

EMERGING TRENDS IN LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

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What different could we do for our employees in Learning & Development space, which they themselves could not achieve in this age of information?

The Paradox of Focus

We are living in the age of information, wherein, we could easily access and learn from resources available around us. For the entire duration, we remain awake, we are in constant mode of processing information available around us. Whether we learn from it or use it for our upskilling depends on the cost of its access in terms of time and money. It also depends on our perception of potential gain we could derive out of such learning, which further depends on our span of attention on the activity. These days, with most of our time involved in looking at some screen, mobile phones being most common, our attention spans have shrunk considerably.

According to Dr. Gloria Mark¹, a psychologist and the Chancellor's Professor of Informatics at the University of California Irvine and author of "Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance", it was found that the average attention span on any screen to be 02:30 minutes on average, back in 2004. It came down to 75 seconds in 2012 and since 2017, it has been recorded at 47 seconds on average with 40 seconds² being the median value within the respondents. In a separate study by researchers at Pennsylvania State University³ and Stanford University⁴, the average mobile device screen viewing session lasted roughly 10 seconds.

The research⁵ by Microsoft in 2015, shows our attention span has come down to 8.25 seconds, less than even a squirrel. When our attention is disrupted,

our ability to form the perception of potential gain gets impaired. We learn something when information perceived to be valuable and that information get stored in our short-term memory. Only when we engage actively with some information or activity, it moves from short-term to long-term memory. With our limited cognitive ability, when we try to multi-task or try to handle too much information simultaneously, we impair our ability to retain anything long enough in our short-term memory to successfully cement for the longer term. The studies by Dr. Gloria Mark, show that, we take 25 minutes to get back to our original task once we switch the task for the sake of multi-tasking.

Therefore, those 10-40 seconds of span of attention is all we have to devise modern day learning and development strategies for our employees to upskill. We shall not delve upon the righteousness of this situation as we shall consider this to be part of our natural evolution. Rather, we shall focus on how to engage our employees for those 40 seconds, so that they voluntarily or involuntarily stay on for that duration or even longer perceiving gain of value from their learning resources.

With this notion, let us dive into emerging trends in Learning & Development (L&D) for our evolving task-switching workforce.

Microlearning

We grow up learning things in totality. Any learning less than totality, we refer to as knowing. We study

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¹<https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/attention-spans>

²<https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/attention-spans>

³<https://www.psu.edu/news/research/story/human-screenome-may-give-insight-human-health-and-well-being>

⁴<https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2020/01/introducing-human-screenome-project>

⁵<https://www.scribd.com/document/265348695/Microsoft-Attention-Spans-Research-Report>

subjects in schools and colleges with a definite start and finish. We learn to do daily chores not partially but totally. It could span over years, but has a start and finish, which we may or may not decide. We perceive completeness in such learning. Till the time, we feel and believe in that completeness, we are not sure whether we have learned. This feeling of completeness varies from person to person, but it is something we all seek in natural order. The trend that we are going to discuss now is theoretically in contradiction to our natural search for completeness, yet it captures our thoughts and attention span of 40 seconds to make us perceive completeness. Some call it bite-sized resources, some call it in-the-flow learning, some call it on-the-go learning. However, it refers to any learning content requiring less duration of focus and attention yet provides a sense of completeness.

So, how could we come up with such learning content or resources? Does it need to be in audio-video form just like a short video clip? Does it necessarily require a sound or visual? Should it have soothing colours? Should it be available on a portal or as a link? Are we asking to write questions to hold those 40 seconds of attention? Or, are we missing something.

The answer to all these lies in the fact that the learner must perceive gain from learning being greater than the effort put in. In the myriad of our task-switching lives, we must

- Identify the most common repetitive tasks, employees engage in every day and create microlearning content for them to access alongside such repetitive tasks.
- Employees should be able to relate to that content and find it complementing to their activities with simple and preferably single learning objective. It should be easy to understand and implement in their flow of work.
- The content should be standalone, which gives a sense of completeness when completed independently.
- Access to the content should be easy for employees to learn at their own pace in their own ambience, without considerable cost in terms of time and money.

A myriad of content options like self-paced e-learning modules, short videos, interactive quizzes and games, job aids, infographics etc. are suggested if one searches for microlearning contents on the internet. But in fact, it is not limited to that only. A simple poster near the coffee machine or water filler machine at workplace is also a microlearning content. A jingle on the public announcement system is also a microlearning content. A cartoon of a typical problem being solved with an undertone of humour is also a microlearning content. Ultimately, our perceived gain from learning should be greater than our effort to learn.

As a matter of organizational policy, our L&D professionals should devote considerable portion of their time to devise innovative microlearning content. Instead of long lecture sessions and complex presentations with unidirectional communication, we should engage our employees in interactive microlearning contents, which evokes curiosity.

