

How Employees Learn 2021

Nurture a learning culture that engages employees and advances the business



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Executive Summary

An organization's learning culture is the foundation for successful learning and development (L&D). Yes, organizations need the proper L&D tools, personnel, and courses, but it is *culture* that encourages learning and forms the bedrock of success.

L&D professionals should be asking themselves whether their culture enables employees to capitalize on organizational tacit knowledge, and whether employees have the freedom and time to learn from whom they want.

To better understand how organizational culture can support learning initiatives and under what circumstances the best ones succeed, we investigated the following areas:

- the perceived effectiveness of learning cultures today
- how cultures support learning and learning strategies
- the degree of freedom that employees have over their learning experiences
- the key factors that determine the effectiveness of learning
- the practices that seem most closely associated with learning success



About this Survey

The "How Employees Learn in the Workplace" survey ran from December 2020 to February 2021. We gathered 328 usable complete and partial responses, primarily from HR professionals in virtually every industry vertical. Respondents were from all over the world, but the majority of them were from North America, especially the United States.

The HR Research Institute conducted this research in collaboration with Fuse, the learning and knowledge platform for enterprise that sparks active engagement and people performance.

Respondents represent a broad cross-section of employers by number of employees, ranging from small businesses with fewer than 50 employees to enterprises with 20,000 or more employees.

Below are key findings from the study:

Major Finding 1

L&D doesn't have a large enough impact on performance, learning engagement, or learner satisfaction. Few say L&D is excellent at improving:

- Learner engagement (8%)
- Employee performance (9%)
- Learner satisfaction (10%)

Major Finding 2

Poor learning cultures could explain why L&D is often failing to achieve its potential

- Just 20% strongly agree that their organization has a successful learning culture.
- Only 37% say their culture definitely supports their organization's learning strategy.

Major Finding 3

What contributes to a successful learning culture?

- 'Relevance' and 'participation' are cited as the two most important factors that determine the effectiveness of learning (64% and 56%, respectively). In fact, learning that ties directly to work can lead to better learner engagement, and the large majority (80%) of respondents believe that learning is most successful when learners are engaged.
- An ability to interact with other knowledgeable employees can enable employees to become successful at work (67%).
- Despite this, just 43% say their learning systems facilitate the sharing of learning with others.

Major Finding 4

Learner autonomy is emblematic of a progressive learning culture

- Only 21% of learning-culture laggard organizations give employees a high or maximum degree of freedom in terms of *what* they learn, whereas 52% of learning-culture leader organizations do.
- Only 24% of learning-culture laggard organizations give employees a high or maximum degree of freedom in terms of *when* they learn, but 48% of learning-culture leader organizations do.

Learning-culture leader organizations say their organization's learning culture is successful whereas learning-culture laggard organizations do not.

Major Finding 5

Compared to learning-culture laggard organizations, learning-culture leader organizations are:

- More than **FOUR TIMES** as likely to say that information flows freely up and down their organizations
- More than **FIVE TIMES** more likely to say they definitely have a learning strategy
- About **FIVE TIMES** more likely to make learning engaging
- **TWICE** as likely to say their systems facilitate the sharing of learning among employees
- Nearly **TWICE** as likely to say they have a collaborative approach to learning

Please note that the findings and recommendations contained in this report are informational only. Nothing in this report should be construed as constituting legal opinions or advice. Please consult an attorney if you have questions about the legal requirements, rules or regulations associated with any content discussed in this report.

Learning Is Not Creating the Impact It Could or Should



Finding: Just 51% say their organization's L&D is good or excellent at improving employee performance

We asked participants to indicate the extent that their L&D efforts improve a variety of key factors and found that only half say their department is good or excellent at improving employee performance (51%). Even fewer say L&D improves learner engagement (43%) and just 41% say the same about learner satisfaction. Only about 10% of participants rate L&D as excellent in these areas.

