The DNA of Online Learning

The complete guide to online learning for business

ICS Learn

Contents

Introduction

Online learning is part of a digital revolution that's changing the world. Today's businesses are realising the need to embrace digital tools and training methods in order to meet the demands of the modern age – an age that's global, connected, and moving faster than at any point in history.

With so many of life's tasks being automated, a deficit in digital skills is a major handicap in both the business and personal sphere. Computers are acquiring new abilities at an extraordinary rate: workers with easily automated skills will find themselves struggling to match the efficiency and performance of machines.

Businesses must equip their workers with the digital skills they need to succeed in the 21st century, and at the same time employ digital teaching methods to ensure their learning process fulfils the needs and expectations of modern learners.

A recent report by Towards Maturity highlighted a huge gap between what learners want and the professional training that employers deliver. As the internet changes how we work, communicate, relax and connect, workers increasingly expect to learn online too.

Learners want access to relevant resources at the point of need, often through mobile. They also want agency in their learning – to take responsibility for their professional development, and learn at their own pace. This flexibility and in-the-moment relevancy is something that classroom training can rarely provide.

80% of workers think online learning would help them further their career, but only 42% agree that their company provides relevant online learning for their job - most organisational learning is still highly focused on face-to-face courses.

And while 80% organisations rank digital transformation as a high priority, only 35% have a 'clearly defined' strategy to achieve this.

These businesses are missing out on huge organisational benefits. Higher than average percentage of budget allocated to learning technologies is a strong predictor of a top-performing company. These top companies don't have the biggest budgets or the highest ratio of L&D staff to employees – they utilise learning technology to maximise results with the resources they have.

91%
of staff prefer to learn at their own pace

82%
know what learning they need

89%
of staff consider that they are responsible for managing their own learning and development

Towards Maturity's report highlights the widening gap between organisations who have successfully adopted online learning, and those who haven't:

'What stands out as we take an objective look at the development in technology-enabled workplace learning over the 13 years since we started this research programme, is that the performance gap is widening between those that are achieving the best results and the rest. Whilst our top performing learning organisations are achieving greater reach, efficiency and business impact, and establishing a positive approach towards learning that is evident at every level in the organisation, too many learning and development professionals are struggling to change attitudes.'

— *Towards Maturity, Unlocking Potential 2016-17 Learning Benchmark Report*

This paper will first examine the specific benefits of online learning to both the learner and the organisation. It will then explore the characteristics of online learning and lay out a roadmap for digital transformation, focusing finally on how to optimise online learning to achieve common business goals: performance, efficiency, and streamlined processes.
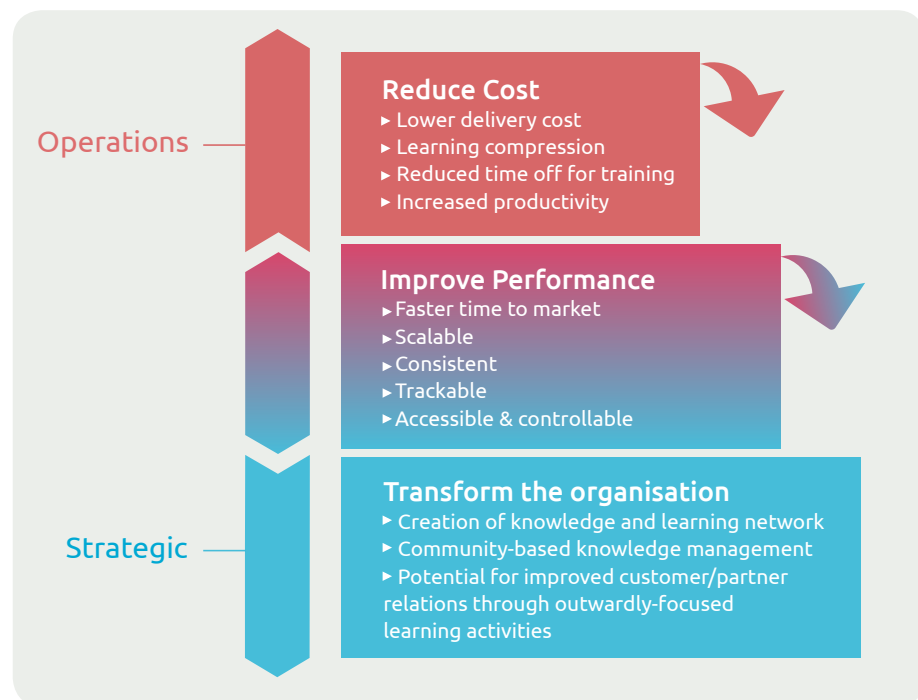
The Benefits of Online Learning

The old-fashioned conception of online training as a cut-price, corner-cutting solution is defunct. While online learning certainly has huge potential to reduce costs, focus on the financials often leads businesses to overlook the multitude of other benefits that online training can bring.

