



Discussing the future of workplace learning

The world of learning and development (L&D) never stands still.

The latest skills challenge, new technological innovations, emerging learner demands; there's always something to focus the mind. In the midst of all this however, it's good to occasionally pop our heads above the parapet to think about what might be coming down the line in a few years' time.

One of the (many) great things about working with over 130 high-class L&D suppliers on the Civil Service's Learning Framework is that we can always ask them what they think.

So that's what we did, sitting down for a quick chat about what the future might hold with Rhys Evans (Director of Strategic Partnerships at Eliesha), Tina Seth (Head of UK Development and Consultancy at Dods Training) and Burrwa Nashat (Director at MindGym). They were joined by Louise Scott-Worrall, our very own Head of Learning Services.



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How will we see the delivery of workplace learning changing in the coming years?

Rhys: I think we'll see a real focus on the value of time. Time is such a premium commodity that we have to constantly challenge ourselves to make sure we're delivering value when we use it.

In addition, the way in which learners consume and attain knowledge continues to evolve. They're happy to consume knowledge independently (so long as they can protect enough time to do so) but expect it delivered in a way that meets their needs. We already see this through the rising demand for contextualised pre-work, bite-sized learning, gamification and self-curated content. So, the 'why' in what we offer has to be quickly evident. If learners are going to invest time, they want to know, "What's in it for me and what value will I get from engaging with this?"

Tina: Agreed. A shifting approach to knowledge acquisition (learners' expectations are broader and they want them met more quickly), combined with advances in digital learning and AI, means that individuals expect workplace learning to meet their personal needs. We see this in practice with learners expecting experience-based input from their trainers and consultative, social learning, rather than traditional, knowledge-input teaching. Whether they realise it or not, most learners are personalising how they want to learn and forcing providers to adapt.

Louise: I think there will be an even greater shift towards 'just in time' learning and away from 'just in case' learning. The preference now is for giving learners what they need, when they need it and making sure this is aligned to an organisation's strategic priorities. That's infinitely preferable to putting whole swathes of people through the same learning activity just because they might need that knowledge at some point in the future – especially as they probably won't!

Granular, bite-sized, digital learning will feature heavily here – but just as important as its delivery mechanism is its timeliness; providing learning at the point of need. Learners' time constraints remain a major concern though – so expect to see new ways emerging of helping learners and their line managers to make personal development a priority.

Burrwa: Rhys and Louise both mentioned bite-sized learning and I think that will remain an important consideration. Our approach to workplace learning advocates bite-sized activities to deliver impact. The stats are as strong today as they were 20 years ago when we first started. Bite-sized produces 17% greater learning transfer, is 30% cheaper and delivers almost twice the ROI of a traditional learning approach. Given the scarcity of time and budgets in the Civil Service, this way of learning is highly effective.



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Rhys: Another important factor will be how organisations are still refining their hybrid working offer, in terms of what can be done remotely and what needs to be done in-person. At Eliesha, we think that learners will be less keen to come into the workplace simply to acquire knowledge. Instead, they'll demand that their communal learning focuses on the 'how' – e.g. solution-based, facilitated group discussions that focus on the application of new skills. They'll also want any time that's spent physically with colleagues to be concentrated on gaining value from those connections and conversations and on discussing real operational challenges.

Tina: Absolutely. I think we'll continue to see workplace learning move towards offering more adaptive, flexible experiences. And we'll see learning being adapted more rapidly to cater for individual preferences and the changing demands of the workplace.

Burrwa: That aligns with our experience too. We've seen how the emergence of remote working has already accelerated the use of virtual training modules and mobile-friendly resources; allowing people to learn anytime, anywhere. Traditional classroom settings are making way for digital platforms and virtual learning environments. And now we're seeing how blended learning approaches, combining in-person sessions with virtual modules, are gaining traction, offering a more dynamic and personalised learning experience.

Tina: As an aside, there are lots of tech-driven changes to the delivery of workplace learning happening at the moment. Predicting which of those will be successful is like rolling a dice. But they are causing some sustained change in approaches to learning, which I think is interesting. And whatever does happen will be complemented by organisations holding increasingly vast amounts of data on their employees' learning activity and progress. We're already seeing this being used to drive decision-making around L&D.



What most excites you about the way in which workplace learning is changing?

Burrwa: Building on what we were discussing before, I think it's how the emphasis on learner-centric approaches, personalised learning pathways, immersive simulations and microlearning modules are revolutionising how individuals acquire new skills. But I'd also pick out how the integration of AI and data analytics is enhancing the efficacy of learning interventions, enabling targeted interventions and adaptive feedback mechanisms.

Tina: Two things for me as well. The first is our improving ability to demonstrate real progress and improvement from learning. Evaluation has long been difficult, expensive and a bit forced – but the context is shifting now. Learners are more engaged in the process and organisations are becoming clearer on what they need.

