

THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF LEARNER EXPERIENCE IN ELEARNING

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Introduction

Can you recall the first time you learned how to cook a basic meal? Did you find a cookbook, study preparation guidelines, and figure out how to put it together yourself? Did a parent or peer show you how to do it, step by step? Or, perhaps the first time you made your own meal was in the information age, and you simply got online, found a few instructional videos and recipes, and proceeded to create your first meal yourself. Or maybe it was a mix of all of the above.

In any case, the ease with which you were able to acquire the knowledge necessary to complete the intended task at hand – in this case, a basic meal – represents the most critical, central part of the learning journey that enabled you, as a learner, to achieve your desired outcome expediently, efficiently, and effortlessly.

Unless you're in the business of restaurants or culinary arts, learning to cook may differ in content from what and how we learn in corporate learning environments, but in many ways the form and function of the process behind learning is not dissimilar. And what links any learning process in any field, in any environment is the critical importance of learner experience.

Beyond content, beyond strategy, beyond processes, and beyond technology, the effectiveness of any learning program is ultimately only as good as the learner experience when all is said and done. Even if learners are provided with the best tools to learn and the best learning programs, if the actual learner experience does not facilitate a smooth, tailored learning journey, then the ship has sunk before it has even left the harbour.

And this is what we will discuss in this paper. Of course, any smart learning strategy will incorporate a blend of people, processes, and technology to achieve its aims. But in this paper we intend to hone in on the critical role of learner experience in making a learning strategy actually work.

In the pages ahead we'll explore:

- The difference behind the terms often associated with learner experience, including user interface, user experience, learner experience.
- How learner experience is the weakest link in any learning strategy.
- The elements that make a great learner experience, across people, processes, and technology.
- The critical role of modern and emerging elements in eLearning that have helped and will continue to facilitate a seamless learning journey.
- The essential role of traditional learning modalities in eLearning and any learning strategy.
- Actionable takeaways to improve eLearning programs that genuinely engage learners and improve learning performance and business performance.

Before we begin, it is essential to understand that while we can always leverage broad tactics and strategies to get our learners on board, every individual learner is unique, and one's learning journey may be quite different from another's. But we'll explore all of this as we dive into the world of learner experience.

Aren't User Interface and User Experience the Same Thing?

User interface and user experience are often confused or thought of as the same thing, but in fact they are two very different terms. As a matter of fact, learner experience is also an independent term as well, but all three are deeply related, especially as we blend people, processes, and technology in an eLearning context.

So while some may think it sounds like splitting hairs, let's establish the difference between learner experience, user interface, and user experience:

User Interface (UI): On the most basic level, UI can be thought of as the way in which a user and a computer system interact with one another. If we're to use an analogy, imagine going to a grocery store's produce section to find the right apple. You see the colour, smell the scent, and taste the taste of a particular apple. This is the most immediate, superficial level of how you interact with that apple.

User Experience (UX): This goes one step beyond UI and is more holistic and comprehensive. UX includes the entire spectrum of interaction with a computer system, including how easy or pleasurable it is to use. If we're to take our supermarket analogy to the next level, UX would cover how pleasing we found that apple to use and taste; how we have used it in different salads and meal combinations; and our complete, aggregate impression of how we have consumed that type of apple, over time.

Learner Experience (LX): This builds on UX and takes it in the direction, specifically, of learning and eLearning. It is not limited to computer-based interactions, and instead covers the entire learner experience, from eLearning (online, software-driven), to social and experiential learning, to traditional classroom-based learning. We're reaching here with our apple metaphor, but in the name of continuity, LX applied in the produce aisles would cover our long-term experience with our chosen apple, how it tasted, how we used it, and most importantly how we were taught to use it in different contexts and situations.

All three elements will factor into this paper, but we will obviously be focusing on user experience as it pertains to the learner, hence a focus on LX.

Learner Experience is the Weakest Link in the Learning Chain

When we look at learning strategies, it's important to consider not only the breadth and depth of those strategies, but also where their critical weak spots or Achilles' heels may lie.

