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## Meet the Modern Learner: *Engaging the Overwhelmed, Distracted, and Impatient Employee*

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A noticeable lack of participation, engagement, and satisfaction exists in corporate training offerings these days. This is largely because business itself, and companies and learners have all changed faster than many learning and development (L&D) organizations have kept up.

Enterprise L&D departments have started to adapt their approaches to building, buying, and delivering learning programs. But, in many cases, they still are not fully embracing the fact that much employee learning does not actually happen in formal training courses or via learning management systems (LMSs).<sup>1</sup>

*In this bulletin, we look at two key trends that have significant implications for L&D professionals:*

- Several changes in the work environment which are dramatically altering learners' needs and habits
- Changing priorities that are driving new approaches to learning for the modern workforce

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, *The Evolution of the High-Impact Learning Organization*, Bersin & Associates / David Mallon, Janet Clarey and Mark Vickers, August 2012. Available to research members at [www.bersin.com/library](http://www.bersin.com/library) or for purchase at [www.bersin.com/hilo](http://www.bersin.com/hilo).

## Meet the Modern Learner

*“Today’s employee isn’t just sitting back and waiting for professional development opportunities to be offered to them. They expect training and information—on demand, in a way that they can digest it, specific to their knowledge gaps, and using the latest in technology.”*

—*Learning Solutions Magazine*<sup>2</sup>



### KEY POINT

Only 14 percent of L&D leaders believe that they are viewed as strategic partners to their businesses.

Enterprise learning is increasingly disconnected from learners’ jobs, behaviors, habits, and preferences. Only 14 percent of L&D leaders believe that they are viewed as strategic partners to their businesses.<sup>3</sup> Almost one-half of learning leaders say their staff is reluctant to engage in training.<sup>4</sup>

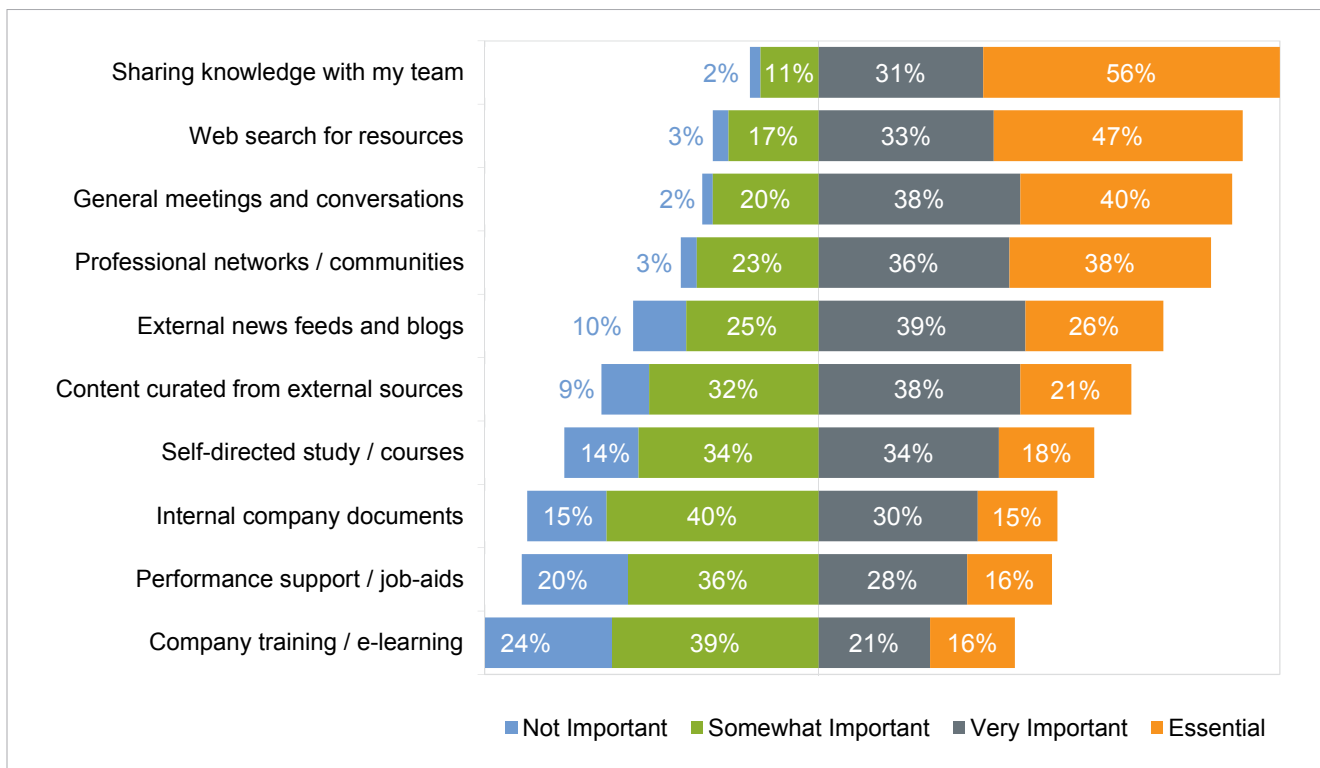
A big part of “why” is that employees are overwhelmed—but that is only the beginning. Employees are also distracted, impatient, and untethered. They are taking more control of their own development; increasingly, they want to learn on-demand, and from their peers and leaders at least as much as from the “experts” and training courses that L&D organizations still rely on (see Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> Source: “Corporate Executives and the New Secret Weapon: Learning Data,” LearningSolutionsMag.com / Carol Leaman, January 20, 2014, <http://www.learningsolutionsmag.com/articles/1334/corporate-executives-and-the-new-secret-weapon-learning-data>.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, *Key Findings: Becoming a High-Impact Learning Organization*, Bersin by Deloitte / David Mallon, Janet Clarey, and Mark Vickers, August 2012. Available to research members at [www.bersin.com/library](http://www.bersin.com/library).