The second is that the value of learning is becoming increasingly apparent to learners. Adaptive, personalised learning that's more relevant to their individual circumstances is helping them to better appreciate the impact of what they're engaging with. There's a definite shift taking place, whereby individuals are becoming more invested in their own learning needs and how they can meet them, whether that's through micro-learning, digital products, social channels or facilitated learning. This means that workplace learning is going to keep becoming more targeted and effective and, as a result, more impactful.

Rhys: Thinking back to what I said before, focusing on how new skills are applied in our communal delivery activities means we can really concentrate on impact and actions. Learners arrive better prepared and engaged and ready to make commitments that can be shared and tracked.

This means we can engage with clients about the role of learning within the whole process of change, improvement and development. Our joint understanding of learners is increasingly sophisticated, so our solutions can be better contextualised and we can then see how transfer of learning and application is delivered in the workplace.

Louise: For me, the most exciting thing is how we appear to be on the cusp of making even better use of technology and data. I agree with Burrwa in that developments around AI and data analysis are only going to improve learning's effectiveness. Data in particular is going to make learning more relevant to an individual, more aligned to their learning preferences and more aligned to organisational priorities.

And I think that's how L&D professionals are going to secure the seat at the top table that we've all craved for them for so long. They'll do it by using data to improve the learning on offer and helping to improve business productivity.

What's the single biggest challenge facing the L&D industry in 2024 and how do you see that playing out or being resolved?

Louise: Technology, definitely. Affording the technology and then making the most of it. And also acknowledging how this may expose some skills gaps and development needs for the L&D professionals themselves. Can they interpret and use data correctly, for example? Can they get the most out of AI?

Burrwa: For me, it's about ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities amidst the digital divide. Bridging that gap is going to require cross-sector collaboration, being aware of emerging learning needs, promoting inclusivity and designing accessible learning solutions for all learners.

Rhys: Budgets and value. I know that's two, but they're inextricable! Tackling this challenge requires us to better evidence the impact of learning. We're now trialling new techniques for evaluation that have increased learner response rates to over 85%. This delivers really valuable intelligence. Using this to inform improvement and to track impact is essential.

Tina: Budgets for me too. Budget cuts in the public sector means that L&D funds are usually the first to be cut. In the face of this pressure, L&D departments must show their critical contribution to business success. They need to demonstrate the impact that training programmes have had on performance change and organisational change. And I think that L&D professionals must see themselves as performance consultants. Despite the phrase having been in use for a few years now, the sentiment behind it still isn't embedded into most roles.

These people should know their business backwards, know what skills are critical to success, where the gaps are and how to prioritise those to have maximum impact on business strategy. We're still having too many conversations where the L&D commissioner knows what they want - but not why, what difference it will make or how to measure that difference.

While the L&D industry obviously needs to provide training that's inspiring and engaging, it also needs to think about the bigger picture. Research from Columbia University showed that, when assessing a piece of learning's effectiveness, the learning event or course itself only contributes 24% of that effectiveness. Course pre-work accounts for a further 26%, while follow-up activity is responsible for the remaining 50%. Despite this, a typical learning investment places 85% of its focus on the learning event. The way these budgets are spent needs to be reversed – but that's hard to do when there's such a heavy focus on the number of courses being laid on and the number of people attending them.

Louise: I'd also echo what Rhys and Tina said. We cannot ignore the challenge of proving the impact of the learning that L&D teams provide. Our partners at Microsoft talk of companies needing to elevate their Chief Learning Officer to a Chief Productivity Officer. That really resonates with me. It stems from the idea of delivering learning to make a difference to business performance and productivity, not just because it's a nice thing to do. That requires L&D leaders to know their people and their business; to use data to determine where best to focus their resources; and to then demonstrate the tangible impact they've delivered. That will give L&D the senior visibility it wants – because what Board or executive team wouldn't want to oversee an upswing in productivity?

Given the power, what one thing would you love to change about the L&D industry right now?

Rhys: That all our conversations start with the end in mind. We have great products but shouldn't be afraid to challenge our clients and ourselves on whether they're the right ones, right now. By being clear on the outcomes and change needed, we can work with our clients to bring our experience to the table and co-create the right solutions.

Burrwa: I'd opt for creating a culture of continuous learning and innovation in all organisations. To do this, we'll need to shift mindsets as well as behaviours. The beauty of this is that it is all possible, just by applying the principles of behavioural science.

Tina: Going back to what I said before, I'd really like to see L&D leaders operating as valued members of the Executive Board and top team. Unfortunately, there's still a transactional relationship in many organisations where L&D teams are simply commissioned to resource learning events and only get second-hand messages from the Board, delivered through HR.

Changing that requires the integration of L&D into the business planning and strategy setting process; developing systems thinking capabilities within L&D teams; and harnessing data and generative AI to evidence the impact of L&D on business goals.

Louise: Like Tina, I'd like to get away from that transactional Board relationship. Having comprehensive data on learning's productivity impact will help hugely in this regard. That's what will allow L&D leaders to talk with greater confidence and conviction about what their teams can deliver and to have bold, courageous conversations about how learning can help deliver strategic priorities.



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