61%
of learners like to be able to learn on the go

38%
of learners use their mobile phone or tablet to access the resources they need at work

50%
would be happy to do so if they knew what resources were available

Operations

Reduce Cost
▶ Lower delivery cost
▶ Learning compression
▶ Reduced time off for training
▶ Increased productivity

Improve Performance
▶ Faster time to market
▶ Scalable
▶ Consistent
▶ Trackable
▶ Accessible & controllable

Strategic

Transform the organisation
▶ Creation of knowledge and learning network
▶ Community-based knowledge management
▶ Potential for improved customer/partner relations through outwardly-focused learning activities

At the operational level, online learning saves both **time** and **money** while increasing **productivity** and **efficiency.** Online learning involves less time travelling to and from training events while reducing tutor hours and expensive printed material. It's also much easier to maintain and update content when needed.

The content itself tends to be honed and refined to its most streamlined, effective form. Learning is therefore **compressed**, allowing more training in the same amount of time or less time spent on training overall.

Learners can work through the resources at their own pace, and aren't bound by the pace of the slowest in the group or disturbed by questions from others. They can also skip sections that aren't relevant to them, and return to areas of interest or need, increasing **retention**.

Online learning...

Reduces costs by 18%

Reduces learning delivery time by 27%

Reduces time to competency by 15%

Reduces time taken off for learning by 21%

Increases productivity by 15%

Online learning systems provide **scalability** and **consistency** whether there are two staff being trained or 2000. More learners will have access to standardised training, making it easier and faster to onboard new staff, roll out new applications or processes, communicate new policies, and consolidate best practice across the business.

Case Study: British Airways
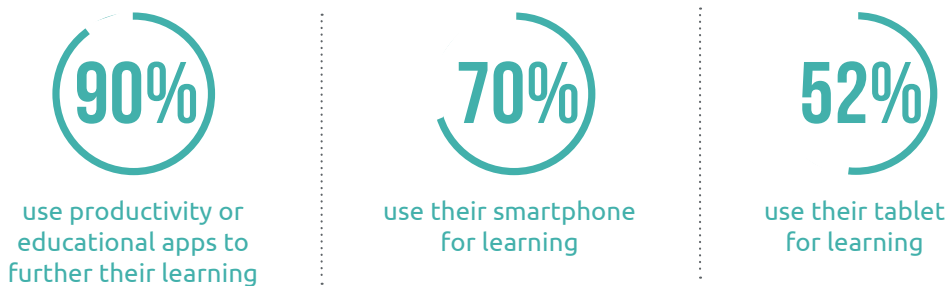
Reduced costs by **£1.1 million** over 3 years

Online learning speeds up change to new products or systems by **24%**

Online learning speeds up change to new IT applications by **25%**

69% of learners are able to quickly put into practice what they learn online

Online learning is **trackable**: a Learning Management System (LMS) will allow you to measure your employees' progress, track how frequently they've accessed their materials, create automated reporting, and see at a glance who has completed training and who has not.

And you're more likely to be tracking great results with online learning. Learners are more likely to access their study materials frequently because online learning is so **accessible**. It allows learners to go **mobile** and study from anywhere with an internet connection, on their smartphone or tablet as well as computers. They can get their learning at the point of need or utilise their commute, evenings and lunchbreaks to learn.

90%
use productivity or educational apps to further their learning

70%
use their smartphone for learning

52%
use their tablet for learning

Case Study: McDonalds

▶ **£5 million** saved in 2 years

▶ **10%** growth in sales

▶ **Increased** standard of hygiene

▶ **Increased** employee engagement

▶ **Increased** transfer of knowledge to the workplace
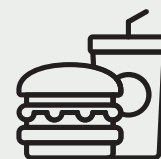
Online learning is **social** learning. It increases interdependence between teams who are learning together, as the focus moves from asking the teacher a question to working out the solution collaboratively using the resources provided.

Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) allow for ease of **collaboration** and the exchange of ideas, while peer discussion in group forums reinforces learning and aids memory. This develops **communication and teamwork skills** and can increase social cohesion within groups.

► **77%** rate working in collaboration with others as essential or very useful

► **70%** are motivated by technologies that allow them to network and connect with each other

► **50%** of L&D leaders involve communities of practice in their offerings, yet only **11%** encourage staff to solve problems socially together and just **12%** use curation tools to facilitate access

This shift away from teacher-focused learning fosters a useful constructivist approach: it positions learning as an active process of constructing knowledge based on previous knowledge and experience. It allows learners to build their knowledge through doing, discussing and participating rather than simply listening to a teacher.