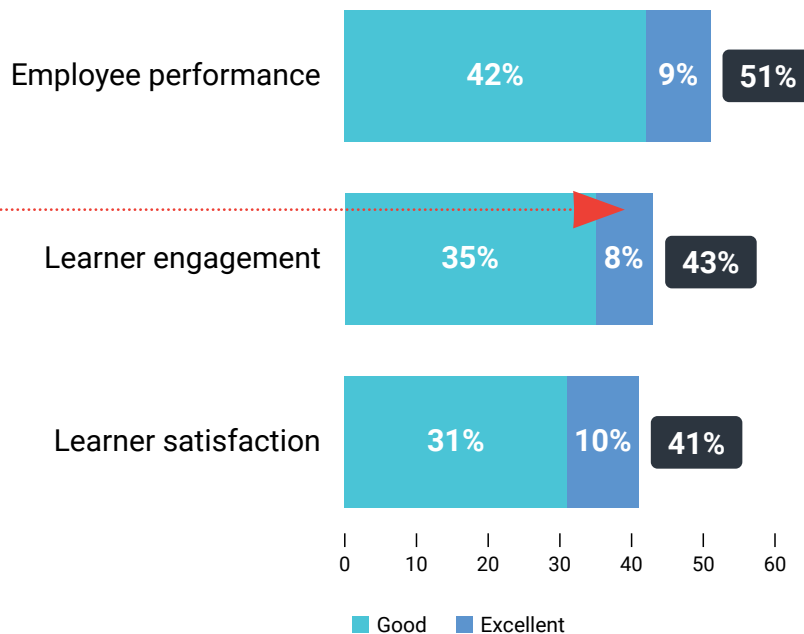
Although somewhat discouraging, this data makes sense in light of other factors related to learning cultures. For example, fewer than two in every five respondents agree that their culture definitely supports their organization's learning strategy.

The good news is that this means most organizations can improve. By keeping employee and enterprise performance top-of-mind, many organizations can leverage learning to drive up performance both at the individual and organizational level. The real question is *how*. The rest of this report seeks to answer this question, with an emphasis on nurturing and harnessing strong learning cultures in order to improve overall learning effectiveness.



Only 8% say L&D is excellent at improving learner engagement

Survey Question: How you would rate your organization's learning and development (L&D) in terms of its ability to improve the following factors?



Poor Learning Cultures Help Explain L&D's Deficiencies



Finding: The lack of a successful learning culture could explain why, in many cases, L&D is failing to drive engagement, satisfaction, and performance

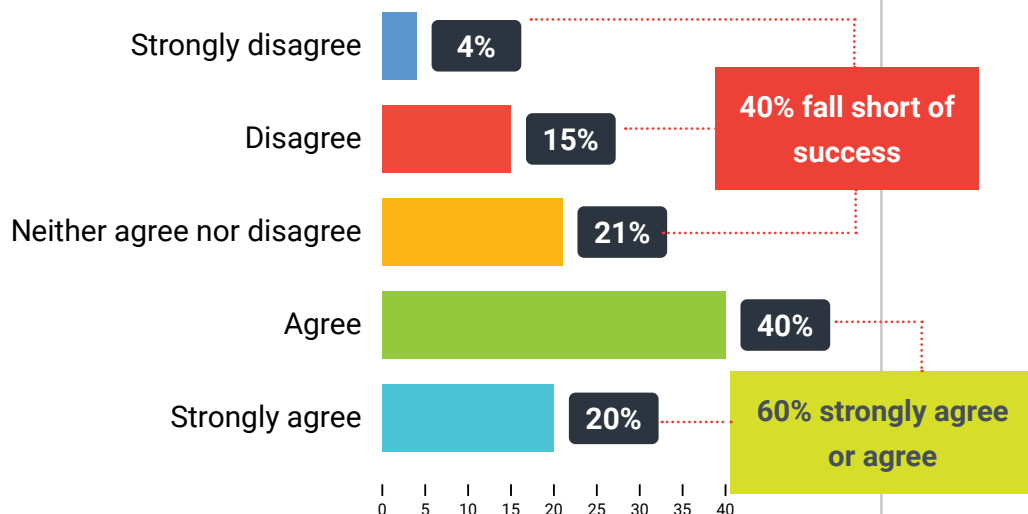
Just 20% strongly agree their organization's learning culture is successful, indicating much room for improvement. Further, a full 40% disagree, strongly disagree or neither agree nor disagree that their organization has a strong learning culture.

Even these numbers may overstate the strength of today's learning cultures. Other data from the survey shows that only 60% have cultures that support their L&D efforts, and even fewer (37%) say their culture definitely supports their organization's learning strategy. Clearly, there's an identified need to improve learning culture in order to optimize overall learning outcomes.



Many indicate their learning culture needs improvement

Survey Statement: Please indicate the extent that you agree that your organization has a successful learning culture.



Which industries have the most successful learning cultures?

1. Health Services

When we analyze the survey data by industry, we find that respondents in Health Services organizations are most likely to strongly agree (47%) that their organizations have successful learning cultures. This compares to only 20% for the general survey population.

Learning cultures in Health Services organizations are especially important due to today's fast-changing and high-priority healthcare environment. In this industry, it is critical to stay abreast of the latest knowledge and to have essential certifications. L&D needs to ensure employees are up to date to provide the best possible care as learning successfully can sometimes be a matter of life and death.

