



8 ways

to boost engagement in virtual
organizational learning

The 8 learning trends that will revolutionize the way we learn at work.

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INTRODUCTION

Many organizations recognize changing the way people learn at work as one of their biggest organizational development challenges, but few companies feel ready to take on that challenge. Considering how COVID-19 has dramatically changed our ways of working and accelerated the need for digital transformation, it's no wonder that so many companies feel uncertain about their ability to navigate rapid change. After all, learning and development (L&D) professionals are expected to not only prove the value of their learning programs but also adopt entirely new learning paradigms, learning styles, and learning technologies.

[As corporate and leadership coach Kathy Ball-Tonic shares in an interview with Howspace:](#) “If you had asked me last year what I thought about leadership in a virtual world, I might have laughed and replied “it’s impossible to create connection and transformation.” But I would have been wrong. It takes work, and requires being very, very intentional, but it is totally achievable.”

While COVID-19 has forcibly altered our ways of working, most companies will permanently transform to work in more digital ways. This means there’s a huge opportunity to improve your digital practices and organizational learning not only now, but well into the future. But when it comes to learning programs, how exactly can you build and sustain employee engagement?

To help you navigate the sea of organizational learning trends and understand how learning should change in your business, we broke this ebook down to the 8 learning trends that are already revolutionizing the way people learn at work. In the following 8 chapters, we share everything we’ve learned from our partners and customers while collaborating with them on complex organizational learning programs.



Ilkka Makitölo

CEO, Howspace

Howspace



About Howspace

Howspace is an AI-powered social learning platform that allows you to put people in the front and center of your organizational learning programs. By engaging your learning program participants in peer-to-peer learning, you'll help create personalized learning experiences and a sustained learning impact.

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1. PERSONALIZED CONTENT & CONNECTIONS

Replacing “one size fits all” with “context is king”.

Prior to the commercial breakthrough of digital learning platforms, organizational learning programs were difficult to organize and time-consuming to manage. And when the first learning management systems (LMSes) and other early learning technologies were introduced in the 1990’s, they came to L&D professionals’ rescue by solving the problem of content creation and distribution.

Before long, the collective learning industry had fallen in love with technology. The only problem was that early on, the technology wasn’t advanced enough to keep up with the evolving needs of organizational learning. Instead of being able to make contextual content recommendations to the learning program participants, “one size fits all” and “content is king” became the accidental mantras of first generation learning platforms.

The problem with a generic approach like this, of course, is that busy knowledge workers simply don’t have the time to build the connection between a theoretical concept and their work. Without any context or reflection with peers, these new theoretical concepts—no matter how interesting on paper—are quickly forgotten.

As [research from McKinsey](#) suggests: “The core principles of adult learning require that companies tailor their learning programs to employees’ specific strengths and needs, rather than developing a one-size-fits-all program for everyone. In our experience, the most effective approach to adult learning is blended—that is, complementing in-class learning with real work situations and other interventions, such as coaching.”



We're finally seeing the technological advances needed to build learning platforms with personalized recommendation engines. Dubbed as the Netflixes of learning, these platforms are designed to make content recommendations based on the users' past behavior, role, and interests. But it's not only the personalized content that makes a difference, it's the context. That context comes from the social aspect of learning. On some learning platforms, users are able to discuss and directly apply their learnings on the fly, with the help of their peers. "One size fits all" has been largely replaced by "context is king". Elevating the custom content with social interactions creates a much more meaningful experience.

And with artificial intelligence, we're also starting to move past mere content recommendations. In the future, AI-powered learning platforms will also be able to connect learners to relevant people and discussions.

Instead of letting artificial intelligence take over, however, forward-thinking businesses are investing in AI-powered, yet human-curated learning experiences. With the right combination of hand-picked data and real-time analysis through artificial intelligence, companies are able to quickly react to new information and keep personalized content and connection recommendations as relevant and timely as possible.

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2. LEARNING AS AN EXPERIENCE AND A JOURNEY

From one-off learning events towards an ongoing learning journey.