<sup>4</sup> Source: *Engaging Disengaged Learners: Using data from learners in the workplace to challenge our assumptions* (PowerPoint presentation, based on the report, *2013-14 Towards Maturity Benchmark Study*, November 2013), *Towards Maturity* / Laura Overton, February 2014, [www.slideshare.net/Lauraoverton/engaging-disengaged-learners](http://www.slideshare.net/Lauraoverton/engaging-disengaged-learners).

Figure 1: How Useful Are the Following Ways for Workers to Learn in the Workplace?



Source: Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies, 2014.<sup>5</sup>



## KEY POINT

Employees are overwhelmed, distracted, and impatient. They want to learn on-demand and increasingly from their peers and leaders.

In short, reaching learners (and keeping their attention) is more complicated and competitive than it used to be. The challenges go beyond simply making learning more “bite size.” Usually, it is easier to capitalize on shifts in people’s behavior than it is to change them. So, in order to more fully address the obstacles, it is helpful to start by better understanding how learners’ work, behavior, and habits have evolved. Together with technological progress, the conditions and environment under which today’s employees are working continuously influence how they behave and access information—and thus, require equally flexible ways of receiving learning. The following sections take a look at these influences and how employees feel today.

<sup>5</sup> Source: *Learning in the Workplace Survey*, Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies / Jane Hart, June 4, 2014, <http://www.c4lpt.co.uk/blog/2014/06/04/learning-in-the-workplace-survey-2014/>.

## Overwhelmed

Between receiving and sending an average of nearly 110 emails per day—not to mention meetings, conference calls, and the relentless stress of information overload, there is less and less time for “real” work.<sup>6</sup> In fact, two-thirds of knowledge workers complain that they do not have enough time to do their jobs.<sup>7</sup> That leaves most people with very little time, if any, for formal training and development—just 1 percent of a typical week, on average.<sup>8</sup> Even if you can get their attention, it is even harder to keep it.