A comprehensive learning strategy takes a wide range of elements into account, including:

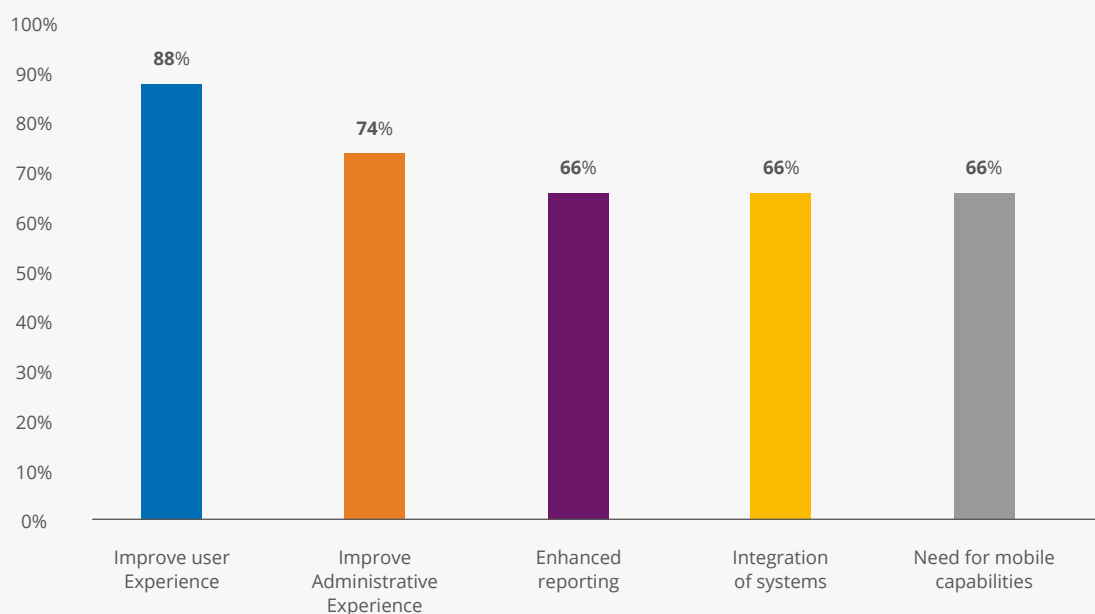
- What are the goals and objectives of learning?
- How do these L&D goals and objectives align with overall business goals and objectives?
- What is the learning content?
- Who are the learners?
- How do they learn?
- What tools and processes support their learning journey?
- How are the successes and deficiencies of the learning strategy defined?
- What is the process for continual improvement in the learning strategy?

All of these factors are essential pieces of the pie when it comes to building and improving an effective learning strategy, and they are all links in the chain of a comprehensive learning program.

However, while all of these pieces can be carefully put into place and executed, it is important to realize that a learning program is only as effective as the learner's capacity to effectively absorb, retain, and act according to the information they have been delivered. Otherwise it is all just a waste.

And this is something businesses and L&D professionals are increasingly tuning into. A recent Brandon Hall Group training study revealed that the number one reason organizations were switching their LMS was to improve user experience.

