



# **Workplace learning: A complete guide for businesses**

November 2023

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This overview explains the essentials of workplace learning while providing expert analysis and examples of companies that are leading the way in building a dynamic learning culture. Click on the links for a deeper dive into the trends, tools and best practices you need to know to build an effective learning strategy.

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# Workplace learning: A complete guide for businesses

DAVID ESSEX, INDUSTRY EDITOR

Workplace learning was once a perk bestowed on the most promising employees and typically delivered in off-site trainings or university classrooms. Now, it's a necessity for every employee, an expected part of the benefits package and a normal part of the workday.

The ubiquity of the World Wide Web on desktop and mobile devices fueled an explosion in cheap, easily digested learning content, sparking an [e-learning](#) revolution that pushed corporate learning far beyond essentials like compliance and job training. Workplace learning today has become a vehicle for career advancement and personal development, and has given employees more say in how they learn and develop.

Together, these trends have elevated workplace learning strategies and technologies to the top of the talent management heap. The other four "pillars" of [talent management](#) -- recruitment and onboarding, performance management, compensation management and succession planning -- rely more than ever on learning and development.

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But old ways hold fast, even amid a technology-inspired revolution, and the dream of modern workplace learning that puts the individual first is still largely aspirational for many organizations.

This overview explains the essentials of workplace learning while providing expert analysis and examples of companies that are leading the way in building a dynamic learning culture. Click on the links for a deeper dive into the trends, tools and best practices you need to know to build an effective learning strategy.

## WHAT IS WORKPLACE LEARNING?

Workplace learning is an organization's process for training employees for day-to-day tasks such as using business systems and operating machinery, as well as for following compliance policies on anti-discrimination, harassment and data privacy, among other issues. It also encompasses the formal education, certification and work experiences that employees need to advance in their careers and stay current with the changing needs of the business.

Workplace learning is a relatively new term for what is traditionally called corporate training or learning and development (L&D).

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## WHY IS WORKPLACE LEARNING IMPORTANT FOR ORGANIZATIONS?

Besides its importance in keeping an organization's workers knowledgeable about their field and skilled in carrying out their tasks, workplace learning has significant impacts on most parts of the business.

First, a strong [training and development program](#) can improve overall performance when employees get training to address shortcomings noted in their performance reviews. It can also boost productivity by teaching employees to work more efficiently.

Workplace learning has advantages in [recruitment and talent acquisition](#). Having a reputation for generous educational benefits can make an organization more attractive to job candidates.

The development half of L&D has a particular impact on employee satisfaction because of its role in career growth. Workers who see career opportunities in the organization and get the training needed for advancement are generally happier, which in turn boosts employee retention. Retaining well-trained employees at higher rates reduces the cost of talent acquisition and helps to maintain the organization's storehouse of knowledge and skills.