## Distracted

With practically everyone connected, employees are now interrupted as frequently as every five minutes—ironically, often by collaboration tools like emails and instant messages.<sup>9</sup> By staying connected, workers create their own interruptions, too. Since 2000, the number of people using the Internet has grown 566 percent; on a daily basis, the average social networking user spends more than three hours on social networking sites.<sup>10</sup> Many people actually unlock their smartphones up to nine times an hour.<sup>11</sup> Such digital “snacking” can lead to a focus on superficial information rather than more valuable activities and insights.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Source: *Email Statistics Report, 2014-2018*, Radicati Group, Inc., April 2014, [www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Email-Statistics-Report-2014-2018-Executive-Summary.pdf](http://www.radicati.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Email-Statistics-Report-2014-2018-Executive-Summary.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Source: *The Knowledge Worker's Day: Our Findings*, Basex / Johnathan B. Spira, November 4, 2010, [www.basexblog.com/2010/11/04/our-findings/](http://www.basexblog.com/2010/11/04/our-findings/).

<sup>8</sup> Source: “Make Time for the Work That Matters,” *Harvard Business Review* / Julian Birkinshaw and Jordan Cohen, September 2013, <http://hbr.org/2013/09/make-time-for-the-work-that-matters/ar/1>.

<sup>9</sup> Source: “Collaboration & Social Tools Drain Business Productivity, Costing Millions in Work Interruptions,” *harmon.ie*, May 18, 2011, <http://harmon.ie/Company/PressReleases/press-release-may-18-2011>.

<sup>10</sup> Source: “Infographic: A Day in the Life of the Internet,” Sean Valant, May 2, 2013, <http://blog.hostgator.com/2013/05/02/a-day-in-the-life-of-the-internet/>.

<sup>11</sup> Source: “Study Says We Unlock Our Phones a LOT Each Day,” *Time.com* / Doug Aamoth, October 8, 2013, <http://techland.time.com/2013/10/08/study-says-we-unlock-our-phones-a-lot-each-day/>.

<sup>12</sup> Source: “‘Infobesity’ causes distraction and stress at work, says Microsoft expert,” *HR Magazine.com* / Hywel Roberts, May 20, 2014, [www.hrmagazine.co.uk/hro/news/1144175/-infobesity-causes-distraction-stress-microsoft-expert](http://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/hro/news/1144175/-infobesity-causes-distraction-stress-microsoft-expert).

## Impatient

Having adults pay attention to lectures for more than 15 minutes has always been a challenge.<sup>13</sup> Now, though, attention spans and patience are measured in minutes and seconds—especially on laptops, tablets, and smartphones.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, workers are also accessing information—and learning—differently than they did just a few years ago. More than 70 percent of learners turn to search engines to immediately learn what they need to do their jobs.<sup>15</sup> They are conditioned to search online, using such tools as Wikipedia, Quora, and YouTube.

## Untethered

Meanwhile, more and more work is happening across multiple locations—from homes, satellite offices, and customer sites, to trucks, trains, and airplanes.<sup>16</sup> Around 30 percent of adults already do at least some of their work remotely.<sup>17</sup> More than one-third of workers are not even technically employees anymore—they are temps, contractors, and freelancers.<sup>18</sup> It is hard to reach these people consistently when they are often mobile and even harder to develop their skills efficiently since they are not permanent employees.

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<sup>13</sup> Source: *Information Impact and Factors Affecting Recall*, Annual National Conference on Teaching Excellence and Conference of Administrators / Ralph Burns, May 1985, [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/234757683\\_Information\\_Impact\\_and\\_Factors\\_Affecting\\_Recall](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/234757683_Information_Impact_and_Factors_Affecting_Recall).

<sup>14</sup> Source: “Say it quick, say it well – the attention span of a modern internet consumer,” TheGuardian.com / Rob Weatherhead, February 28, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/media-network-blog/2012/mar/19/attention-span-internet-consumer>.