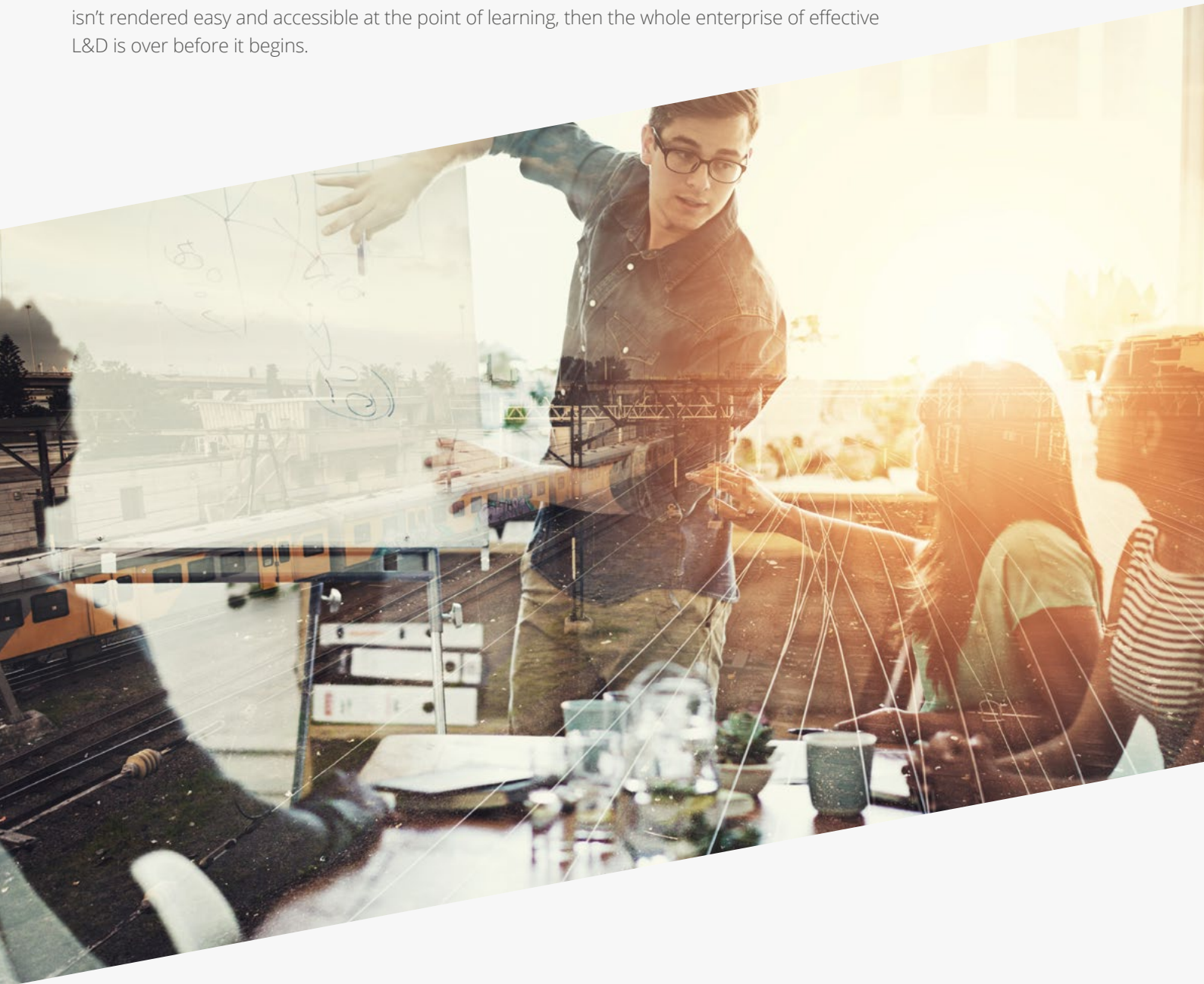
TOP 5 REASONS FOR SWITCHING LMS



Source: 2015 Brandon Hall Group Training Study

Think back to the cooking example provided in the introduction of this paper. Reading the clinical instructions contained in a recipe book may serve one student very well when it comes to baking a pie. Another student might find that direct, hands-on instruction provided by a master is most effective. Another might find bite-sized YouTube videos to be the best way to learn how to bake a pie. Another, still, will find that a balanced blend of all the above approaches will yield the perfectly prepared pastry. But if one particular learner is boxed into the wrong learning approach, then they simply won't be able to learn at their best or deliver the best results in their job activities.

That's why learner experience represents the weakest link in the learning chain. If some learning content is absent or subject to improvement, those changes can be made to the content. If the processes that support learning have deficiencies, those processes can be corrected and improved. We have all of the elements of a perfect, ideal learning management system in place, but if learning isn't rendered easy and accessible at the point of learning, then the whole enterprise of effective L&D is over before it begins.



The Essential Element of Friction in Learning Effectiveness

We've used the cooking example, but how about learning how to play a game of cards? With the goal of learning how to play poker, one could pick up an old copy of Hoyle's Rules of Games and read through pages and pages of instruction to learn the rules and nuances of how to play poker. Alternatively, they could have an instructor guide them, step by step, through the process. Or, they could just sit down with a few friends, learn on the fly, fail a time or two, and learn through experience how to play the game. Which approach, broadly, do you think would be more effective?

Our guess would be the latter. While different learners learn differently most effectively, there's no doubt that learning in the environment, on the fly, as it happens, is an incredibly effective way of figuring out "the rules of the game", as it were.

That's why friction is such a fundamental element of learning performance, and a cornerstone of effective learner experience. What do we mean by "friction"? Well, consider every obstacle a learner has to go through in order to, by way of the above example, learn how to play poker. Every textbook, every PowerPoint slideshow, every classroom-based training experience, and every video separates the user from the ultimate goal at hand: playing and winning at poker. Yes, these are all necessary steps, but they all represent forms of potential friction that impair the learner from learning towards their learning goals and objectives across the three Es of excellent learner experience: expedience, efficiency, effortlessness.



EXPEDIENCE



EFFICIENCY



EFFORTLESSNESS

If an end user who is using a learning management system and eLearning tool finds it challenging to use the eLearning tool in the first place, then friction is already established and the battle of learning is lost before it has begun. If an end user rolls their eyes when they learn they have to log into their LMS, then the learning journey is undermined. When a learner "suffers" through an online course only in the name of clicking the checkbox of completion, the enterprise of L&D itself has become an exercise in absurdity.

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If, on the other hand, a learner finds an eLearning product that is genuinely engaging and easy to use, and if they actually retain the information they have been provided, then perhaps all is not lost and the ongoing battle to captivate learners is not lost.