2. Education

Respondents from the Education industry are the second most likely to strongly agree that their organizations have successful learning cultures (44%). An explanation for this could be that these organization are more in tune with educational best practices and so are better able to implement those practices via their own L&D initiatives.

Larger organizations are more likely to report stronger learning cultures

Respondents at larger organizations are more likely to say their organizations have stronger learning cultures. Whereas 68% of respondents from large organizations and 61% from mid-size organizations say they have a successful learning culture, the same is true for only 54% of small organizations.

One reason for this may be that, as we will discuss later in the report, larger organizations also have larger bases of internal knowledge experts that employees can learn from, offering a variety of on-the-job learning experiences that help create a learning mindset. Likewise, larger organizations benefit from economies of scale that may allow them to provide learning resources and technologies at a lower cost per employee.

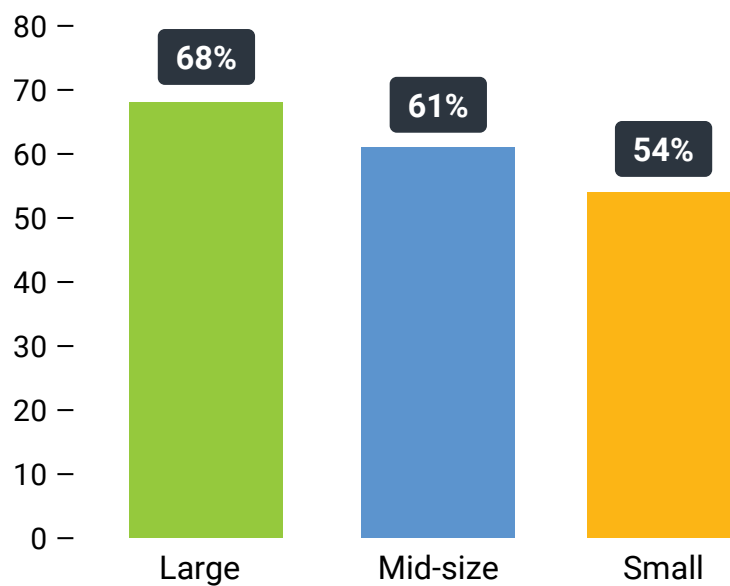
Defining Small, Mid-size and Large Organizations



For the purposes of this research, the HR Research Institute defines organization size according to three main segmentations:

- **small:** 99 or fewer employees
- **mid-size:** 100 to 999 employees
- **large:** 1,000 or more employees

Percent who strongly agree their organization has a successful learning culture
[by size of organization]



To Improve Learning Cultures, Organizations Must Focus on Learning Effectiveness

So how can organizations develop strong learning cultures that improve employee engagement and performance? Looking at what makes learning effective could hold the answers:



Finding: “Relevance” is the top determining factor for the effectiveness of learning

We asked participants to indicate the four most important factors that determine learning effectiveness in their organization.

The top four are:

- Relevance (64%)
- Participation (56%)
- Practice (41%)
- Learning technology (35%)

Relevance

In the education world, relevance refers to “learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students that are connected in some way to real-world issues, problems, and life relevance.”¹

In the business world, L&D needs to ensure learning is relevant to both the employee and the business at large—and the key to that is collaboration.

How is L&D expected to change in the near future?

Eighty-eight percent of respondents expect L&D to change over the next several years, including in the following areas:

- Improving the learning experience (65%)
- Allowing more personalization (46%)
- Having more employee recommendations (38%)
- Having more employee-generated content (36%)
- Having more employee curation (26%)

¹ The Glossary of Education Reform (2013, August). Definition of relevance. Retrieved from <https://www.edglossary.org/relevance/>

Participation and practice

These complementary factors are also key to effectiveness. That is, learners must *participate* to acquire learning, and they need to put learning into *practice* to develop skills and drive performance. In fact, the learner may not be able to retain knowledge and learning unless it is applied in context and incorporated into their work.²