<sup>15</sup> Source: *Engaging Disengaged Learners: Using data from learners in the workplace to challenge our assumptions* (PowerPoint presentation), Towards Maturity / Laura Overton, February 2014, [www.slideshare.net/Lauraoverton/engaging-disengaged-learners](http://www.slideshare.net/Lauraoverton/engaging-disengaged-learners).

<sup>16</sup> Source: *Worldwide Mobile Worker Population 2011–2015 Forecast*, IDC / Stacy K. Crook, Justin Jaffe, Raymond Boggs, and Stephen D. Drake, December 2011, [www.idc.com/research/viewtoc.jsp?containerId=232073](http://www.idc.com/research/viewtoc.jsp?containerId=232073).

<sup>17</sup> Source: *Ambivalence is Not a Strategy*, Flex+Strategy Group / Work + Life Fit Inc., [www.worklifefit.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/WaningCommitmentReportFINAL.pdf](http://www.worklifefit.com/sites/default/files/pdfs/WaningCommitmentReportFINAL.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Source: “Breaking Down the Freelance Economy,” *Harvard Business Review Blog Network* / Justin Fox, September 4, 2014, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/09/breaking-down-the-freelance-economy/>.

## Collaborative

People are also looking to learn from their peers and to share what they know. At Google, for example, more than one-half of training courses are delivered by a network of more than 2,000 employees who have volunteered to share their expertise.<sup>19</sup> They are not the only ones, either. According to Bersin by Deloitte research, as much as 80 percent of all workplace learning happens via on-the-job interactions with peers, teammates, and managers—frequently without L&D departments involved.<sup>20</sup>

## Empowered

While fewer and fewer people have the time, patience, or inclination to learn anything “just in case” anymore, many skills now have a half-life of less than five years.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, just about everyone needs to keep learning constantly. More people are looking for options on their own. At least 50 percent of the roughly 10 million people signing up for massively open online courses<sup>22</sup> (MOOCs) are working adults.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, 62 percent of IT professionals reported having paid for training out of their own pockets.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Source: “Here’s a Google perk any company can imitate: employee-to-employee learning,” FastCompany.com. / Sarah Kessler, March 26, 2013, [www.fastcompany.com/3007369/heres-google-perk-any-company-can-imitate-employee-employee-learning](http://www.fastcompany.com/3007369/heres-google-perk-any-company-can-imitate-employee-employee-learning).

<sup>20</sup> For more information, please see the blog post, “Informal Learning Becomes Formal,” Bersin by Deloitte / Josh Bersin, January 22, 2009, [www.bersin.com/blog/post/Informal-Learning-becomes-Formal.aspx](http://www.bersin.com/blog/post/Informal-Learning-becomes-Formal.aspx).

<sup>21</sup> Source: *Global Human Capital Trends 2014: Engaging the 21st-century workforce*, Deloitte Consulting LLP and Bersin By Deloitte, Deloitte University Press, April 2014, <http://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/human-capital/articles/human-capital-trends-2014.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Massively open online course” (or MOOC) refers to a new category of vendor that provides open, no-cost (or low cost) online education and courseware. Initially, the MOOC market focused on providing academic-level courses to students around the world at little to no cost. Today, companies are building out large libraries of free or low-cost content; this market is rapidly evolving as these companies build industrial-strength learning platforms and expand their content.

<sup>23</sup> For more information, please see the webinar presentation, *MOOCs for Corporate Learning: Seven Ways Organizations Are Using Massive Open Online Courses to Drive Business Results*, Bersin by Deloitte / Josh Bersin and Todd Tauber, December 3, 2013. Available to research members at <http://insights.bersin.com/research/?docid=17029>.

<sup>24</sup> Source: “IT pros get training on their own dime,” *Computerworld* / Mary K. Pratt, December 6, 2013, <http://www.computerworld.com/article/2486804/it-management/it-pros-get-training-on-their-own-dime.html>.