And this is what leads us to the makings of a great learner experience.

The Elements of a Great Learner Experience

As we have alluded, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to eLearning and learning management in general. Learners learn at their own pace, by their own means, and across different modalities of learning.

However, there are broad factors that can help us figure out what makes a great learner experience.

IT'S EASY TO USE

We've talked about friction in LX, and this is where friction is most noticeable. If an LMS is cumbersome, unwieldy, or otherwise challenging to use for its end users, then it shouldn't be used in the first place, period.

We need LMSs that are in tune with the general user conventions end users are used to using, as redundant as that sounds. There's no need to re-invent the wheel in most instances. Conventional users know how to use conventional software products, and LMSs should put end-user standards at the forefront in order to minimize the friction behind how they will achieve learning outcomes.

THERE'S MINIMAL-TO-NO TRAINING INVOLVED

This speaks to the previous point, but just as an LMS ought to be easy to use, it ought to also have no-to-minimal training involved. Once they log into the system, they should naturally see where their eyes and cursors need to go in order to fulfill their immediate training objectives. If someone logs into an LMS and has to ask questions off the bat, then we have problems.

IT'S ACTUALLY FUN TO USE

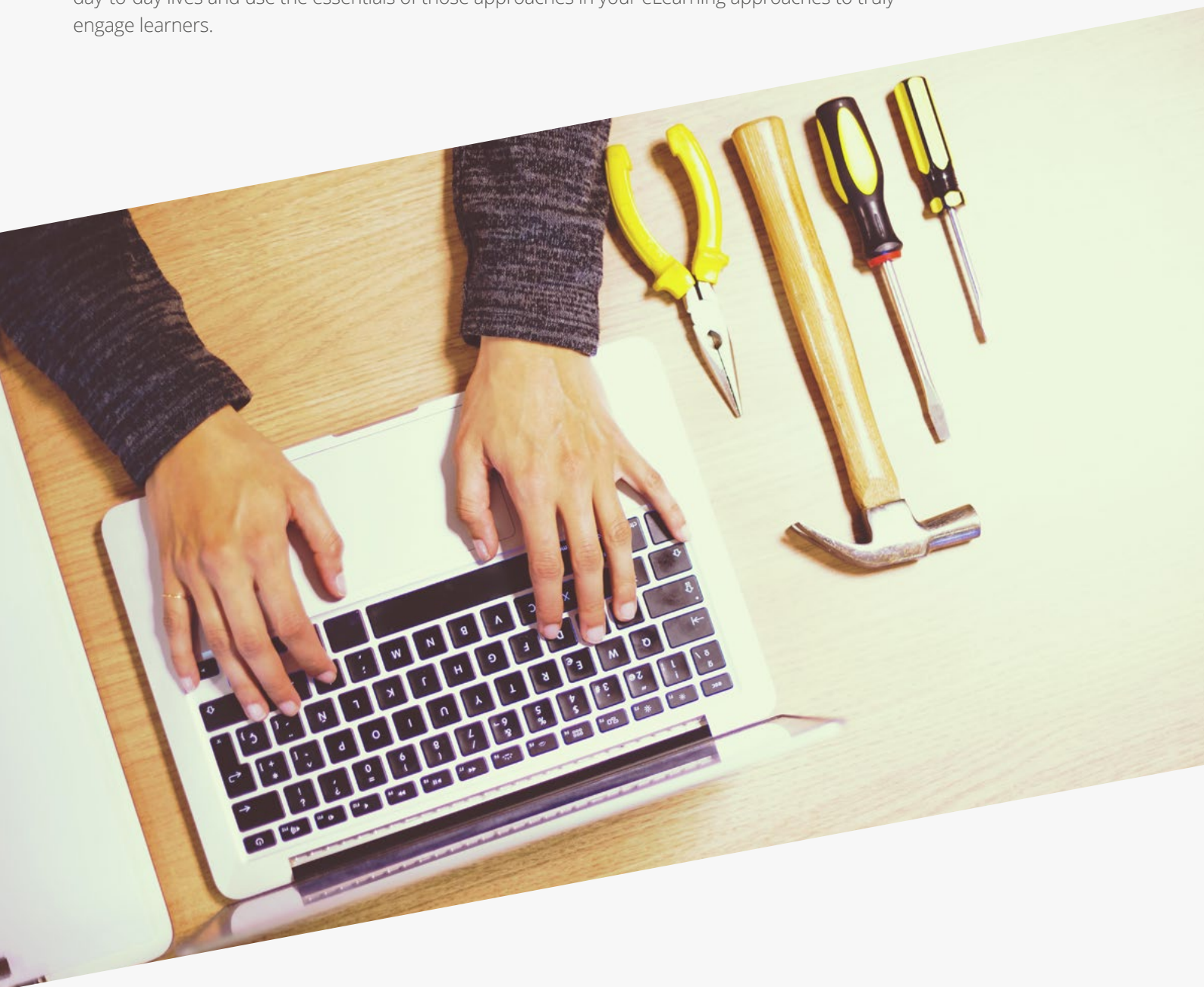
A step beyond being easy to use, an LMS ought to actually be fun to use. In subsequent sections we'll discuss the role of gamification and augmented reality and virtuality in eLearning (which doubtless increase the "fun" quotient for users), but a system that is actually appealing and engaging for users will ultimately let them learn better and faster and let L&D professionals rest easier that their learners are acquiring knowledge at a good pace.