It also frees the teacher to assess and observe the learning taking place, transforming their primary purpose from 'delivering information' to supporting learning where needed. **Teacher resources and attention** can be channelled much more efficiently to where they're really needed – in many cases, to where learners have requested assistance.

On a strategic level, online learning can transform your organisation. A well-developed, long-running programme of online learning will build a community of knowledge through forums and social channels, where content is both consumed and created by learners. While 'official' learning materials are essential, workers can also help each other through online networks, creating a **library of community knowledge** accessible by everyone at the point of need.

Case Study: British Telecom

Delivered online training to **23,000 employees** over 3 months at a cost of **£5.9m**.

If delivered in-person, this would have taken an estimated five years and cost **£17.8m**

45% of top-achieving companies agree that their face-to-face training actively builds on knowledge gained through online learning

66% of top-performing organisations support user-generated content

27% are using feeds, curation and social bookmarking

27% are using learning record stores to track progress through a wider variety of content

Self-paced, self-directed learning can also be transformative for the mindset of the learner. It encourages learners to take **responsibility** for their own learning instead of being passive receptors, increasing accountability and motivation.

They can organise their own time and attention to focus on areas of relevance or difficulty, and skip over content which is known or unnecessary. This increases learner motivation as they have agency over their learning and can avoid feeling like they are 'wasting time'.

► **72%** of learners have a clear personal plan about what they want to learn and why
► **70%** curate topics that interest them and file for future reference
► **67%** of top performing companies have noticed positive changes in staff behaviour as a result of increased learner engagement

The benefits of online learning aren't only seen by an organisation and its employees, but also by its customers. In the most obvious sense, customer satisfaction increases when staff are trained online by around 20%.

However, modern organisations are also leveraging customer-focused online learning programmes to increase brand loyalty, stand out from their competitors, and create a culture of learning that extends beyond their business.

Barclays is a prime example of this. They launched their free Digital Eagles programme during their transition to online banking to ensure that their customers had the requisite computing skills to access their services. Opening their learning resources to the public sends a powerful message to both customers and employees about what kind of business they want to be.

In their own words: "We're at the forefront of the digital revolution, we'll take everyone with us and won't leave anyone behind." That's something for every organisation to aspire to.

The DNA of Online Learning

'In 2016 the world of work is changing rapidly and the learning professionals that support today's organisations are slowly waking up to the fact that we can't just train colleagues once and then retain them for life. Their work needs to move away from 'pushing' programmes and 'organising' initiatives for people to thinking about how people are really learning in the modern world and how to support them on a continuous basis.'

— Jane Hart, Towards Maturity 2016/2017 Benchmarking Report

We've seen that modern learners don't want online learning to repeat the processes and structures of classroom learning. They want flexibility, relevancy, and accessibility. They don't want to be told what to do; they want to take responsibility for their training and be an active participant in learning.

Online learning provides a unique opportunity to take the best of traditional learning and make it even better. It facilitates the replacement of top-down, scheduled, didactic learning with self-directed, self-paced participatory learning – something that few classrooms provide. However, it also maintains and enhances the solid support structure that's vital to every form of learning.

So what are the characteristics of successful online learning?

Support culture: celebrate and energise

Support culture: think win-win-win

Support culture: work stronger together

Support culture: reach out and connect

Support culture: focus on outcomes

Support culture: be more humble and care more

Training

Mentoring/Coaching/Facilitation

Knowledge Development

Online Community

Effective Communication

Storytelling

Virtual Environment

Sharing Ideas

Structure	Networks
Decisions	Norms
Motivators	Commitments
Information	Mindsets

Inside the Helix: Essentials of Online Learning

The **structure** you create informs how your **learner network** develops. You need some form or structure in place to create a community, no matter how formal or informal, and having a strong network is essential for both staff and learners.

The **decisions** you make will become the **norms** in your community. Every decision you make will affect those involved in the learner network.

The **commitments** you make become **motivators** for achievement and progression. These could be job-related, such as increased status or salary, or learning-related such as qualifications.

The **content and information** you provide will develop and inform the **mindset** of your learners. Make sure that everyone has straightforward, timely access to the information and resources they need to complete the course.

Outside the Helix: Community and Support

Underpinning everything should be a strong **support culture** that motivates, energises and connects learners.

Mentoring and coaching is an essential part of any training. The emphasis should be on the learner learning, not the teacher teaching; they should be an active participant in their own learning.

Knowledge is developed through the **online community** you create – a community which works together to build and share information.

Communication channels are crucial in disseminating knowledge throughout the community. Communications should focus on telling an inclusive, motivating story that involves people in a conversation rather than telling them what to do.

The **Virtual Environment** is the space through which we share ideas and knowledge. This goes beyond just Learning Management Systems (LMSs) to include social learning environments and social media channels – for example, blogs, Wikis and Facebook groups.