## What This Means

Feeling a little overwhelmed yourself? Good. We know this is a lot to process—that is the point. Now, imagine what learning at work is like for a typical employee. In many cases, learning departments have only a short timeframe to get an employee's attention. Given the recent changes in the business and work environments, learning departments have to work harder and smarter to get measurable results from learning opportunities, which makes it increasingly important to understand the modern learner.

### ***Case in Point: A Multinational Advertising Agency Delivers Valuable Learning to Employees in a Fast-Paced Environment***

With nearly 7,000 employees in more than 70 countries, a global advertising agency had a challenge to provide timely and relevant learning to its professionals. As is typical for this industry, the agency is under constant pressure to keep its employees up to date on the latest trends, which is critical to delivering the best solutions to its clients. This relentless demand for innovation requires the agency's employees to continuously look for ways to hone their skills. However, in an environment in which even finding a few minutes for lunch can be a big deal, the agency faced a constant challenge in offering formal training to employees without taking away too much time from their work.

As one part of the solution, the agency invested in on-demand video learning that would break down complex ideas into concise lessons in an entertaining way. Through collaboration with a vendor, the agency implemented a digital learning solution centered on short videos (less than a couple of minutes) that can be accessed anywhere and on any device.

While it is still early in this program, the agency is seeing enthusiastic adoption and positive feedback from employees who would otherwise be too busy to sit down for a more traditional training module. In fact, some employees even say they look forward to watching the learning videos. The convenience of concise, easily accessible learning videos has been a value-add for the agency. 





## KEY POINT

Today's learners seek more than just shorter bursts of learning; they also want formats that are entertaining and engaging.

## Conclusion

The modern learners' jobs and learning habits call for concise, highly targeted access to useful information whenever and wherever it is needed. However, today's learners seek more than just shorter bursts of learning; they also want formats that are entertaining and engaging.

To meet these new needs, L&D groups should approach learning very differently; it is no longer adequate to rely on traditional methods. In this new environment, learning professionals should be exploring how to blend and curate free, user-generated, and commercially available content. Organizations need to leverage search technology and other novel solutions to ensure that employees have access to the most relevant, up-to-date development opportunities.

L&D departments that can keep up with employees adopting new work and learning practices may establish more cohesive, continuous learning experiences, better meet learners' needs, and ultimately help their organizations to perform better.





## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Employees are exceedingly mobile and social, but that is not all. They are overwhelmed, distracted, and impatient, too. Hence, they are taking more control of their own development.
- Today's learners are demanding learning options that are accessible whenever and wherever they want—and which also enable them to connect and collaborate with peers, not just to consume content.
- Organizational L&D teams should look for ways to experiment with and adopt new approaches and technologies. L&D teams that can keep up with the trends are better prepared to help their organizations to perform better.

## Appendix I: Meet the Modern Learner (infographic)

# MEET THE MODERN LEARNER

As training moves to more digital formats, it's colliding with new realities in learners' jobs, behaviors, habits, and preferences.

Today's employees are overwhelmed, distracted, and impatient. Flexibility in where and how they learn is increasingly important. They want to learn from their peers and managers as much as from experts. And they're taking more control over their *own* development.



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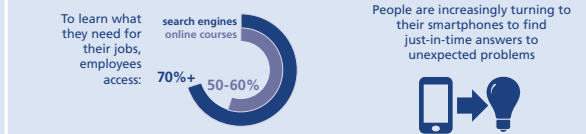
### UNTETHERED

Today's employees find themselves working from several locations and structuring their work in nontraditional ways to accommodate their lifestyles. Companies are finding it difficult to reach these people consistently and even harder to develop them efficiently.



### ON-DEMAND

Employees are accessing information—and learning—differently than they did just a few years ago. Most are looking for answers outside of traditional training and development channels. For example:



### COLLABORATIVE

Learners are also developing and accessing personal and professional networks to obtain information about their industries and professions.



### EMPOWERED

Rapid change in business and organizations means everyone needs to constantly be learning. More and more people are looking for options on their own because they aren't getting what they need from their employers.



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