IT LEVERAGES KNOWN CONVENTIONS

We've talked about how LMSs don't have to re-invent the wheel of learning. So too, eLearning systems do not have to reinvent how users acquire new knowledge and skills.

Learners are learning online everyday: how to make recipes, how to make shelves, how to build learn languages. They do this all with very known and very seamless learning conventions that are pretty widespread.

Don't find a new way to help learners how to learn. Understand how they learn effectively in their day-to-day lives and use the essentials of those approaches in your eLearning approaches to truly engage learners.

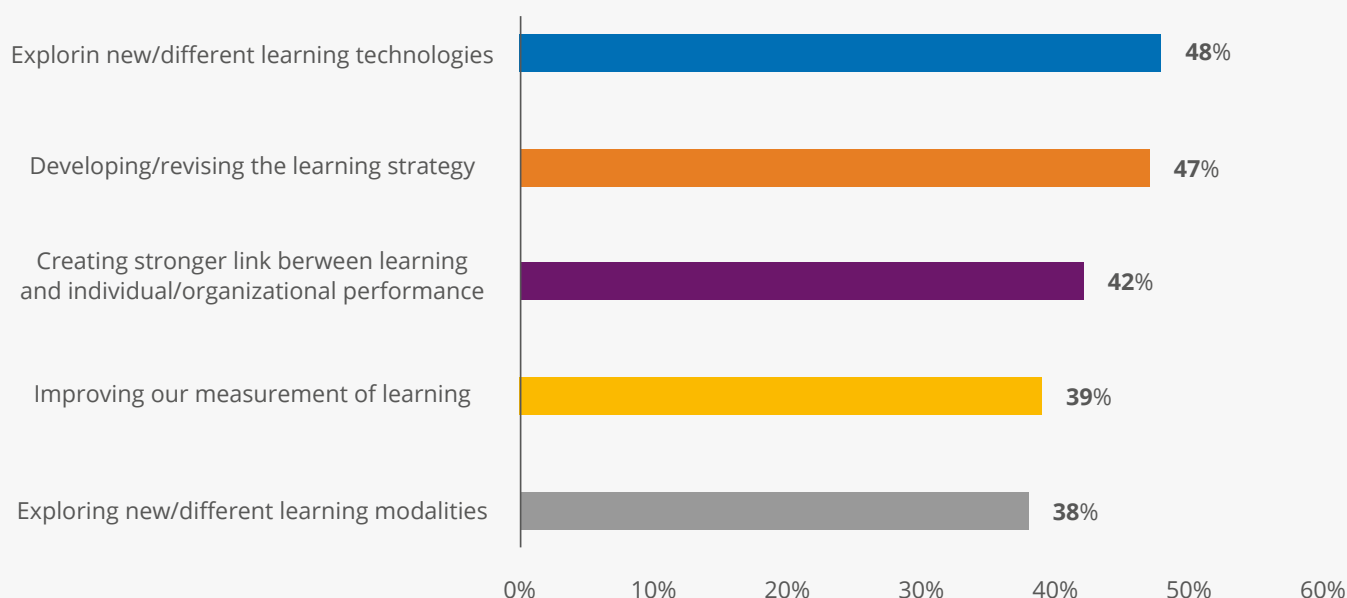


Delivering an Effective Modern Learner Experience

What goes hand-in-hand with delivering an effective LX in the 21st century is how we deliver essential information and lessons to our users effectively, through technology. The two cannot be separated, since any LMS worth its salt uses technology to achieve its aims. To that end, let's cover some of the aspects a relevant LMS should leverage to achieve optimal learner outcomes.

It's also apparent that organizations are increasingly trying to use a greater variety of technologies in their L&D programs. Another recent Brandon Hall Group report on learning technology showed that exploring new and different learning technologies rated as the number one priority among respondents.