Every part of the structure must work together to facilitate successful online learning.

What's the difference between online and traditional learning?

In essence, learning doesn't change whether it's gained in a classroom or through technology. Many characteristics of online learning seen above are also true of traditional face-to-face learning. Both online and offline learning experiences involve questioning, exploration, collaboration; both result in self-reflection and empowerment; both rely on engagement and foster curiosity.

However, there are some distinct differences between the two.

Traditional Learning	Online Learning
Teacher Centered	Student Centered
Single Media	Multimedia
Isolated Work	Collaborative Work
Information delivery	Information Exchange
Factual-based learning	Technology-enabled learning
Push approach	Pull approach
Learning is acquistion	Learning is Participation

The final two contrasts are key to online learning theory.

Push vs. pull approach describes why online learning better serves modern learners who want timely access to relevant information. Where traditional learning **'pushes'** information at a set time to set people, online learning allows learners to **'pull'** in necessary education at the moment of need. It's the difference between asking and being told: the information might be the same, but when it's in response to a direct need and is immediately useful, it's far more valuable.

Learning-as-acquisition vs. learning-as-participation describes the difference between two theories of learning. The acquisition theory posits learning as the transmission and accumulation of knowledge, and education as something to be received by the learner. This is closely aligned with traditional teacher-led learning, where the teacher imparts knowledge to students who dutifully fill their books with the knowledge they have acquired.

Participation theory, in contrast, depicts learning as an active and ongoing process which a network of learners are involved in. There is a focus on social learning, conversation, and communities of practice. Online learning facilitates this form of active learning, as it places agency with the learner and encourages student-centred, collaborative work.

Learning-as-participation is vital to creating an effective organisational learning process. Workers know what training they need to do their jobs; when given responsibility for gaining this knowledge and the tools to do so, they will flourish.

The Three Pillars of Online Learning

Learning System	⬅️	Learning Content

⬆️⬇️   ⬆️⬇️
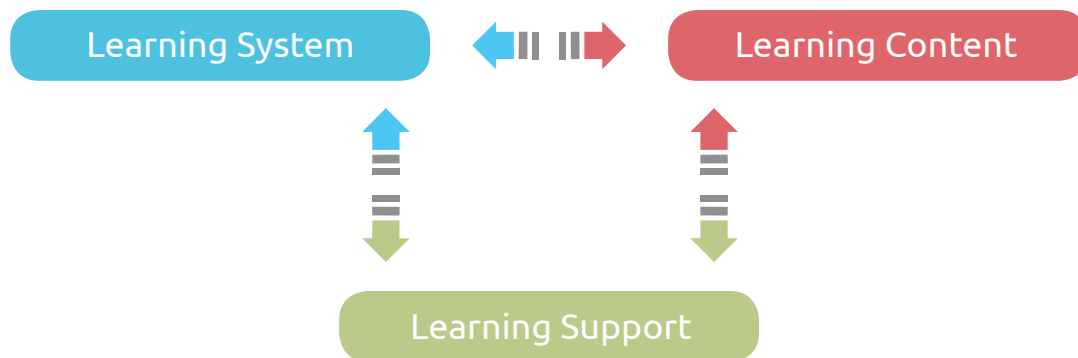
Learning Support

Let's take a closer look at the key components of an effective online learning system. There are three vital parts: content, system, and support.

Learning content must be in place to allow learners to develop their knowledge and skills. Content can be a simple as written information, or involve a host of multimedia content:

- ✓ Videos
- ✓ Interactive quizzes
- ✓ Scenario games
- ✓ Online assessments
- ✓ Live classrooms
- ✓ Surveys & questionnaires
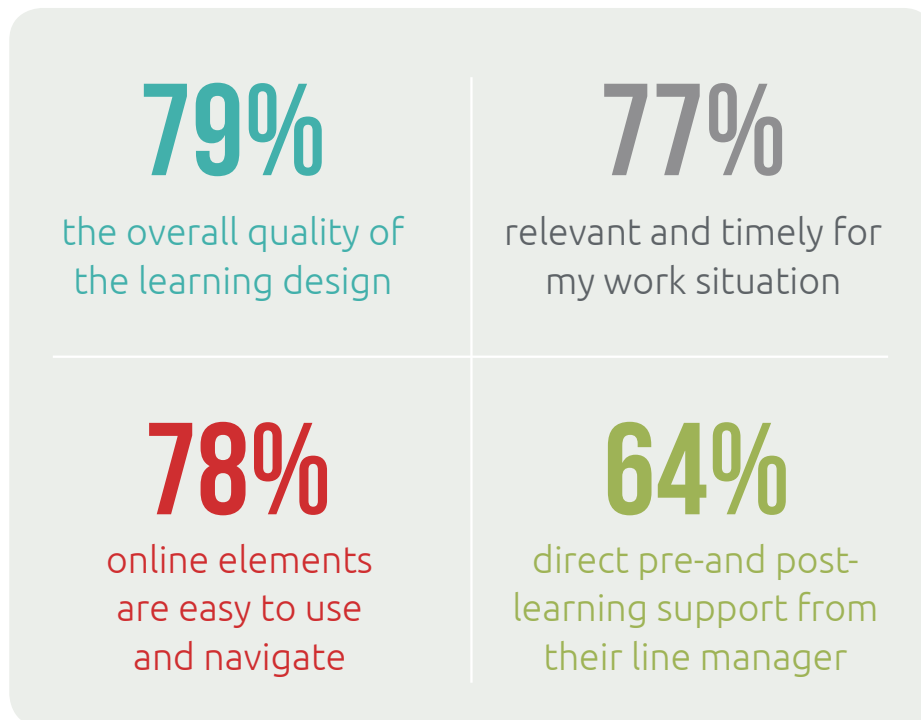- ✓ Checklists
- ✓ Infographics
- ✓ Podcasts