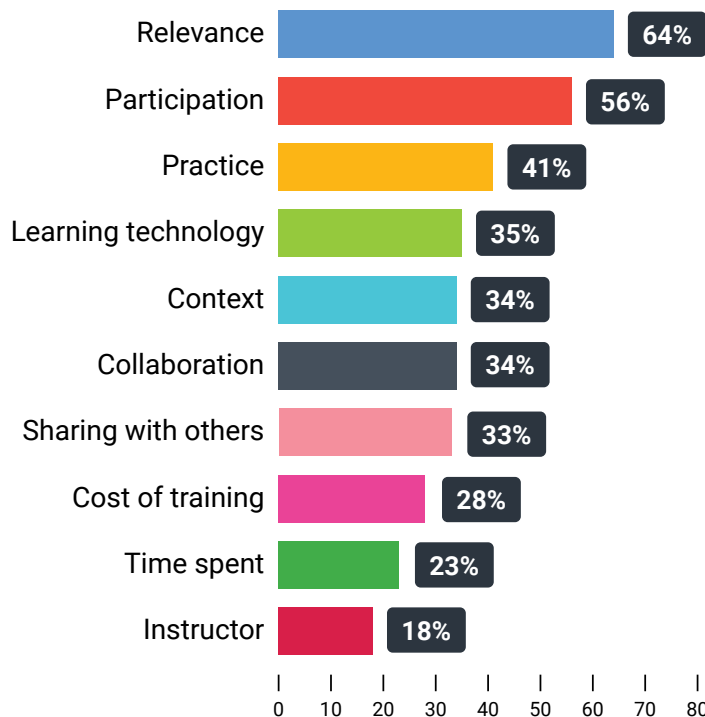
Learning technology

The fourth most widely cited factor is learning technology. Modern learning technology can support learning effectiveness and culture in numerous ways: learner access, participation, practice, feedback, measurement, self-pacing, and more. Of course, not all learning technologies are created equal. Organizations must use the learning technologies and methods that work best for the specific needs of their employees and businesses. For example, employees with little access to desktop computers will not derive much benefit from technologies that are not mobile-friendly.



Learning technology is among the four most important factors that determine learning effectiveness

Survey Question: What are the four most important factors that determine effectiveness of learning in your organization? (select up four)



² Glaveski, S.(2019). HBR: Where companies go wrong with learning and development. *Milwaukee Business Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/news/2019/10/06/where-companies-go-wrong-with-learning-and.html>

Interaction and Knowledge Sharing: Key to Effective Learning Culture



Finding: Interacting with other knowledgeable employees is the most effective learning practice

Three Types of Knowledge

Experts often divide knowledge into three types:

- **Explicit knowledge:** This tends to be structured information that can be documented (often in writing) and shared to large numbers of people.
- **Implicit knowledge:** This is often viewed as knowledge gained from experience, and it often goes undocumented.
- **Tacit knowledge:** This know-how is also gained through experience but can be especially difficult to put into words or otherwise formally communicated. For example, a basketball player may not be able to fully explain how they can successfully shoot a free throw, but they can often provide insights to help others shoot free throws better.

While relevance is crucial to learning, interacting with knowledgeable employees is just as essential to employee learning and performance at work. Why? Because so much work know-how is implicit and/or tacit (see *callout*) and so is difficult to communicate and transfer to others via traditional classroom experiences or e-learning.

It therefore makes sense that more than two-thirds (67%) say interacting with other knowledgeable employees is the most effective learning practice. That's because company subject matter experts often have implicit and tacit knowledge that is hard to acquire from other learning settings.

There are various learning practices that include such interactions, including working with internal coaches and/or mentors, which is also among the top four responses at 46%. Openly sharing internal expertise may not only help build relationships but also help the teacher become more knowledgeable about their field as they codify their own expertise.

Just under half (47%) indicate that technology such as e-learning is an effective learning practice. Technology can bring together internal and external knowledge experts to train employees. It can also provide employees with personalized content and learning opportunities that will benefit their role and career objectives. Some organizations use technology because it can track practice and allow managers to access valuable learning metrics and objectives.

Ultimately, though, such technologies will likely be more effective if they also incorporate interactions with other knowledgeable employees who can share implicit and tacit know-how.

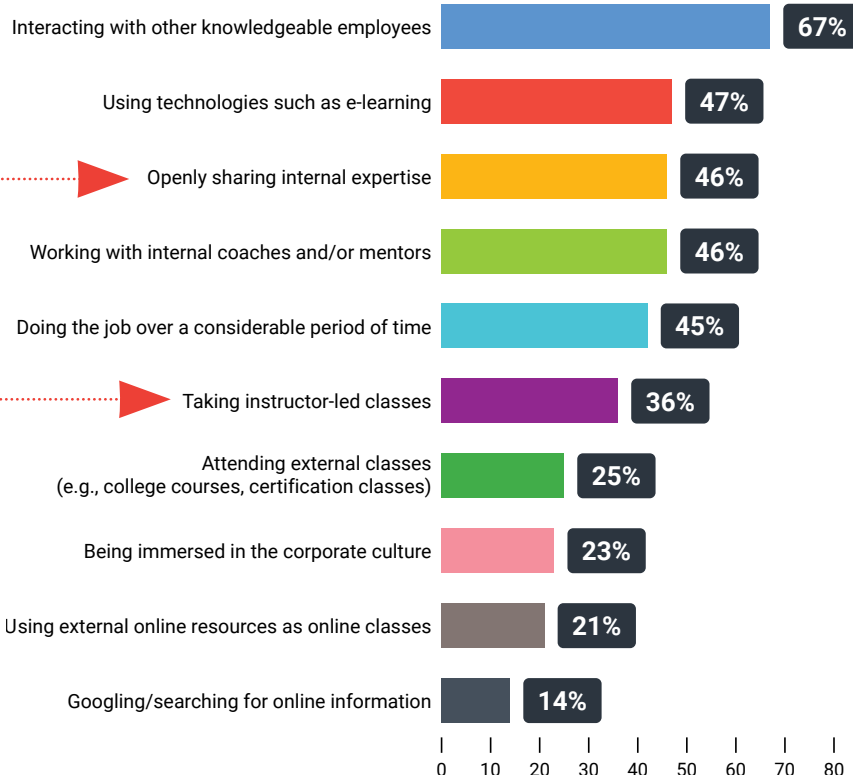
Organizations of all sizes view L&D as collaborative