TOP 5 LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES



Source: 2016 Brandon Hall Group Learning Technology Study (n=302)

To that end, let's cover some of the aspects a relevant LMS should leverage to achieve optimal learner outcomes.

CONNECTIVITY

It should go without saying that any modern eLearning system needs to be bolstered by a robust network of connectivity. Learners need access to their LMS and learning content wherever they may be and however they may access it in order to support a seamless, ongoing learning experience. Limiting the friction that may impede learners from getting information quickly and effectively is an essential ingredient to a truly supportive LX.

However, this ingredient is too often ignored, at the peril of both the learner and the organization overseeing learner progress. One small impediment, such as intermittent inaccessibility or lack of connectivity, can disrupt the learning process and have a negative impact on the learner's overall engagement with L&D programs.

Connectivity also speaks to a learner's ability to access essential learning at the point of need, as opposed to the point of instruction. As the growing relevance of personalized learning has taught us, learners can acquire essential and practical on-the-job lessons and insights when they have access to specific training material on the job, right when they need it. But while ongoing connectivity is always going to help facilitate a better learner experience, we can't forget that connectivity's oppositional sister, offline access, also plays a huge role.

OFFLINE, TOO

In an ideal world, we would be connected to our LMS all the time, at points of need, and at points of study. However, the brutal reality of the 21st century is that, while we would like to think the entire world provides points of connectivity at all times, there are many situations and job functions where that simply cannot happen.

Think of roles in industries like mining, shipping, defence, and aviation. Due to a variety of circumstances, users simply cannot be connected -- through whatever device -- to the centralized LMS they are used to accessing on a regular basis. In these instances the devices they use to engage in continual learning simply cannot access the LMS and their learning journey, for a time, is at a standstill.

This is why it is sometimes said that "offline is the new online". While cloud-based LMS providers strived for many years to provide an offering that was available in any region of the world, at any time, with a connection to the internet, one thing was lost to some: the fact that we simply cannot access the internet in certain regions, at certain times.

So a new challenge emerged: if we're to provide users with software tools that are accessible on offline devices and map to the LMS they are used to using, how do we reconcile and synchronize the progress they have achieved -- the courses they have taken, the course scores they have achieved, etc. -- with what exists on the broader, connected system, once they have re-established connectivity?

Fortunately, some LMS providers have made leaps and bounds in this regard in recent years, and now learning progress can be easily reconciled with the centralized LMS effortlessly.

MOBILITY

We have discussed the importance of both connectivity and offline functionality in a learner's journey. But it would be remiss of us to venture into this territory without covering the vastly important role of mobility in eLearning and how it can help streamline LX.

It's extremely important to make the learning process seamless. Learning is an activity that isn't strictly connected to the workplace but can occur in variable locations and conditions. That's why accessing learning content from everyday personal devices, such as smartphones and tablets is mandatory. The possibility to also download training material and engage with them offline (while taking a flight, for example) is an element that must be considered, especially if the workforce is always on the go in different business conditions and with different schedules.

Once upon a time, learners learned with instructors, textbooks, and on-the-job training. The modalities with which we can learn have exploded in the digital age, with notable improvements and opportunities in the past five years alone. In an era where a learner can glance down at his or her smartphone or tablet and execute course activities right as they are on the job in the exact environment they will be exercising their job functions and learn and absorb critical information at the point of need, it seems archaic that we would need to turn to textbooks at all (though they will always have their place, to be clear).

It is abundantly clear that smartphones, tablets, and even other devices such as wearables like smartwatches, will continue to play an increasingly relevant role in eLearning on the job. As a result it is incumbent on the progressive L&D professional to develop a learning strategy that takes mobile elements into account.

And the numbers stand by the fact that learners are virtually glued to their devices as it is. Among millennials, which increasingly dominate the workforce, most say their smartphones, for example, never leave their side, according to a recent report by Zogby Analytics.

MILLENNIALS = LOVE THEIR SMARTPHONES...



87% = "Smartphone Never Leaves My Side"



Source: KPCB, Zogby Analytics

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MICROLEARNING

In some ways this is but an extension of the mobile learning aspect of LX, but it ought to be mentioned in isolation. Microlearning is a means of teaching that goes outside of the standard box of traditional learning wherein course content is delivered through more lengthy, protracted lessons of training. Instead microlearning delivers specific learner content in small, short bursts. Think brief YouTube or Facebook videos, or some of the quick, easy-to-digest and low-time-commitment animations we see all the time on social media.

While learners can certainly invest the time and effort into traditional modalities of learning like classroom, instructor-led training, they can also get the critical insights and lessons they need with quick, bite-sized chunks of learning material, and that's what microlearning is all about. It's also a new mode of teaching that L&D professionals might ignore at their peril, especially as attention spans grow ever shorter.