A learning **system** is the technology which facilitates online learning. It's necessary to host the learning content and to track the progress and completion of learning. This can be built internally to suit your business, or created by an external online learning provider. Examples include:

- ✓ Learning Management System (LMS)
- ✓ Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- ✓ Webinars
- ✓ ePortfolios
- ✓ Video conferencing
- ✓ Email
- ✓ Forums

Underpinning both of these is support: learners can't progress without the support in place that enables them to achieve their goals. This can take the form of:

- ✓ Mentors
- ✓ Coaching
- ✓ Tutor-led webinars
- ✓ Face-to-face teaching
- ✓ Workshops
- ✓ Group forums
- ✓ Peer support

What do learners want from online learning?

79%
the overall quality of the learning design

77%
relevant and timely for my work situation

78%
online elements are easy to use and navigate

64%
direct pre-and post-learning support from their line manager

When designing a learning system, it's vital to listen to the needs of the learners themselves. Learners want a simple and intuitive system that allows them to find the information they need, when they need it.

They're motivated by professional development – be it a certification, a promotion, or simply recognition from a manager – and by personal development in the form of new skills and increased performance and productivity.

60% strongly agree that recognition of their learning is important to them

45% are motivated by the wish to obtain professional certification

45% are motivated by the thought of promotion

40% are motivated by wanting to maintain or achieve a higher certification

69% are motivated by wanting to do their job better or faster

57% are motivated by wanting to increase their productivity

83% are seeking out the opportunity to gain new skills in the workplace

The Transition to Online Learning

The end result of online learning implementation will vary between organisations according to need, resources, and ambition.

All online learning systems must be built on the three crucial pillars: content, support, and system. These, therefore, form Phase One – the essentials components that a business must supply in order to facilitate online learning at any level. Businesses in Phase One often use online learning to facilitate inductions, Heath and Safety assessments and other compliance measures.
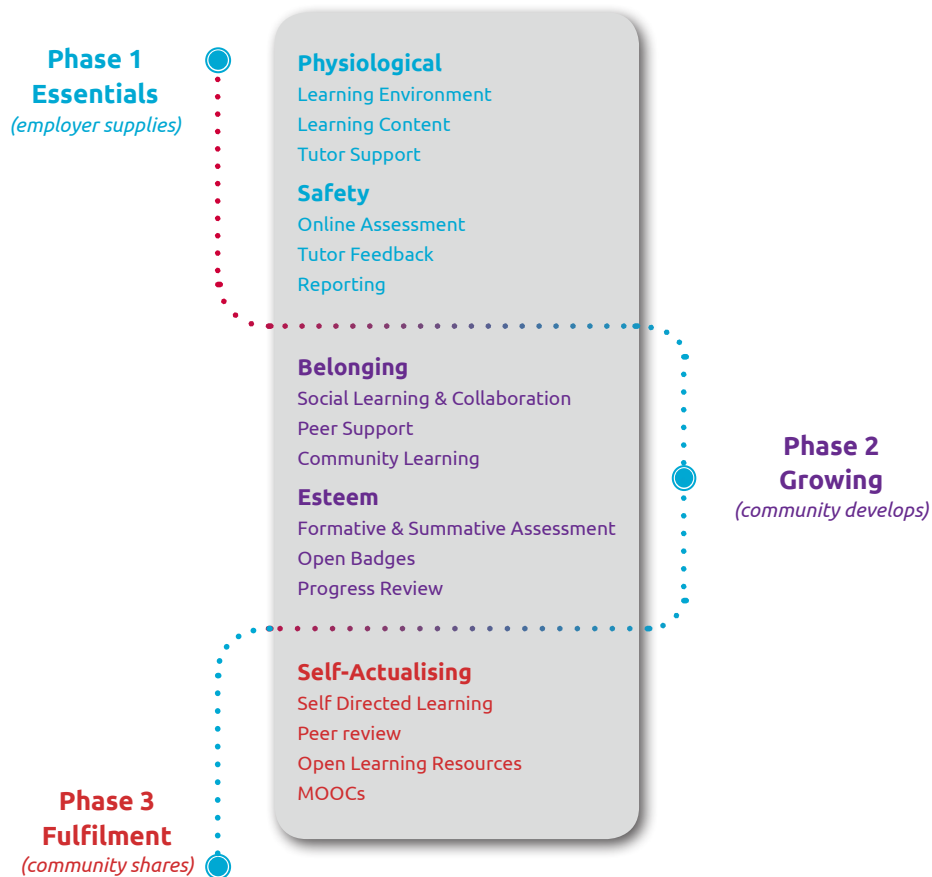
As the scale and ambition of the learning system grows, it moves into Phase Two. Aspects such as online forums and community learning develop at this stage, increasing the freedom and scope of communication and fostering a sense of belonging among learners.