In the area of collaboration, organizations of all sizes tend to be similar. Fifty-four percent of large organizations associate the word “collaborates” with L&D; the same is true for nearly half of mid-size organizations (47%) and small organizations (49%). This suggests that collaboration is a key learning practice irrespective of the organization’s size.



Sharing internal expertise is a more effective learning practice than taking instructor-led classes

Survey Question: In your organization, which four learning practices are most effective at enabling employees to become successful at work? (select up to four)





We believe that one hallmark of a good learning culture is that employees are encouraged to share and contribute knowledge.

On-the-job training is often more effective and engaging than instructor-led training

We asked respondents to choose the top five most effective ways that employees learn at work. The large majority (88%) point to on-the-job training, which reinforces that employees most often turn to other knowledgeable employees when seeking to solve a problem at work. This is probably because training on-the-job allows employees to interact with subject matter experts and “learn by doing” whereas instructional classes often use “learn by listening.” The latter tends to take learners out of the flow of work and removes the opportunity for them to put acquired knowledge into immediate practice for the purpose of skill development.

Successful learning cultures encourage knowledge sharing, yet information does not flow freely in many organizations

We believe that one hallmark of a good learning culture is that employees are encouraged to share and contribute knowledge. The good news is that 73% agree or strongly agree that employees are encouraged to do so. The bad news is that far fewer (46%) indicate that information flows freely up and down the organization. As we will see later in this report, one way of closing this gap might be to give employees greater learner autonomy.

Linking learning directly to work leads to better learner engagement

The large majority of respondents (80%) believe learning is most successful when learners are engaged, but just 38% say their organizational cultures actually make learning engaging. We view this as troubling because simply giving people access to learning is unlikely to result in high rates of learning unless learners are engaged by the process.

We asked participants to choose the five circumstances in which employees learn most effectively. The most widely cited responses are “when they are engaged and motivated” and “when it ties directly to their work,” at 80% and 79%, respectively. We think these two items are virtually tied because they relate strongly to one another. That is, employees tend to be more motivated by learning when that learning pertains directly to what they are doing at work every day.

Learning Technologies Must Support Learning Cultures

Most respondents (78%) say their organizations use some form of learning technology. However, not all learning technologies do a good job of allowing colleagues to teach and share with one another.

Respondents say the most important facet of a learning technology platform is to provide learning in the context of real work, but just 43% say their systems facilitate the sharing of learning among employees, and even fewer encourage employees to “teach” each other (41%) or allow employees to create learning for one another (25%).

Why so many learning platforms fail to facilitate knowledge sharing? One reason is that traditional learning management systems (LMS) began as machines intended to automate learning, thereby taking people out of the instructional equation. In fact, the system first developed by Sidney L. Pressey was called the Teaching Machine and was intended to remove live instructors from the equation.³ Too often, this tradition is still reflected in today’s technologies even though it’s a tradition that can impede learning. Compared to those primitive technologies, today’s systems can be designed to support and facilitate learning sharing and collaboration among employees.

So, learning professionals should keep in mind that even if their organization’s *culture* encourages the sharing of learning, their *systems* might not. If this is the case, we would recommend that organizations try to ensure that their systems—especially technological systems—align with their cultures in this respect. That is, if organizations wish to inculcate a learning culture that encourages employees to share with one another, then they should also have learning technologies that can facilitate this.