Personalized Learning Journeys

Once employees start consuming microlearning contents, they must have a sense of direction. They should feel confident that the organization is serious about their learning, conducive to the requirements of their role. Transparency and clear communication of a role's expectations is the bedrock for creating that sense of direction. Their performance in their role should be connected to their learning achievements and any upshift and downshift in work performance should have a visible correlation to learning for employees to have a sense of gain. Performance in Key Responsibility Areas (KRAs), job role, proactive endeavors, time spent on learning, qualifications, age, professional achievements etc. should be variable parameters for generating personalized learning journeys for employees. The journeys should have milestones for employees to have an understanding of what to expect at each milestone. If the employee is not able to sense gain, they could give feedback and alternate content could be substituted to make the journey meaningful.

Artificial Intelligence in L&D

Now that we have an understanding of Microlearning and Personalized Learning journeys, who will be doing the hardwork to make sure that contents and journeys are ready when demanded.

In organizations, with large number of employees, it could be a daunting task for a team of human L&D professionals to deliver that with speed, accuracy and quality. With the mission to keep that 40 second attention span engaged in learning, updated contents and quicker availability of customized learning journeys is important. Artificial Intelligence (AI) could be of great help in such scenario, provided we know how to actually use it and not be mesmerized by its exotic appealing hype. We could use AI in areas of content creation and quickly generate large number of Personalized Learning Journeys, based on changes in parameters or variables of determining learning. To ease our understanding and interpretation of results of such large number of customizations, we could segregate employees in groups or cohorts, with homogeneity in one or more parameters. It is nothing but sampling our population of employees. With the advent of modern-day Gen-AI tools, which are sophisticated to not only analyze existing data but also create and fill up any missing data points, running a thorough analysis of learning journeys with their impact on performance has become easier. It is like a What-If sensitivity analysis with different combinations of learning contents to maximize correlated performance in work. AI could help with such computations, given the correct instructions from us. Data-driven analysis of sentiments and satisfaction of employee trainees, aid in planning better training programs and their delivery methods, thereby, maximizing the Return on Investment (ROI).

Immersive Learning Technologies

Imagine a trainer lecturing us on how to do a job or handle a situation and asking whether we have any questions. Imagine we are in that situation where we must act to be at peace. Which scenario will help us to learn faster and retain our learning longer? It is no wonder that unless we are immersed in a scenario,

we cannot imagine or fathom a solution to an issue. But we may argue that are not we facing the issues and learning on the job? Yes, we do, but only those of us are learning who get to face such scenarios. Just because, someone does not face a situation, does not mean they do not need to know to navigate the situation. What if an organization wishes to impart experiential learning to its employees on a larger scale. The answer to this is immersive simulation-based learning technologies, where through Artificial Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), we could create an artificial ambience, where we could replicate a real-world scenario for employees to take centre-stage and act prudently. This technique is very helpful for onboarding new employees to the organization as well as those returning to customer-facing and decision-making roles after a considerable break. The immersive situation recreates the urgency and stress involved in such real-world scenarios and learners are compelled to assess the situation and act accordingly. This aids in full capture of attention, maximum retention and sense of complete learning. The initial technical setup and scenario building is a cost intensive step in this method, but when scaled up for training large number of employees, the benefits eventually surpass the costs. Input for scenarios could be frequent issues in the organization like recorded customer service issues, documented technical failures, similar kinds of frauds etc. Gamified scenarios also increase learner engagement and motivation.

Cross Training

With all the above methods, we could train the employees to perform better in their roles. But we also need employees to be skilled in case of potential workforce restructuring or significant job-role change or substitution of employees. A cross-trained employee can seamlessly step in and ensure the company operates smoothly without the need for emergency training or last-minute outsourcing. It enhances collaboration as employees tend to have working knowledge of other aspects of the organisation beyond their role. It could improve return

on investment, as having a skilled internal employee is cost effective compared to external hire or outsourcing. It also improves employee engagement and acts as a business continuity measure.

Soft Skills Development

Now that we have been somehow able to capture the 40 second attention of our learners by creating microlearning content through AI and curating them into personalized learning journeys, complemented by immersive learning experience, what if our learner employees are unable to communicate their learnings. What if their body language is detrimental to their learning. Our skill and knowledge are of no use, if we do not wish to use them when required. Our usage could be flawed if our intentions are wrongly communicated to people we deal with. A skilled employee, if perceived to be unapproachable by our clients and partners, is not a valuable resource. We need to remember that even our clients and partners have that 40 second attention span. How our employees communicate verbally and non-verbally decides a lot about our dealings with clients and partners. Focusing empathy, adaptability and problem-solving should be integral to L&D programs. Soft skills aid in building better work culture by promoting active listening, constructive feedback and inclusiveness.