GAMIFICATION

Many of us are familiar with the now-worn example of a "smart, connected" toothbrush that tracks our dental habits to help us monitor and improve on our daily hygiene regimen. We get "points" for brushing, "badges" for brushing with regular frequency, and "trophies" and "levels" for improving our overall dental health through provable action, consistently.

Increasingly, this approach is being applied in corporate learning environments where learners are now offered points, badges, and trophies for achieving and surpassing goals and doing better than their immediate competitors.

From badges and boards to keys that open learning doors, there are a myriad of game mechanics to consider when designing your online training course.

Gamification is a game changer. People are competitive by nature and love to get rewarded for what they did and how they performed. It introduces a sense of competition that leads to more interaction and motivation while doing a training program. Earning badges and being part of contests is just a starting point to increase a learner's continued attention -- something that can be even more effective with, for example, a gamification reward marketplace, where people taking part of the learning activity can exchange their achieved badges and points for physical rewards or even money (e.g. gift cards, etc.)





The question is: which gamification elements should you use for your audience in order to spark their motivation? How can you reinforce positive behaviours and get them to engage with the subject matter in a more meaningful way? Most importantly, which game mechanic is a perfect fit for your online training program and organizational goals?

VIRTUAL REALITY AND AUGMENTED REALITY

Best-in-class companies seek out new technologies and modalities to use in order to get learners up to speed faster and more effectively, and both augmented reality and its cousin, virtual reality (VR), have entered the spectrum of tools employers are increasingly using to engage learners.

The numbers show it. In 2012 the spend on VR programs in eLearning was about \$2.3 million in the US alone. With an anticipated five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 23%, that spend is expected to reach \$6.6 million in 2017.

There's good reason for scrutiny about the potential of AR/VR. After all, the as-yet-undelivered promise of VR has been in the works since the early 1990s. However, VR has recently seen a surge in popular adoption and use, and is increasingly viewed by L&D departments as a great way of getting key training information to users quickly and effectively, thereby improving learner experience.

Also, AR/VR is becoming more and more affordable and its tools are becoming increasingly accessible. And there's also the fact that, not only do users love using it when it is executed properly, it fits naturally in certain training environments: think aviation (simulations in operating aircraft) and oil and gas (operating controls on an offshore rig).

Traditional Approaches

What goes hand-in-hand with delivering an effective LX in the 21st century is how we deliver essential information and lessons to our users effectively, through technology. The two cannot be separated, since any LMS worth its salt uses technology to achieve its aims. To that end, let's cover some of the aspects a relevant LMS should leverage to achieve optimal learner outcomes.

DON'T FORGET THE CLASSROOM!

We've covered many of the technology-based aspects of a robust LX, but what we can't forget about is that classroom-based, instructor-led training will always have a role in effective learner engagement and, in turn, effective LX. We have discussed the 70:20:10 methodology at length here at Docebo, and it is a framework wherein learners achieve effective learning at the ratio of approximately 70% experientially, 20% socially, and 10% traditionally (i.e. instructor-led, classroom-based).