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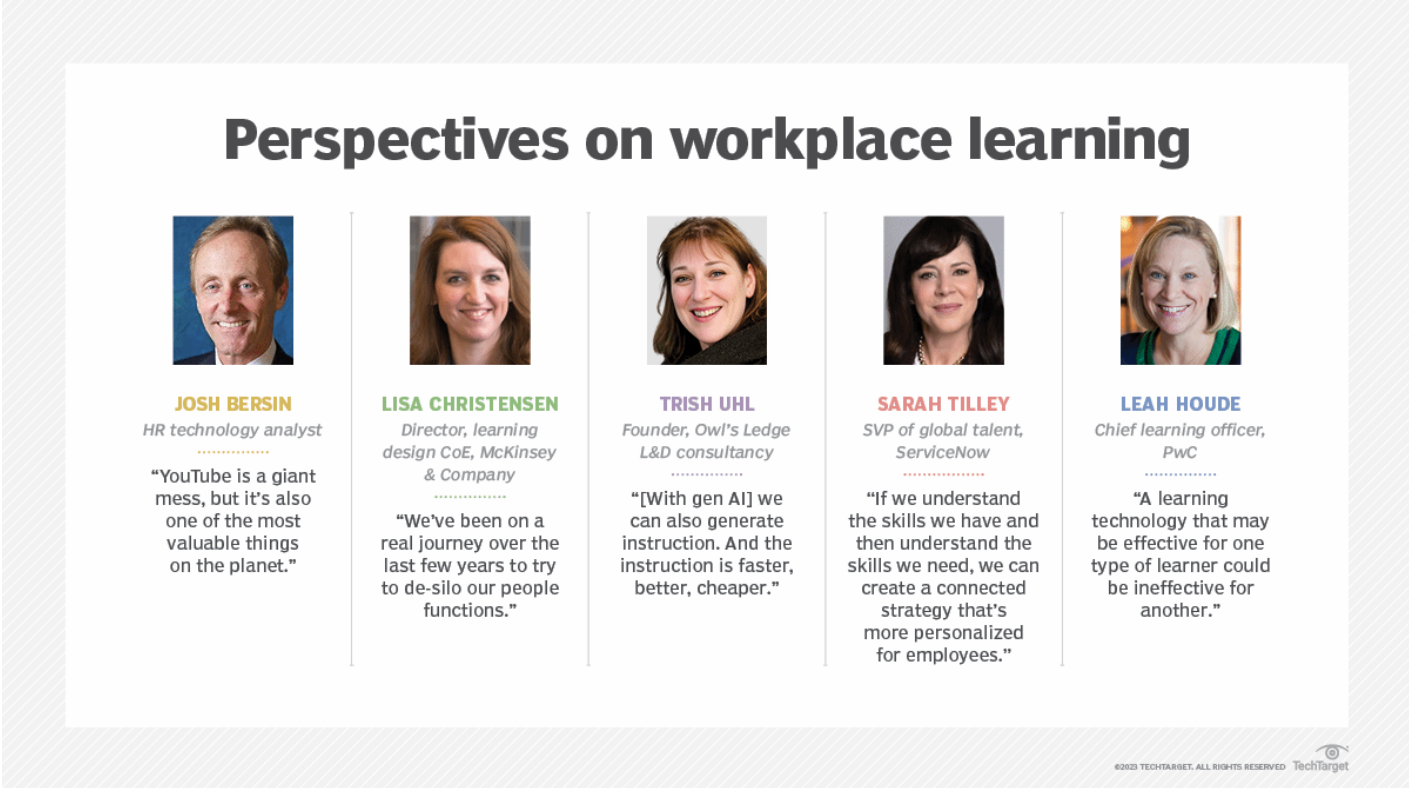
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# Perspectives on workplace learning



 <p><b>JOSH BERSIN</b> HR technology analyst</p> <p>“YouTube is a giant mess, but it’s also one of the most valuable things on the planet.”</p>	 <p><b>LISA CHRISTENSEN</b> Director, learning design CoE, McKinsey &amp; Company</p> <p>“We’ve been on a real journey over the last few years to try to de-silo our people functions.”</p>	 <p><b>TRISH UHL</b> Founder, Owl’s Ledge L&amp;D consultancy</p> <p>“[With gen AI] we can also generate instruction. And the instruction is faster, better, cheaper.”</p>	 <p><b>SARAH TILLEY</b> SVP of global talent, ServiceNow</p> <p>“If we understand the skills we have and then understand the skills we need, we can create a connected strategy that’s more personalized for employees.”</p>	 <p><b>LEAH HOUDE</b> Chief learning officer, PwC</p> <p>“A learning technology that may be effective for one type of learner could be ineffective for another.”</p>
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## HOW HAS WORKPLACE LEARNING EVOLVED?

Corporate learning has undergone two major technological shifts. First, the mostly manual training processes that companies used were partially computerized in on-premises learning and office productivity software. Over the last decade, those same systems began moving to the web, which has resulted in an explosion in new types

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of content and [microlearning](#), which breaks down complex topics into short-form, standalone units that can fit easily into an employee's workflow.

The new web tools and [content providers](#) have enabled much more personalized learning experiences and the rise of user-generated content as an alternative to traditional instructor-led courses.

The democratization of content creation might seem to introduce an element of chaos that runs counter to the corporate desire for control. "Everybody thinks it's going to be a mess, and it always turns out to be a really valuable thing because it's like YouTube," said Josh Bersin, an HR technology analyst and founder of The Josh Bersin Company.

"YouTube is a giant mess, but it's also one of the most valuable things on the planet because it's got great search and really good AI to recommend what you want. Also, it's really easy to author a video." Bersin said companies that train employees on how to make videos see the biggest benefits.

Trish Uhl, founder of Owl's Ledge, an L&D consultancy specializing in AI and advanced analytics in workplace learning, said L&D has been "dematerializing" into the machine. One of the more notable places is Microsoft products -- such as Office 365 -- since around 2017, when the vendor acquired the social media site LinkedIn and its lynda.com learning platform, now known as LinkedIn Learning.