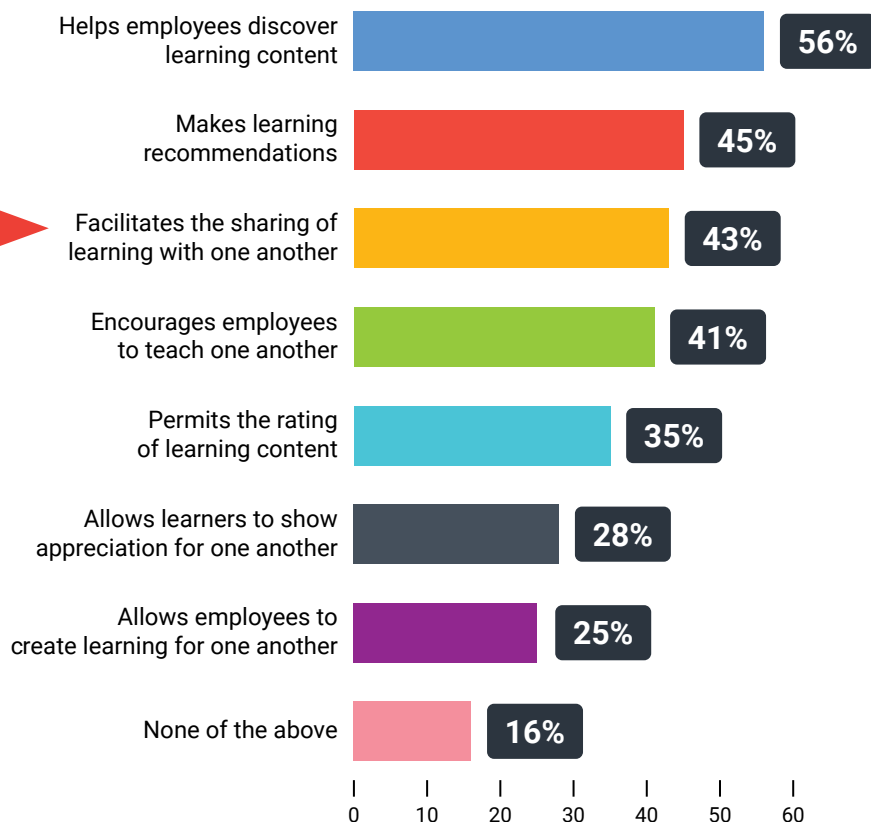


³ Prasand, R.K. (2020, December 28). A brief history of the LMS. *eLearning Industry*. Retrieved from <https://elearningindustry.com/brief-lms-history>



Only 43% of learning systems facilitate knowledge sharing

Survey Question: Which of the following are characteristics of your organization's learning system? (select all that apply)



Note: This data excludes those respondents who indicate their organizations do not have any learning tools.



Strong Learning Culture = Freedom to Learn

So what's holding organizations back from achieving strong learning cultures? A big part of the problem is that many companies are still deciding what's best for their employees when it comes to learning instead of enabling them to help shape their own learning journeys.



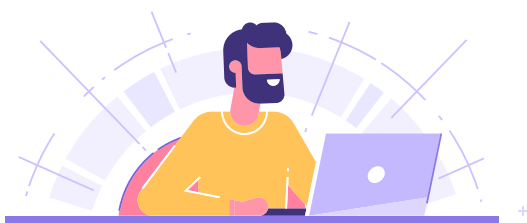
Finding: Employees have limited control over their learning experience

We asked respondents to indicate the degree that their employees have freedom to choose their learning experiences. This study finds that most of the time employees do not have a “high” or “maximum” degree of freedom. As we learned previously, relevance and interacting with knowledgeable employees are key to learning, so infringing on learner autonomy often weakens a learning culture.

However, for employees to be successful in their role, they often need to choose what learnings are relevant and when, such as when they come across a challenging task or when a project changes scope and now includes unfamiliar terrain.⁴ The graph below suggests that employees more often learn on the timetable of the L&D department or their manager instead of when they “need to learn” to successfully perform their jobs.

Relatively few respondents (35%) say learners have a high degree of freedom in terms of *how* they learn—another key issue given that some employees prefer in-person learning settings while others prefer online learning where interactions are minimized and they can learn at their own pace.

⁴ Glaveski, S.(2019). HBR: Where companies go wrong with learning and development. *Milwaukee Business Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.bizjournals.com/milwaukee/news/2019/10/06/where-companies-go-wrong-with-learning-and.html>



Giving employees more control over their learning is likely to boost their engagement and forge a stronger learning culture

Another interesting point is that only a slim minority of respondents (16%) say that “curate” is associated with their organization’s L&D department. We believe that this is a missed opportunity for many organizations.

When L&D and/or learners themselves can curate learning content, they can help ensure learners get access to content relevant to the needs of their positions, industry and brand. Without quality curation, learning can become overly generic and less effective.