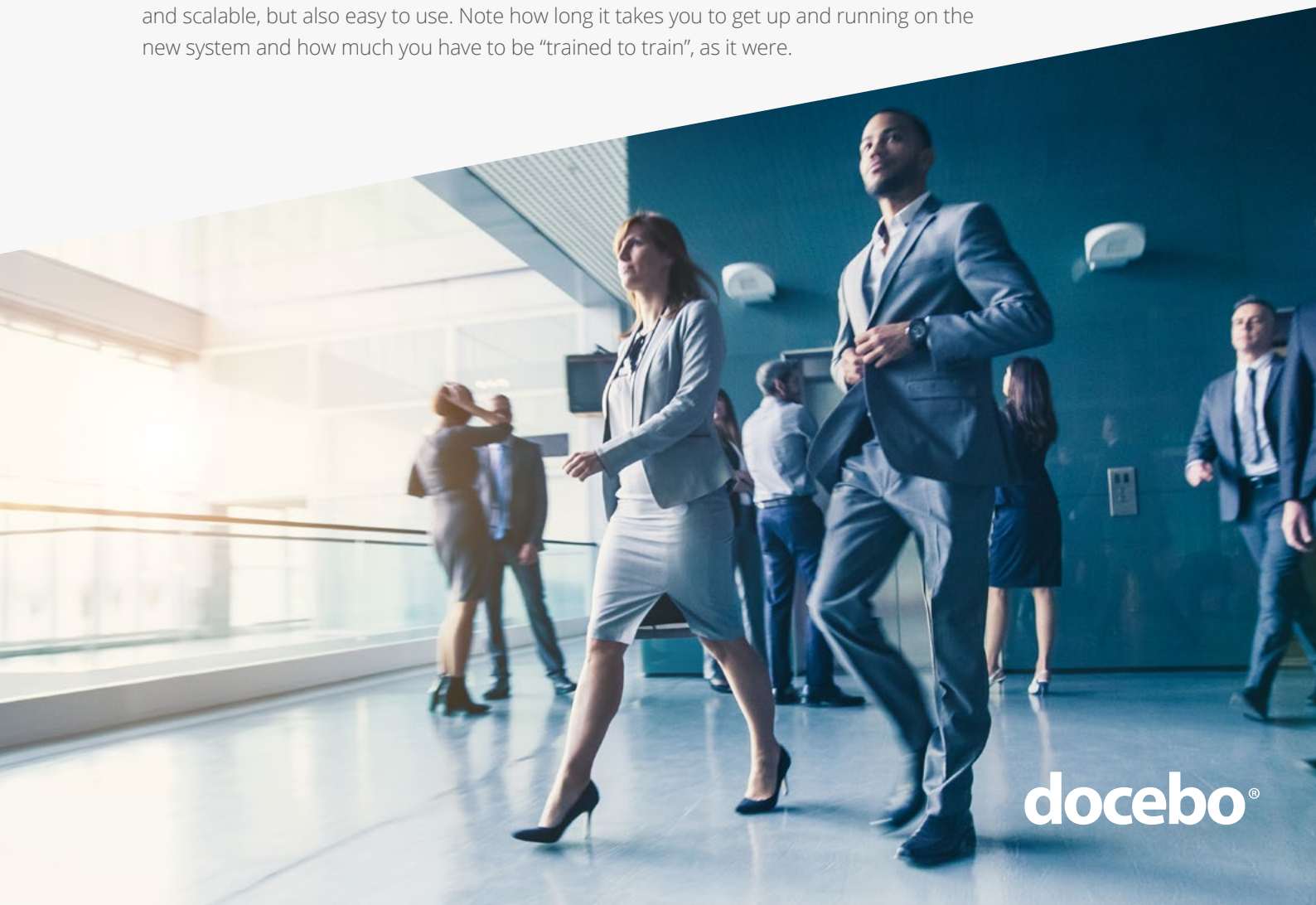
But that's where we face a bit of a conundrum. Classroom-based training tends to accompany this association with stuffy, inaccessible learning whereby only a fraction of the learning delivered is actually retained. These returns can be improved when we complement a comprehensive technology-driven LX approach with fun, interactive, classroom-based experiences. This is where it becomes very subjective. It is dependant on the L&D professional to tailor classroom-based and instructor-led experiences on the very things technology can't define: the quality of the instructor, the manner with which critical lessons are delivered, the place within which the learners learn, and the pace within which they achieve their learning objectives. The traditional instructor-student relationship will always play a role in the learning endeavour.

Conclusion

An L&D program is only as effective as a user's capacity to actually use the LMS software that supports the L&D program. Users are the most central and critical aspect of success in any L&D program, and they need to be provided with an eLearning experience that is effortless (even fun) to use, engaging, seamless, quick, and convenient. Any element of learner experience that impairs a user's ability to engage with their LMS, complete course material, and learn effectively ultimately cripples the entire enterprise of L&D in the first place.

In evaluating the learner experience of an LMS, keep some of the following tips in mind: Conclusion

- If you've already implemented an LMS, execute a comprehensive review of the eLearning program in an attempt to discover strengths, deficiencies, and opportunities for improvement.
- Explore all established, rising and new technologies available to you and your users to create a diverse and multifaceted learning experience.
- Ask your users what they like and dislike about their eLearning experiences. Use surveys, focus groups, and informal Q&As to find areas for improvement.
- If you're in L&D or training leadership, use the LMS yourself on a regular basis, viewing it from the perspective of a frontline user. Ask yourself if you would find the program fun, engaging, and effective to use.
- If prospective vendors offer it, try a free trial of different LMSs and assess which one is robust and scalable, but also easy to use. Note how long it takes you to get up and running on the new system and how much you have to be "trained to train", as it were.



We want you to succeed in your journey towards implementing new learning modalities.

Understanding the role of strategy in implementing 70:20:10 goes hand in hand with learning how to utilize technology to make it all happen effectively.

Take a no-commitment, no-cost, 14-day trial with Docebo today to learn how technology can enable 70:20:10, as well as social and informal learning within a cloud-based LMS platform. Try it today!

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