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Similar things are happening with Salesforce and ServiceNow products, Uhl said. "Instead of it being like learning in the flow of work, the flow of work has been consuming learning."

Another more recent shift in the evolution of workplace learning is the strong focus in recent years on [skill-based learning](#), which emphasizes the skills people need to excel at their jobs rather than formal credentials.

[Reskilling](#), or using training to update employee skills and knowledge for new ways of doing business, has become a priority as companies face a shortage of the know-how needed to stay competitive in increasingly technology-driven markets. Organizations are also [upskilling](#) employees for the new skills they need to keep doing their current jobs.

PwC, the Big Four accounting firm and business consultancy, is running a massive [upskilling project](#) to train its 65,000 U.S. employees for proficiency in using [generative AI](#) tools. "We want our people to know how to easily and responsibly incorporate it into their daily work," said Leah Houde, chief learning officer at PwC, in an email interview.

The initial approach will be high level. "We will teach people what AI is, how to responsibly incorporate the technology into their work, and key considerations and

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guardrails," Houde said. "Once we have level-set across the firm, we will roll out targeted and personalized training for individual teams and users."

Each month, PwC releases a learning pathway on an AI-related topic backed by a bundle of learning content that includes articles, podcasts and TED Talks, so each employee can learn in their preferred mode. To motivate employees through friendly competition, PwC gamifies the process by running a firmwide trivia contest based on the previous month's bundle.

ServiceNow, which makes help desk software and other enterprise applications, also puts skills at the center of its learning strategy, according to Sarah Tilley, the company's senior vice president of global talent and development. "If we understand the skills we have and then understand the skills we need, we can create a connected strategy that's more personalized for employees and meets the business need."

## POPULAR TRENDS AND STRATEGIES IN WORKPLACE LEARNING

The web isn't just another channel for the same old classroom instruction and materials. It has given rise to new educational methods and philosophies that couldn't have happened without convenient digital communication and networking. Here are three prominent ones:

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- [Continuous learning](#) aims to maintain an employee's skills and knowledge over time by delivering frequent and varied learning opportunities. Continuous learning relies on numerous web-based processes -- such as [continuous performance management](#) -- to identify training needs as they arise, and access to social media and e-learning platforms for microlearning, which is the best fit for ongoing learning.
- [Cohort learning](#) involves groups of employees taking lessons together. While it sounds like an online version of classroom instruction, cohort learning goes further by taking advantage of the internet to foster collaboration and accountability between students.
- [Gamification](#) like the PwC trivia contest borrows methods from the immersive entertainment of web-based gaming to make learning more fun and introduce an element of friendly competition. Participants are rewarded by earning badges for certain tasks and seeing their names on leaderboards.

Another important trend is the "de-siloing" of talent management functions to improve the connections between the groups responsible for talent acquisition, learning and performance management, said Lisa Christensen, director of the learning design center of excellence (CoE) at McKinsey & Company, a management consulting firm.

"If each of those organizations works in a tight silo, we don't have access to each other's data. We don't know what each other knows," Christensen said. "We've been on a real journey over the last few years to try to de-silo our people functions and start to work together in more cross-functional units. There's so much goodness in that."

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ServiceNow is following a similar integration strategy, and skills intelligence is what ties the different talent functions together, Tilley said. The skills data used to evaluate job candidates is the same data used internally to assess employees for promotions.

To that end, some organizations develop a [competency framework](#), a structure that defines the skills needed for each job role.

## WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF A WORKPLACE LEARNING PROGRAM?

There are myriad routes to building a learning program, and the details depend heavily on the exact skills required for a job and the available learning tools.

Frequently mentioned essentials include the following:

- Employee feedback.
- Needs assessment.
- Learning paths tailored to the role or employee.
- Content that is engaging to learners.
- Defined goals and outcomes.
- Social learning and other sharing mechanisms.
- Evaluation of learners and programs.

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## WHY IS WORKPLACE LEARNING DIFFICULT FOR ORGANIZATIONS?

One of the biggest challenges Houde hears from other learning professionals is how to make learning more consistent and deliver programs, such as mentorships and apprenticeships, that are the most effective for training employees.

"Given how many potential vehicles there are for workplace learning, it can be challenging for organizations to determine what to lean into," she said.

One of the best ways to find answers is to listen to employees, Houde noted. PwC has held countless listening sessions, she said, during which it learned -- for example -- that employees found the volume of learning content to be overwhelming, especially when it came from several channels. The solution was to create a personalized learning platform so employees could build their own learning plans to suit their jobs and aspirations.