Learners have the least choice about *who* they learn from. If a person cannot have a say in who they learn from, they may resist learning itself. Trust is an important element here. Learners often trust in the people whom they consider to be subject matter experts (SMEs). In fact, this trust prompts learners to connect and engage with specific colleagues. If the learner doesn’t know the person from whom they are supposed to learn, they may be less likely to engage with the learning, which reduces the effectiveness of learning itself or may even prevent it altogether. This widespread lack of choice about *who* to learn from indicates that the L&D industry still has a long way go in terms of empowering people to choose their SMEs and, indeed, facilitating instruction from those SMEs.

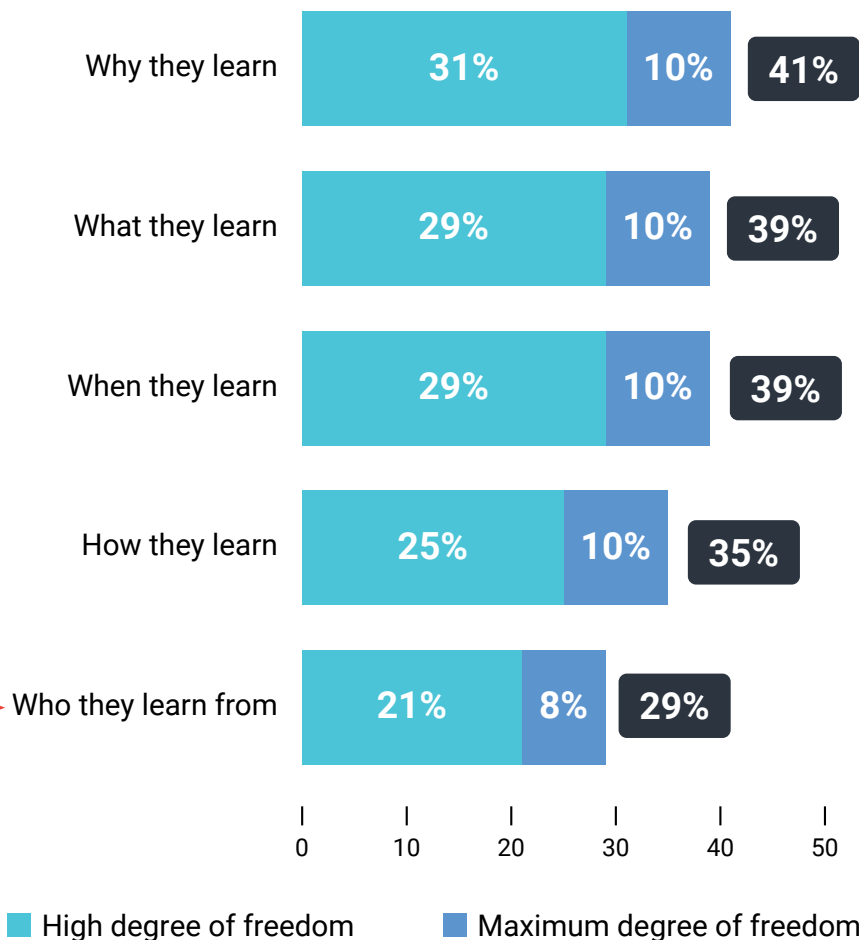
Moreover, we already know that interacting with other employees is the most popular method for becoming successful at work, so failure to incorporate this choice into learning could be preventing some employees from reaching their maximum learning potential.



Survey Question: In your organization, to what degree do your employees have freedom of choice in regard to their learning experiences?



Employees are least likely to be able to choose “who” they learn from



What Do Organizations With Good Learning Cultures Do Differently?

For the purpose of this report, we define learning-culture leaders and laggards in the following ways:

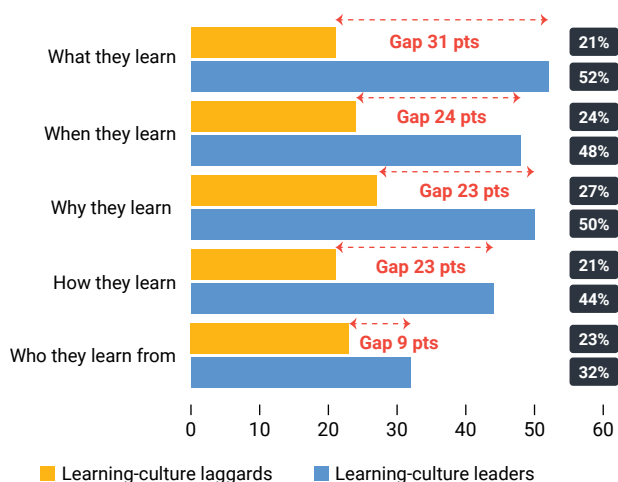
- **Learning-culture leader organizations:** These represent respondents who “strongly agree” and “agree” that their organization’s learning culture is successful.
- **Learning-culture laggard organizations:** These represent respondents who “strongly disagree,” “disagree” and “neither agree nor disagree” that their organization’s learning culture is successful.

