LEARN BETTER, WORK BETTER:
How to Build a 21st Century Learning Ecosystem
New ways to work need new ways to learn.

Technology is moving faster than ever. And with it, the skills and resources people need to do their best work are rapidly changing.

Recognizing this, organizations large and small are throwing huge sums of money at employee development. But their efforts to close the digital skills gap, amplify employee engagement, and strengthen cultures are generally failing.

Why? 21st century employees are different, from the way they engage in workplace tasks to how they consume content. Their demands are different. Their attention spans are shorter. Even their brains are rewired.

Because of these rapid changes, learning and development leaders need a new framework for building successful learning programs that meet 21st century challenges. This is how to do it.

IN THIS WHITE PAPER YOU’LL LEARN:

- Why the cost of ineffective training is soaring to a crisis level
- How to align and engage employees by driving company culture through learning
- The key elements of a 21st century learning ecosystem
- How to win L&D a seat at the table when setting business strategy
Employee disengagement starts with poor training.

Employees who have access to training, development, and support are happier at work. That’s why effective learning is one of the best perks a company can offer.

When training programs aren’t aligned with 21st century demands, worker engagement suffers. Learners become frustrated. They tune out. Eventually they leave, voluntarily or not, and the organization needs to fill the position. This cycle of employee disengagement costs millions.

Today, that cycle is becoming a crisis. The methods that were once enough to keep employees skilled have become ineffective. Learners can’t stand training, and they’re disengaging because of it.

These are the troubles felt by every trainer today:

9 in 10 employees polled don’t feel fully proficient in the technology they use every day.

Only 15% of new skills are successfully applied after being learned.

3/4 of senior managers are dissatisfied with their companies’ L&D function.

Fewer than one in four Chief Learning Officers said their employees were learning fast enough to keep up with the needs of the business.

— Jay Cross

InternetTime.com
How did we get here?

It didn’t happen overnight. Training became broken over the course of decades, as digital tools altered the way we work and think. Old methods were useful when technology was less diverse and changed slowly. Today, digital skills have a half-life of just 2.5 years.  

Traditional training can’t keep up with the speed at which modern technology evolves:

- The average enterprise uses 508 cloud applications, all of which require training. That’s a tall order when one hour of classroom instruction takes over 100 hours to make.

- In-house content creation teams aren’t able to create training fast enough, causing learners to fall way behind on their skills. This skills-based inefficiency with digital tools drains 2 hours of productivity from every employee’s work day.

- All told, this skills deficiency costs the U.S. economy $1.3 trillion annually and causes epidemic disengagement.

More significantly, learners themselves have changed. Technology has rewired the digital-age brain. Attention spans are at an all-time low. The 21st century brain is fast-moving and intimately connected to digital technology. Traditional training is neither.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRAINERS NEED HELP</th>
<th>LEARNERS WANT INSPIRATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Platforms abound, including outdated ones</td>
<td>A skills half-life of 2.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content is fragmented</td>
<td>Learners expect a consumerized look and feel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology evolves too quickly</td>
<td>They’re distracted, lack attention for long training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROI isn’t just unknown, it’s feared</td>
<td>Training leads to little or no retention/application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
New challenges bring new opportunities.

The only way learning and development leaders can face the challenges of training in the 21st century is to reimagine today’s unique obstacles as opportunities. Here are the five most pressing challenges today, along with how you can turn them into new ways to deliver learning.

1. **Users are distracted**, which means that content has to be short to reach through to them.

2. **Tech evolves very quickly.** But that sets an expectation, and a need, for continuous learning.

3. Companies and individuals have different learning goals. Learning ecosystems let us offer and capture informal learning moments in addition to formal learning.

4. **Users are overwhelmed** with ever-present technology, but ubiquitous electronic devices allow us to deliver training in realistic, immediate, digital contexts.

5. **Diverse digital usership** makes it hard to train on a one-size-fits-all platform, but makes it easy to deliver performance support at the point of need...if you have a flexible platform.
New approaches are half the equation, but they’re not enough to create a complete training program on their own.

Training is so broken that there’s an aversion among some innovators to keeping any elements of old-style, formal training. It’s true that some elements of traditional training are no longer compatible with 21st century realities.

But even though technology has exposed innumerable flaws in conventional training wisdom, we can’t discard things we’ve known for a long time about how people learn best. It’s just as essential to keep the traditional strategies that work as it is to ditch antiquated methods. Here are some of the age-old training strategies that L&D needs to find new ways to deploy.

**If it ain’t broke, it can help fix training.**

OUTDATED METHODS

- Static, long-form training that does not engage learners
- Slow creation cycles for training on slow-moving technology
- One-size-fits-all learning methods that don’t recognize diverse learners
- Designated learning spaces and fixed time slots

TIMELESS STRATEGIES

- A formal, strategic approach that is aligned with company goals and culture
- Getting learners emotionally invested in training content
- Realistic practice
- Performance-focused training
A hybrid of old and new.

A 21st century training program combines modern opportunities for training with timeless best practices adapted to digital-age realities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROVEN STRATEGIES</th>
<th>MEET</th>
<th>NEW OPPORTUNITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bite-size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aligned</td>
<td></td>
<td>Continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td></td>
<td>Formal &amp; Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td></td>
<td>Just-in-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance-focused</td>
<td></td>
<td>On-demand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The result of this hybrid approach is a learning ecosystem: a multifaceted, future-proof training program that offers continuous, on-demand performance support. A learning ecosystem is:

1. Built with microlearning, so that lesson content refreshes easily and learners consume it on their terms. Microlearning is the only way to engage the shrinking attention spans of modern, digital workers. It’s better for trainers, too. Micro content is much faster, easier, and cheaper to create and update than traditional content. Trainers can fine-tune the spacing of lessons and intersperse them with assessments, practice items, and other feedback mechanisms.