Building a [skills taxonomy](#), once pushed as an essential step in a skills-based strategy, has proved to be too complex for most organizations, according to Bersin.

"It's not going very well, to be honest," he said. "Some of the roles aren't worth the effort, and some of them really need the effort. If you're an oil and gas company or a drilling company or trucking company, you don't want people getting on equipment that they don't know how to use."

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Bersin said the taxonomy work happens in two stages. First is the infrastructure project to figure out where to put the skills data and how to use it. "There's also the business project of why we're doing this and what problem we're trying to solve. The companies that only do the infrastructure project tend to flail around," he said.

"You can't just pick something off the shelf. It's going to have 50,000 skills in it, and now you're going to have to take 50,000 words and phrases and match them against 1,000 job descriptions. Good luck with that."

Another priority for many organizations -- integrating learning systems with other talent systems -- remains challenging, but it's gotten easier as more products are deployed in the cloud as SaaS, according to Bersin.

## HOW TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL WORKPLACE LEARNING PROGRAM

The experts have gleaned some best practices from designing leading-edge L&D tools and programs.

**Diversified offerings.** Diversifying your offerings and providing several modes of learning is critical, Houde said. "A learning technology that may be effective for one type of learner could be ineffective for another," she said. "There is no one-size-fits-all approach for any given topic."

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She said PwC found that certain topics, such as leadership development, lend themselves more to in-person learning because it allows for nuanced dialogue, collaboration and opportunities for people to connect and practice new skills in a safe environment.

In contrast, [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) is best delivered digitally. At PwC, employees earn an Inclusive Mindset badge by participating in self-paced training that uses avatars in interactive scenarios that are then supplemented with personal reflection and group discussion.

**Time management.** Tilley said it's important to address the time constraints employees face. "We try to create opportunities for people to learn on the go," she said.

She also advised setting aside time for learning at the enterprise and team level and reinforcing the value of learning opportunities. "You've got to try to introduce it into the flow of work [and] make it just part of the fabric of the way the company operates."

**Manager involvement.** Uhl, of Owl's Ledge, said a key to having engaged learners and training that leads to action is manager involvement before the training ever happens. An employee is more motivated if they know their boss cares about their training because they've worked together to define objectives and expectations for it,

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as well as how it relates to the employee's current performance and long-term career development. "It's one of the best things we can do to promote learning transfer," Uhl said.

Management involvement has less to do with authority than with people's need for social interaction and peer groups, she said.

"If I know that this training matters to my boss and that my peers in my division, department or work team are going through the training together, there's an expectation we're going to take what we learned and apply it on the job together. That's a powerful recipe for turning learning into action."

## THE ROLE OF A LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

All but the smallest companies run their workplace learning programs from a [learning management system](#), or LMS: server software that provides a place to create, deliver and administer courses. It typically has interactive features for students, such as discussion groups and video conferences, and administrative features like alerts, quizzes and completion certificates. LMSes historically have run on premises but are increasingly being delivered over the internet.

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"An LMS is kind of a necessary evil," Christensen said, at least for organizations that need to manage a large volume of learning content. "What I personally don't see a lot of LMSes doing right now is being a very good interface for the user."

However, some of today's [top LMSes](#) have modern UIs and support for microlearning and other modern workplace learning approaches.

## ADDITIONAL WORKPLACE LEARNING TOOLS AND PLATFORMS

### LXPS

In recent years, consultants and vendors have promoted the [learning experience platform](#) (LXP) as a more flexible alternative to LMSes that is better able to manage web-based content and employee contributions.

The [top LXPs](#) offer strong web and mobile features, integration with other talent management and HR platforms, deep personalization, gamification and a wide variety of learning methods.

But the choice is not usually either-or, [LXP versus LMS](#). Many organizations retain an LMS for administrative purposes and often choose an LXP based on which one works best with the LMS.

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"LMSes are never going to go away," Bersin said, likening them to payroll systems. "You cannot run a company without one, because you have to keep track of compliance and operational training and other things. The LMS is really good at that."

LXPs, by contrast, offer a much easier to manage front end but also have limitations, said Bersin, who is generally credited with coining the term and defining the basic concepts of LXPs. They haven't taken off the way he thought, despite being revolutionary when they first hit the market around five years ago, mainly because there was no way to search for and find content inside of the company. "It was all locked up in the LMS," he said.