A wider variety of assessments types are often developed in this stage, along with 'rewards' for completion such as qualifications, certifications and badges. These are useful for boosting learner motivation and self-esteem and providing the recognition of achievement that learners want.

A 'full' and comprehensive online learning system is one in Phase Three. This can only be achieved once Phases One and two are complete, and may take some time to develop. Phase Three sees a completely involved community, where learning content is developed as well as consumed by learners, and learning is self-directed and available to everyone.

Education also becomes more altruistic in this stage; Barclays and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are perfect examples of this.

Phase 1
Essentials
(employer supplies)

Physiological
Learning Environment
Learning Content
Tutor Support

Safety
Online Assessment
Tutor Feedback
Reporting

Belonging
Social Learning & Collaboration
Peer Support
Community Learning

Esteem
Formative & Summative Assessment
Open Badges
Progress Review

Phase 2
Growing
(community develops)

Self-Actualising
Self Directed Learning
Peer review
Open Learning Resources
MOOCs

**Phase 3**
Fulfilment
(community shares)

With each new phase, the interactivity and collaboration involved increases, as does the complexity of the system. However, not all organisations will need to develop their system to the final phase. Basic training needs may be satisfied by a Phase One or Two learning system.

For organisations that require or aspire to a full learning experience, progression through all three phrases will be necessary. This can take some time; however, it's possible to achieve the full capability of a Phase Three learning system without building your own. Using an existing online learning provider gives you access to facilities and resources developed throughout all three phases. It's also the easiest way to ensure your training is accredited by relevant awarding bodies.

Are you ready to make the transition to digital?

With considered preparation, any organisation can make the switch to online learning. This chart will give you a visual representation of your strengths and weaknesses so that you can plan your strategy accordingly. Fully digital-ready organisations will plot themselves at the centre on each of the 5 points; most likely, you'll be close to the centre in some aspects but further away in others, as shown below.
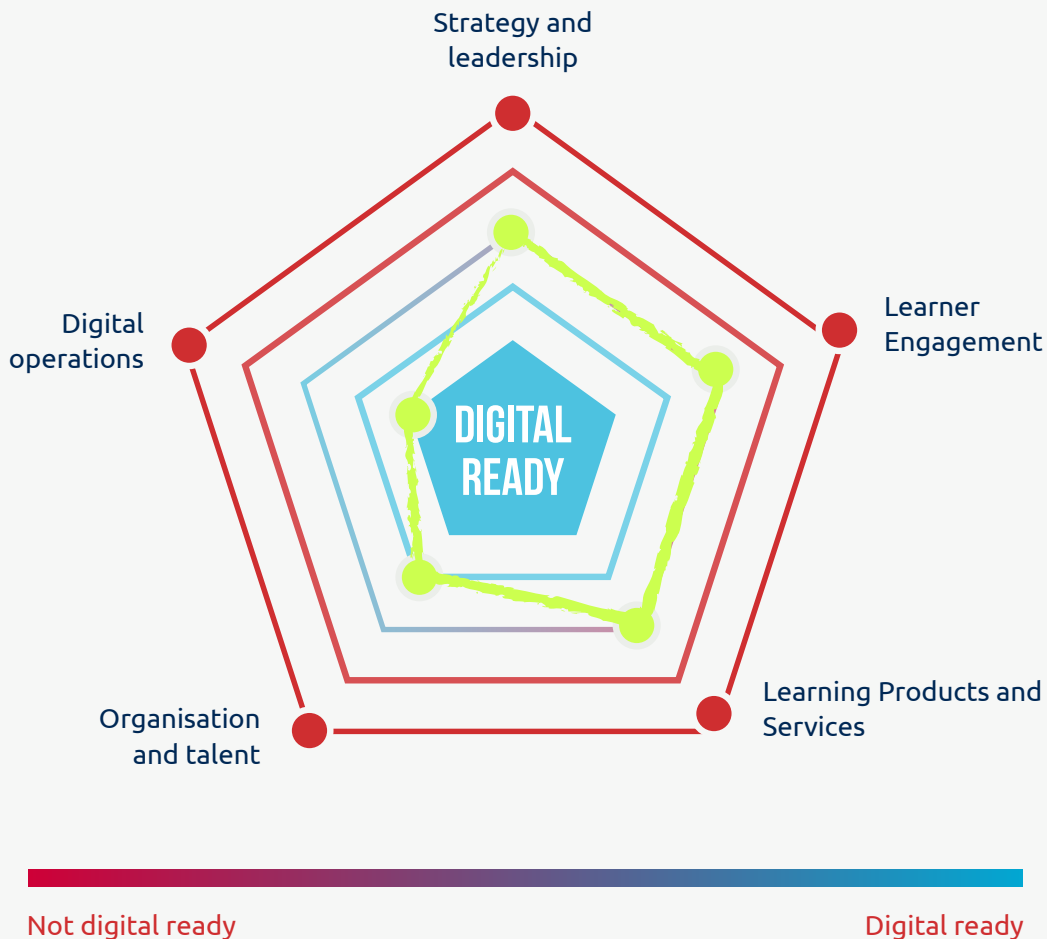
In our example, the company has fantastic digital operations in place, but still has some way to go on learner engagement, learning products and services, and strategy and leadership.