Finding: Learning-culture leaders are more likely to recognize the need for flexibility and give learners far more control

We found that learning-culture leaders are far more likely to give their employees more freedom over their learning experiences. In fact, leader organizations are about twice as likely to say they give employees a high degree of freedom of choice in terms of what, when, how and why they learn. This suggests that one hallmark of a successful learning culture is greater employee choice and freedom in the area of learning.

Survey Question: In your organization, to what degree do your employees have freedom of choice in regard to their learning experiences?

Percent responding high or maximum degree of freedom





Finding: Organizations with strong learning cultures see success in many other areas as well

Apart from giving employees more freedom over their learning experiences, what else do learning-culture leaders do differently?

Our study shows that learning culture leaders are also:

Over five times more likely to say they definitely have a learning strategy



55%

vs

10%

About five times more likely to make learning engaging



54%

vs

11%

Over twice as likely to recognize employees for learning and teaching



43%

vs

20%

Over twice as likely to attach learning to all performance goals



49%

vs

23%

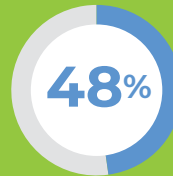
Over four times as likely to say that information flows freely up and down their organizations



vs



Twice as likely to say their systems facilitate the sharing of learning with one another



vs



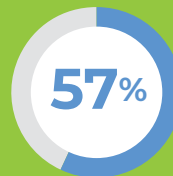
About three times more likely to say their L&D departments *cultivate* learning



vs



Nearly twice as likely to say they have a *collaborative* approach to learning



vs





Key Takeaways

Given the research findings in this report, below are suggestions for how organizations might become more effective at fostering a successful learning culture.

Key Takeaway 1

Assess the effectiveness of learning within your organization.

Determine the degree to which learning and development initiatives have the desired impact on employee performance, engagement, and satisfaction. Do employees, supervisors and senior managers view it as successfully meeting their needs? Are they eager to use learning resources? If learning is not as successful as it should be, consider formulating plans for improving it.

Key Takeaway 2

Embrace learning as part of the corporate culture. If the organization does not have a clear understanding of its culture and where learning fits into it, consider working with top leaders and other stakeholders to clearly define it. Do managers value employees who help teach others to succeed, and do managers themselves have good teaching skills? How well does the learning culture align with learning initiatives? Work with stakeholders to understand behaviors and tactics that foster learning and to address any cultural barriers to successful learning.

Key Takeaway 3

Create or revise the company-wide learning strategy if needed.

We found that organizations with effective L&D are five times more likely to say they definitely have a learning strategy. With better insight into the culture as well as how learning is viewed, consider holding meetings with key stakeholders to discuss how to improve and align learning. How can learning better fit into the company's short-term and long-term strategies? Work with senior leaders, HR, and others to better understand what skills the organization has and what skills it needs that can be developed in-house. Where are the skills gaps? Once these gaps are understood, develop better tactics for addressing those gaps.

Key Takeaway 4

Encourage collaboration and sharing. Learning-culture leaders are twice as likely to say their systems facilitate the sharing of learning with one another. Work colleagues often have implicit and tacit knowledge that is hard to acquire from other learning settings, making them a uniquely effective source of learning. Employees can be encouraged to share what they know with one another and even to create learning content for one another where it makes sense. Peers can also recommend and curate the sources of learning that apply best to their specific needs and jobs.

Key Takeaway 5

Strongly consider giving employees greater freedom over their own learning experiences. Learning-culture leader organizations are over four times as likely to say that information flows freely up and down their organizations. A learning culture may improve if employees are given greater autonomy not only over what and when they learn but from whom they learn. Learner engagement is likely to rise if they are learning from talented people they know and trust.

Key Takeaway 6

Ensure that learning technologies are aligned with the desired learning culture, one that shares and grows knowledge. We found that learning technology systems do not always reflect learning priorities and perceived best learning practices. For example, if L&D is convinced that employees learn best from one another in the context of work, then learning systems should facilitate and encourage knowledge sharing. Does your learning system allow user-curated or user-generated content? Ensuring organization-specific learning opportunities can create a richer and more relevant learning experience.



About Fuse

Fuse is the learning and knowledge platform that sparks active engagement and ignites people performance. It is used by more than 120 enterprises around the world - including Vodafone, Panasonic, Scandic, Avon, Mazda and BAe - and connects people with the knowledge and expertise they need to acquire new skills and achieve high performance at work.



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