Stress Management

We have that 40 second attention span to engage our employees but so do other stakeholders in our organization, with their own priorities to push forward. The employee feels overwhelmed and stressed about addressing all the challenges they face. Though other priorities are focused on getting the work done by the employee, our priority is to make the employees retain learning for themselves. So, our priority is different than others and our employees must sense it. We should give them a flexible learning schedule with capabilities to resume and recap their learnings at their own pace. There should be summarized contents and some mentoring or coaching avenues to hear them out. Hybrid training programs also puts the convenience of learners on priority. The objective

is that they must perceive the gain to be greater than the efforts put in. Only when our brain is relaxed, less distracted, we can focus better and perhaps for even longer than 40 seconds. Slowly, the brain trains itself to focus for more. This translates to employee well-being and is appreciated by employees though subtly.

Emotional Intelligence

A growing focus in Learning & Development (L&D) is Emotional Intelligence (EI). The various studies highlighted its role in creating resilient, collaborative teams capable of managing stress and communicating effectively. Integrating EI into L&D programs enables HR professionals to build adaptive and empathetic workplaces. Emotionally intelligent leaders understand both their own emotions and those of their teams, helping them lead with authenticity, compassion and empathy. This fosters inclusion, engagement and job satisfaction. Empathy - a core component of EI-supports strong team dynamics by promoting understanding, active listening and cooperation. L&D professionals can enhance EI across the organization through targeted training workshops that focus on self-awareness, emotional regulation, communication and empathy. These can be delivered via interactive formats such as workshops, e-learning and team exercises. Encouraging self-reflection and providing safe spaces for emotional sharing also support EI growth. Measuring outcomes like improved communication and teamwork can assess effectiveness. Far from a passing trend, EI is essential for nurturing resilient and high-performing teams in today's fast-paced work environment.

Continuous Learning Culture

Now having discussed so much, where does our learning end? The answer is nowhere. Nobody told us when to start learning and nobody could possibly tell when to end. We start learning due to requirements of survival and our curiosity. Being human, it is in our natural order to question and be curious about things around us. As organization, our L&D strategy must support that natural order.

We must encourage employees to take ownership of their professional development by providing them access to learning resources beyond directed training contents. Availability of continuous learning contents promotes growth mindset and encourages self-directed learning.

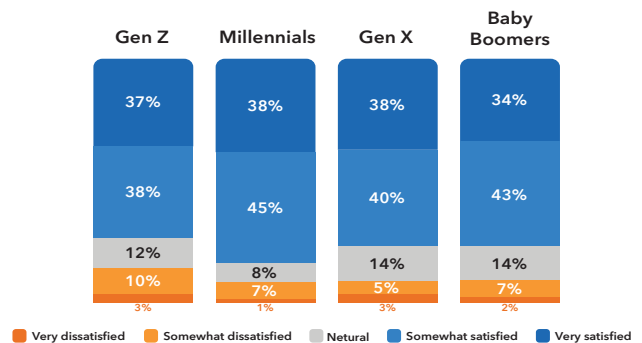
The Intuitive Learning Platform

All the things we have discussed so far could fall apart if the learner employee finds them difficult to access. The learning platform of the organization should be easily accessible anytime, anywhere and on any device. It should have capabilities to support all the above strategies and yet should track learning engagement, completion rates and learning retention matrices for L&D Managers to refine their strategies to improve training effectiveness. A 2024 LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report found that 94% of employees prefer learning while working rather than in separate training sessions. It is possible only when the learning platform is integrated with the business platform. Step-by-step walkthroughs, self-help knowledge base integration, contextual pop-ups and smart tips reinforce the learning in the flow of work for employees. All these things make the employees feel that the organization is serious about their learning and they find value or gain in learning which is directly related to their work.

Conclusion

The core job of L&D in any organization is talent management or maximizing human capital. Modern day employees, especially Gen Z and later, believe in a concept of job satisfaction, which is very different from earlier generations. They value collaboration, social learning, new working models, faster availability of information more than earlier. They are not satisfied with traditional ways. They do not believe in retiring from the same organization to which they first joined. Rather, the majority prefer not to even work for their entire working age. They prefer to retire early and venture into activities of their own, which is evident from large number of startups

Figure 1: Training satisfaction across generations



Source: The TalentLMS 2024 Annual L&D Benchmark Report and alternate professions. The social structure of our country is also changing with the changing demographics, with more new age people preferring solo life or those married are working couples. These bring with them their own opportunities and challenges. L&D Managers need to improvise on all these aspects while framing the L&D policy for their organization with the latest trends in the industry.

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