Strategy and leadership

Do you have a vision for what you want to achieve through online learning?

Have you created a strategy to achieve your chosen outcomes, and shared it appropriately with the leaders or your organisation?

Is everyone on the same page?

Learner engagement

Do you have a strategy for communicating effectively with learners?

Do you have appropriate systems to do this?

How will you motivate your staff to learn?

Learning products and services

Do you have an effective online learning system with content, support and a CMS in place?

Will you build this internally or through an external provider?

How will you develop this system? How will you manage it?

Organisation and talent

Do you have the right people in place with the skills you need to help you develop and deliver your online learning strategy?

Do you know which talents are you seeking to develop among your workforce?

Digital operations

Do you have the processes, controls and digital technologies that you need to support your business?

Are you using appropriate performance analytics to track areas that require training, and measure the success of your training?

Can your online learning strategy deliver these?

You don't need to be in the centre on every point, but having a good overview of your strengths and weaknesses is key to developing a strong, supportive and effective online learning system.

Where do you score yourself on each of the 5 points?

How to Optimise Online Learning

The key tenet of modern L&D strategy is that training activities should be built to achieve specific business goals. To facilitate this, L&D must more away from the periphery and into the heart of the organisation.

The strategy behind training activities should be made clear to all stakeholders; clarity of purpose and intended outcome will drive participation, engagement and ultimately success.

So how do you leverage online learning to achieve your organisational goals?

I want to… improve efficiency

If you're one of the many organisations grappling with squeezed budgets and high expectations, improving the efficiency of your programmes is likely a high priority. Good learning design is essential for streamlining processes without sacrificing quality.

Benefits of Online Learning: Efficiency

18%
cost reduction

27%
increase in volume of training delivered

27%
reduction in training time

Companies who are successful at improving efficiency integrate technology into their learning solutions twice as much as those who don't
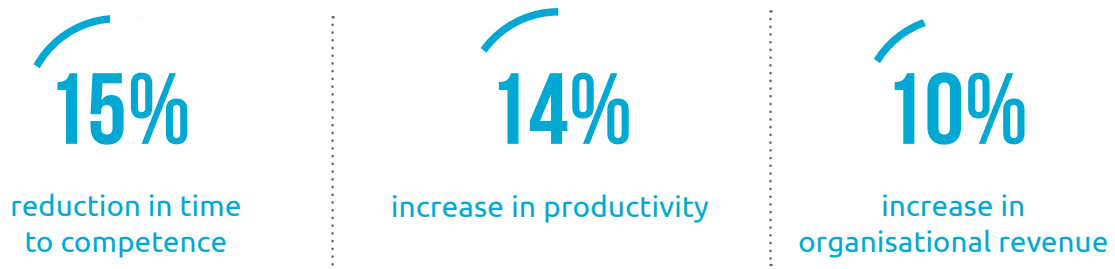
Efficiency-Improving Tactics

▶ Provide appropriate and timely content (for example, allowing learners to access content at any time)

▶ Use video, audio and images to convey concepts as well as text

▶ Reduce clutter and confusion by reviewing programmes regularly and clearing out irrelevant content

▶ Ask your learners how easy it is to find what they need and respond accordingly

▶ Integrate technology smoothly within your face-to-face training

▶ Use integrated online assessments to track completion and provide certification

I want to... improve performance

Modern businesses are moving away from the idea of 'training' being an occasional and separate event and towards an integrated approach which favours regular, on-job learning. Improving performance at the point of need is therefore a large focus of many business endeavours.