   Microlearning empowers trainers to deliver content effortlessly and gives learners support inside the workflow. Microlearning is not an approach to a 21st century program; it’s a requirement.

2. A utility. Microlearning enables performance support that’s available whenever and however you need it, like a utility.

   Think of the different ways you use water in your office. It’s there in the drinking fountain, in the bathroom, in the kitchen sink. Utilities are not luxuries or goods or services. They are necessities, delivered so reliably that you build plans and habits around them being there.

   A learning program that functions like a utility must be:

   • **Push and pull**, able to be accessed by learners in the workflow as easily as pushed by trainers outside it.
   • **Frictionlessly accessible**, ready to meet a wide variety of use cases.
   • **Habitual and continuous.** Users should access it by muscle memory—like turning on a faucet.
A learning ecosystem is...

3. **Aligned** with the company’s people, strategy, and culture. Employees need to be able to clearly see company updates, new goals and priorities, and communications from managers. The more clarity with which employees can understand their organizations and their roles, the more engaged they’ll be.

When everyone is aligned, the company is **all in**. This means that every party in the organization is a stakeholder in the training program, allowing your teams to build skills together and making training essential to the business.

4. Reinforced with **realistic, holistic practice** that makes top performers and digital citizens of every learner. To accomplish that, the age-old wisdom still holds true: practice makes perfect. More accurately, realistic practice makes perfect.

Here are three ways to ensure that learning is reinforced in a realistic way.

- **Use scenarios and simulations.** Get learners into a performance mindset with experiential learning, including training that involves actual stakes.
- **Train for context.** Engineer success in real life by training not only procedural instruction, but also the psychological, social, and physical elements of performance. Read more about this idea [here](#).
- **Strive for wisdom, not just knowledge.** The ultimate goal of learning is something we might call wisdom: the deeply-held skills fluency and organizational alignment that enables learners to successfully improvise on the job when necessary. It’s what makes people feel at home at work.

5. **Affective**, or emotionally stimulating. The most successful learning content is that which resonates with the learner’s emotions. And the best way to give learners a personal connection to information is to provide it the moment they need it. When you have an urgent question, the thing you want most in the world is the answer.

That’s why it’s important to have a nimble, continuous learning ecosystem that delivers support on demand. Learners are empowered, they retain the content, and they feel better having learned it. Affective learning *is* engagement.
Freeing L&D

A 21st century learning ecosystem doesn’t just train learners better. It also gives you, the learning professional, unprecedented flexibility in how you check that the program is working.

**Test and invest.** In the same way that technology evolves, you need to evolve your learning system. To do that, you'll need to constantly test new approaches. With a learning ecosystem based on microlearning, trainers can test the efficacy of individual approaches with pinpoint accuracy. The question is no longer about the performance of the program. It’s about finding what works for individual learners. Your whole learning environment becomes a sandbox. You can place big bets on innovative approaches.

**More ROI in more places.** A learning ecosystem is a powerful tool that enhances productivity throughout the company. It makes learning essential to the business, woven into everyday operations and relied upon by all levels of the company. With so many different use cases, the ROI of a learning ecosystem isn’t visible in just one place—it’s everywhere. Training goes from being judged on broad metrics to strategic ones: Are people hitting their goals more consistently? Is it working to elevate that one team that needs a boost? Is it helping managers manage?

The highest validation of a learning ecosystem comes when you no longer need to obsess over metrics to prove the value of training. Learners already know it. Every day, in every job, *they can feel it working.*

“When a business contribution is clearly there, it’s much easier (for L&D leaders) to earn and keep a seat at the table.”

— Jack J. Phillips & Patti P. Phillips
Training Magazine
To empower modern workers, learning and development leaders have to face the future the same way a good learning program delivers instruction: continuously.

The key to lasting engagement is to provide on-demand performance support with a learning ecosystem. One that will be:

- **Built with a backbone of microlearning**, so that lesson content refreshes easily and learners consume it on their terms
- **A utility** inside the organization, supporting on-demand instruction and diverse use cases
- **Aligned** with the company’s employees, strategy, and culture
- Reinforced with **realistic practice** that makes digital citizens of every learner
- **Personally affective** by solving learners’ problems in the moments they need it most

A modern learning program based on these principles becomes part of everything that happens in the business. Learners will be engaged, managers will see productivity rise, and everyone will be on the same page. Employees will learn better, and work better.
Build your own future-proof learning ecosystem.
Grovo gives you the technology, content, and expert service you need, all in one place.
Request a demo to learn more.

The world’s best brands learn on Grovo.

Build your own future-proof learning ecosystem.
Grovo gives you the technology, content, and expert service you need, all in one place.
Request a demo to learn more.

The world’s best brands learn on Grovo.

Grovo is a better way to learn at work. The platform empowers companies with the training technology and content to align, educate, and inspire their teams. From onboarding to professional development, Grovo’s 60-second microlearning videos teach everything 21st century employees need, delivered in a way that learners love.

Learn more at www.grovo.com.

SOURCES

3. CEB. “How Can We Improve the Impact of the L&D Function on Business Outcomes?” (2011)
7. IDC: Bridging the information worker productivity gap: New challenges and opportunities for IT