In addition, there are now dozens of technologies that do what LXPs do. He named Microsoft, Workday and LinkedIn among vendors with the Google-like search qualities of LXPs.

Meanwhile, LMSes have improved, in part by incorporating such LXP features as self-authoring. "Not only do they track training that you buy and build formally, but they allow employees to publish content into the LMS," Bersin said. "They kind of become social learning platforms."

Christensen prefers the combination of the two. "There's not a ton of [LXP] players, but the ones that are out there seem to be quite good, are really flexible on the front end, pivoted toward skills and have the user in mind." She said an LXP is a great tool

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for curating content and gives learners more agency in being able find content on the web and save it.

## MOOCS

Another important and commonly used tool is the massive open online course ([MOOC](#)).

MOOCs started in the early days of social media-based learning, according to Bersin. Universities began to put some of their courses online, hoping that they could eventually make money by selling online degrees and certificates. [MOOC platforms](#), including Coursera, EdX and Udemy, became popular.

But the early, often instructor-led courses had cumbersome communication methods, which made them hard to scale, he said. And MOOC providers didn't understand what the business model turned out to be: Things that are given away for free must have advertising revenue behind them. That's what Google does with YouTube and why free content now overshadows paid content.

MOOCs "didn't turn out to be as revolutionary as everybody thought," Bersin said. "It was a very exciting novelty for a year or two, but now people [create] much more sophisticated online learning experiences."

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Nevertheless, MOOCs can still play a role in workplace learning, thanks to their generally high quality of instruction, scalability and interactivity. But it's important to have a good grasp of the [pluses and minuses of MOOCs](#) before adding them to a corporate training program.

**Advantages and disadvantages of massive open online courses**

Massive open online courses are designed for large numbers of students located worldwide.

Advantages of MOOCs	Disadvantages of MOOCs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Courses can be accessed from anywhere, at any time.</li><li>Customizable learning paths.</li><li>Students can interact with each other.</li><li>Instructors can create, launch and update courses as required.</li><li>Access to high-quality instruction.</li><li>Organizations can upskill workers at scale and at velocity.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Online learning experience might not engage all learners.</li><li>Some learners might require lessons beyond online learning staples.</li><li>Attendees must commit the time and effort necessary to finish the course.</li><li>Some learners might need guidance on what courses to take to gain desired skills.</li><li>Learners might find it difficult to determine if the class offers quality instruction.</li><li>Some employers might not accept MOOCs created by unfamiliar entities.</li></ul>

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## VR AND AR

[Virtual reality](#) (VR) and [augmented reality](#) (AR) are two emerging technologies starting to have a big impact on learning.

Bersin said VR is having success in technical and soft-skills training, especially at banks and retailers. He said the upcoming release of the Apple Vision Pro headset should help popularize VR.

But Christensen isn't sold on it. "I have a mixed opinion of whether or not that will turn into something that people really want and need," she said. "It's so far out of the workflow that I'm not sure it will end up being the tool."

She said AR, which overlays digital images on the real world rather than recreating that world like VR tries to do, can fit much more easily into workflows. Digital twins -- digital representations of real-world entities -- show great potential in the medical and manufacturing fields when paired with AR, she added.

## TIPS TO MAINTAIN YOUR WORKPLACE LEARNING PROGRAM

One of the best ways to keep workplace learning organized and humming along is [to develop an employee learning plan](#) for each corporate-level program and individual employee.

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Use these plans to specify the following items:

- The needs the training is meant to address.
- The main features of the program, including objectives, courses, eligibility requirements and training approaches.
- Whether programs already exist for similar purposes.
- Key stakeholders, such as employees, their managers and HR.
- Details of courses, including instructors, curricula and required materials.

The more ambitious goal of building and maintaining a [company culture of continuous learning](#) calls for faithfully applying numerous steps and best practices, including the following:

- Lining up executive support.
- Using continuous performance management to identify training opportunities.
- Encouraging peer-to-peer learning.
- Sharing success stories.
- Adding gamification.
- Measuring results.

The most advanced way to support workplace learning is to start a center of excellence. Christensen explained the purpose and benefits of McKinsey's CoE and some of the promising techniques it's investigating.

"We basically build all the learning that we offer internally at the firm," she said. "We have a design capability that runs the gamut from any kind of e-learning to traditional

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things that we might do in the compliance space to more interesting, simulation-based learning."