Benefits of Online Learning: Performance

15%
reduction in time to competence

14%
increase in productivity

10%
increase in organisational revenue

Performance-Improving Tactics

▶ Use mobile devices including bespoke mobile apps to ensure employees have access at the time of need

▶ Create job aids such as checklists to assist at the time of need

▶ Focus on priorities, ensuring all stakeholders are aware of how learning interventions are relevant to and aligned with business goals, including specifying KPIs/metrics to improve (in partnership with senior managers)

▶ Allow new skills to be applied during training, whether through activities or interactive methods such as games and simulators, to enable transfer of desired behaviours into the workplace

I want to... fine-tune our processes

Technology has huge potential to streamline processes within your organisation, whether training-related or otherwise. Keeping everyone in your business informed about the online learning tools available plays a huge part in this.

Benefits of Online Learning: Processes

25%

reduction in speed of rollout of new IT applications

21%

reduction in study time

Process-Improving Tactics

▶ Engage with leaders and learners early on when planning new learning activities

▶ Take advantage of external resources such as online courses

▶ Use organisation-wide information systems so everyone has access to relevant information

▶ Create a bank of job aids and best-practice videos

▶ Use a single sign-on process for learners to get what they need

The Future of Online Learning

The world of work is undoubtedly changing. Much manual work is being subsumed by automation, and most jobs are performed sitting in front of a computer screen. Digital skills are vital and widespread like never before.

People increasingly want to learn in the same way that they work, connect and relax: though the internet. They're used to the instant access to information that is a defining factor of the modern world, and they're demanding that the workplace keeps up. They're also ready to take responsibility for their own learning, and want the tools to progress their professional skills at a pace that suits them.

Online learning enables businesses to meet those needs. Digital advances have made it possible to take learning out of the classroom and incorporate it into everyday schedules. Work and learning are becoming inseparable, leading to a learning culture and a more agile, skilled and informed workforce.

The benefits are seen at every level of business: costs, training time, and time off are all reduced, with massive gains in performance, productivity, efficiency and retention.

The future of online learning is therefore one of massive growth. The trends swing towards mobile learning and the increased use of big data to shape and inform learning opportunities and outcomes. Education will continue to turn away from teacher/trainer-focused learning and towards a community-based, knowledge-sharing mindset. Concepts such as gamification will hold considerable sway as learner engagement steps to the fore, and there will be increased recognition of the value of informal learning tools such as podcasts and blogs.

To reap the benefits of online learning, organisations must act now to ensure that their plans, people and processes are digital-ready. The L&D function should move closer to the centre of business in order to align training activities with business goals and strategy. Clarity of purpose and a shared vision for online development will allow a thriving learner ecosystem to develop – one which unlocks the potential of learners at every level of the organisation.

In these fast-changing times, it's never been more important to stay ahead of the digital curve and develop a culture of learning that delivers. After all: a business is only as good as its people.

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Authors

Sean McCready

Sean has over 25 years of experience in the Further and Higher Education Sectors. Originally a FE Lecturer (in Computer Science), Sean has held senior roles with a number of the UK's leading training and online learning organisations including Ufi / learndirect and Newcastle College Group (NCG), leading the development of on-line teaching and learning programmes and specialist e-Learning systems, tools and content.

With many years supporting the development of online learning, Sean continues to teach the Masters in Education programme part-time with the Open University. A keen supporter of work-based learning and the accreditation of experiential learning, Sean worked on the Ufi Learning Through Work Programme and (whilst at NCG) developed the innovative RecogniseMe programme. He will publish his thesis in Technology-led Recognition of Prior Learning in 2017.

Sean is now Education Services Director of ICS Learn, one of the UK's leading online providers of professional qualifications.

Stephen Littler

Stephen is an ICS Learn CIPD Tutor. He holds a Ph.D. and Academic Membership of the CIPD. His areas of research interest are Human Resource Management, Organisational Change and Development, and Corporate Social Responsibility.

His Ph.D. investigates the CSR activities of the top 4 UK accountancy firms and their social responsibility actions in relation to tax avoidance. He anticipates publishing two further pieces of research in the near future, investigating employee participation and involvement within UK call centres and executive development within the UK banking sector.

Lauren Jack

Lauren is a writer with a focus in online education. She has an M.A. in English Literature, and has won the Robert W Service Poetry Award and the Lorimer Bursary.