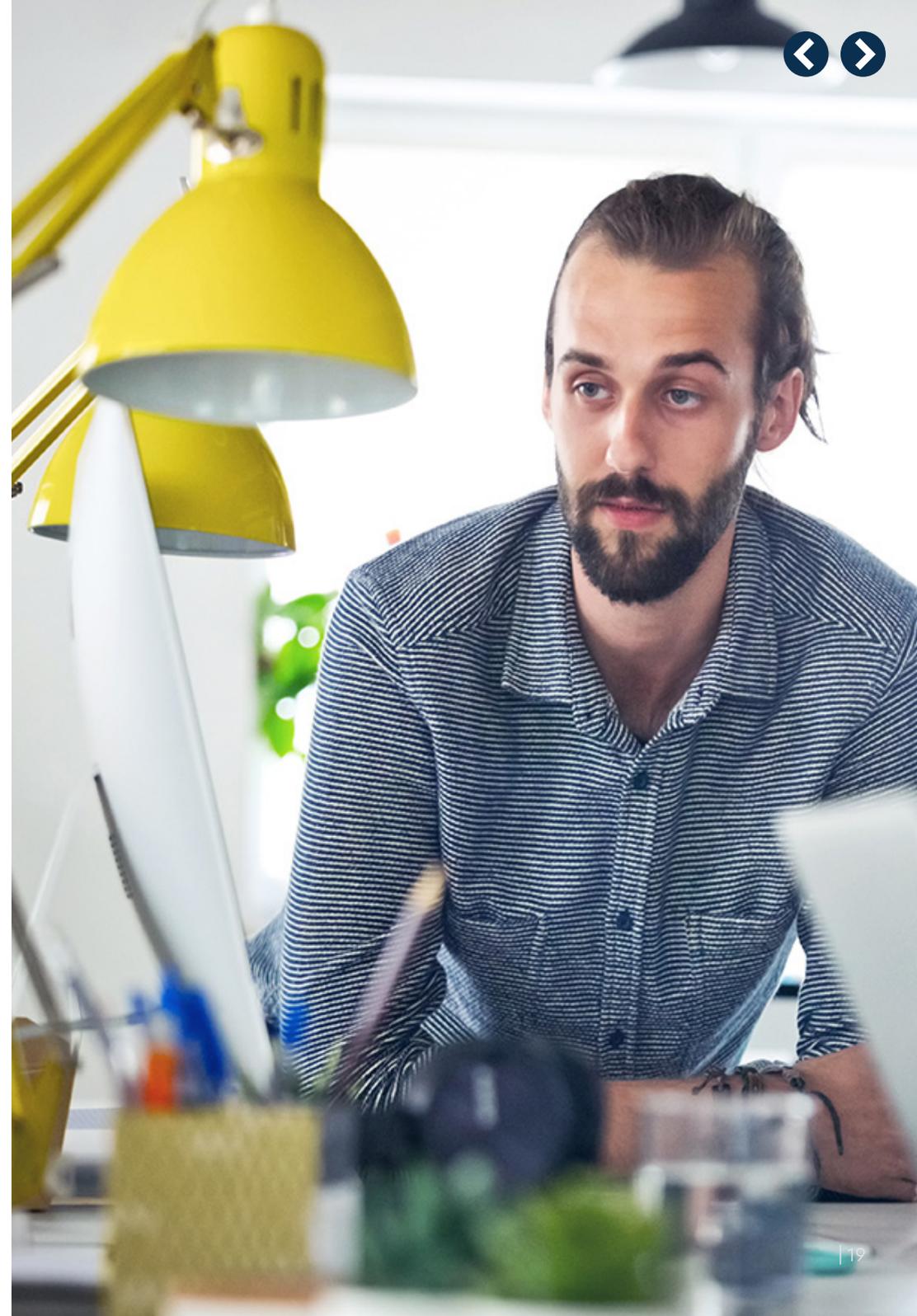
Focus on relevance, connections, and respecting time, and you will naturally generate pull. And if you collect data supporting your efforts, you can embrace agility and adjust learning events later on, as needed.



While everyone involved in this new learning shift may need to change their mindsets, learners are likely more ready for these changes than businesses are, so don't let the "our learners aren't ready" fallacy hold you back.

We already learn this way, every day. For some reason, it is only in the professional space that we fall into a pattern of waiting to be told when, what, and how to learn. If, as L&D professionals, we allow this standard to continue to proliferate, we won't generate pull or engagement, nor will we make a real learning ROI. But, if we focus on learner and business needs first during design, we'll experience high levels of true engagement and make a noticeable impact in our organizations.

Your learners are ready. Are you?





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Ben is the Managing Director of both GP Strategies Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore. He also heads the Leadership and Organizational Development for Asia Pacific. Ben is an expert facilitator, solution designer, and specialist in both digital learning technologies and learner experience design. He has been helping organizations around Australia and Asia define their challenges and develop their people for over 20 years.

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Now an Asia specialist, Ben spent 10 years in China and Singapore, during which he was responsible for creating and managing the Learning Solutions strategy for the APAC region. During this time, Ben and his team have developed and designed innovative and award-winning learning experiences across the region.

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Matt Donovan

Chief Learning and Innovation Officer

Chief Learning and Innovation Officer Matt Donovan is a recognized name in learning, bringing more than 25 years of experience crafting learner-centric solutions and leading high-impact development teams. Not only has he received a large assortment of industry awards, including being named one of Training Magazine's Top 10 International Trainers under 40, his articles are regularly published and presented at a variety of national and international conferences. In his current role, Donovan has collaboratively implemented and grown GP Strategies' Innovation Kitchen. You will often find him presenting at global industry conferences or writing articles for industry-specific publications.

In his former role as the Global Leader for Digital Learning Strategies and Solutions, Donovan oversaw the multifaceted team responsible for creating an extensive portfolio of engaging learning experiences employed by Fortune Global 500 companies. Many of these courses have received industry awards and recognition.

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