The CoE, staffed by around 40 employees, also runs in-person workshops and an annual leadership conference. It includes an R&D lab and is involved in productizing its creations in applications [sold to clients](#) through the McKinsey Academy. She said the lab has been doing a lot of work in AI-based coaching and skills assessment, feedback mechanisms, apprenticeship and helping employees gain fluency in AI.

She said having the CoE has enabled McKinsey to reduce its number of authoring tools and build learning content more efficiently than other departments could do themselves. Whether other organizations should consider a CoE depends in part on their size because a team of, say, three people might not provide adequate scale.

The CoE is looking at apprenticeships as an alternative to formal learning. While there will always be a place for formal learning, Christensen said, she's become convinced that its methods and conventions simply can't keep pace. The world's rapid rate of change makes it critical to help everyone become good teachers and learners so workers can learn on the job all the time, regardless of their access to formal learning.

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## THE FUTURE OF WORKPLACE LEARNING

Most predictions about the next stage in the evolution of learning have AI at the center of things.

Bersin said generative AI will revolutionize corporate training by letting organizations develop content 100 times faster and deliver it through AI-driven teaching assistants and coaches.

These are some other promising uses of AI:

- More accurately mapping employee's skills to their career path and training needs.
- Excerpting training videos.
- Automating [microlearning content](#).

Uhl said generative AI, which has suffered from accuracy problems, is improving thanks to a hybrid approach that pairs it with traditional, rules-based AI.

"We're getting the capabilities of generative AI and then using the traditional AI and proprietary datasets to ground those models so that we're getting something that's more factual and has a higher level of accuracy for those use cases that need it," she said. "It makes the generative AI less wild, wild west."

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# E-learning's playbook for top content

Preparing a successful e-learning program with the right ingredients boils down to knowing, engaging, challenging and rewarding the students.

- Know the audience's competency, skill and knowledge levels to generate content meaningful to them.
- Align the course and content to business priorities, corporate culture and employee learning needs.
- Create well-rounded training courses that cater to user preferences and include interactive multimedia content.
- Develop customized and personalized content that's easily accessible to employees.
- Use generative AI to synthesize training materials, create interactive quizzes and explore context-based scenarios.
- Incorporate familiar UI/UX design elements that learners can easily use to navigate as well as track their progress.
- Segment coursework into smaller bite-sized sessions that learners can digest in less time and more readily access.
- Take the boredom out of learning by introducing challenging, engaging, problem-solving student activities.
- Gamify the e-learning experience to instill a sense of achievement and healthy competition among students.
- Recognize employees for successfully completing training programs and applying their newly acquired skills.



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Uhl listed the tremendous advantages of AI for [developing e-learning content](#).

"We can generate all types of content, but we can also generate instruction. And the instruction is faster, better, cheaper," she said.

The latest [benchmark data](#) from the Association for Talent Development showed it takes 84-115 hours for people to produce 20 minutes of online learning, she said. AI can do it in minutes.

Organizations are also creating their own libraries of proprietary custom prompts for generative AI based on their learning experience and instructional design workflows.

In Uhl's estimation, AI is likely to be hugely disruptive to the L&D industry, whose global revenue is north of \$300 billion -- a significant investment in an industry stuck on a classroom model that measures seat time instead of meaningful results. "It's crucial for the industry to shift its focus toward value-driven approaches," she said.

For ServiceNow's Tilley, generative AI will make customized career development plans possible for every employee. "You can use gen AI to match skills to roles, trainings and opportunities. You can customize learning and more effectively find and assess talent," she said. "It can recommend relevant training, mentors, mobility opportunities, and it's constantly learning, so the more we use it, the smarter it gets."

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"It's going to disrupt how we have thought about corporate learning and it's going to disrupt it in a really big way -- in a really powerful, positive way if we do it right," Tilley said.

Corporate learning has traditionally been thought of as a vertical ladder, she added. "But it's not that. It's a jungle gym, and people want to grow in many different ways. "

Christensen said it's important for L&D departments to prove their value. "In a lot of organizations, learning is viewed as a cost center instead of a strategic partner," she said. McKinsey's department has worked hard to strategically position itself as a means for the organization to deliver on its strategic priorities instead of a drain on resources.

It calls for human-centered leadership, which she said involves "trying to help people move along the human development spectrum to becoming more self-authored over time. That's a lifetime pursuit -- a career-long pursuit."

*David Essex is an industry editor who covers enterprise applications, emerging technology and market trends, and creates in-depth content for several TechTarget websites.*

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## CONTINUED READING

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- [Top learning experience platforms to use](#)
- [How to create a continuous learning culture](#)