Back in the day, most organizational learning efforts revolved around in-person training days. People from all around the company would get together for an inspirational day of workshops and group assignments. And then when the fun-filled day was over, absolutely nothing would happen. There would be no follow-up, no post-workshop assignments, or platform for continuing the discussion.

These kinds of fits and spurts of learning have proven to be highly ineffective. And now more than ever when COVID-19 has made in-person training sessions impossible, L&D professionals have had to rethink the way they approach facilitated learning sessions. Having the right remote collaboration tools in place is important, but creating a sustained learning impact requires more than just technology. Since copying the face-to-face model directly is not the best option, L&D professionals have divided up the training day in smaller parts and started mapping out pre-workshop activities and post-workshop engagements.

Along the same lines, we've noticed that many of our client and partner organizations are slowly moving away from single, one-off learning events towards an ongoing learning experience that follows the learner throughout their career and personal life. Especially now when most teams are remote and distributed, it's crucial to engage people throughout their entire learning journey. Rather than "finishing" a learning module or "graduating" from a formal learning program, companies are beginning to adopt this mindset shift of continuous learning that belongs first and foremost to the individual.

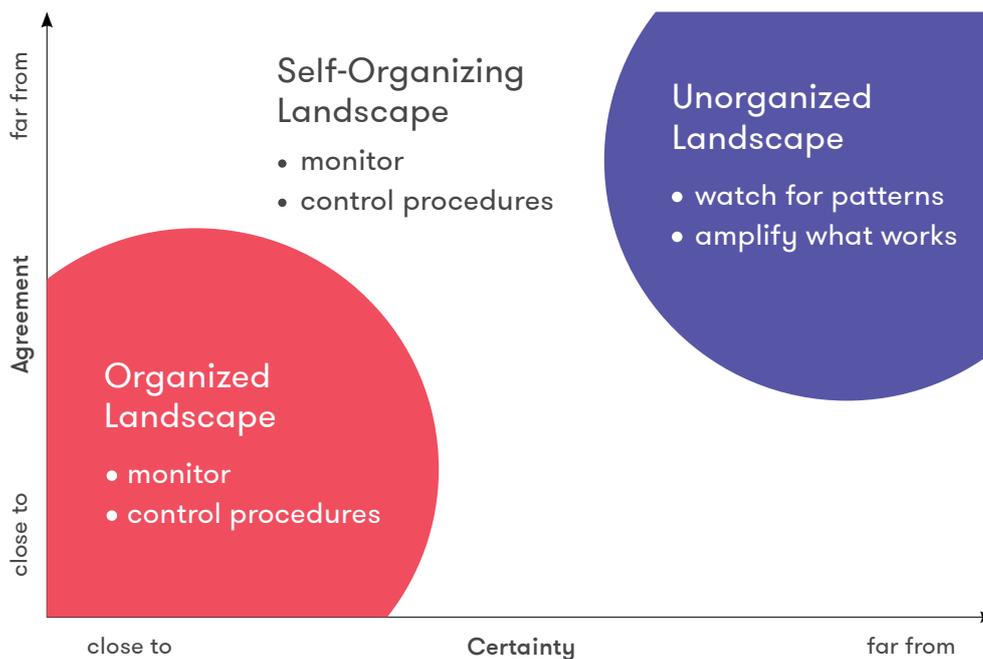
The most advanced L&D professionals are now inviting people in their organizations on personal learning journeys, which have no beginning and no end in sight. The big idea is that learning isn't tied to a person's role or even to the organization they work for, but instead, it's something that people get to bring with them not only when they change jobs but also to their personal lives.

3. LEARNING OVER KNOWING

From hard skills to enduring capabilities.

According to the [Human Systems Dynamics Institute](#), organizations can be categorized into three landscapes based on how close they are to agreement and certainty.

Landscape Diagram



Original image source: [Interaction Institute](#)

The landscapes differentiate between what is called the organized and unorganized zones of human systems. The organized landscape refers to those areas of activity where there is agreement and a high degree of predictability (think the payroll process). The unorganizing landscape refers to those areas that are more random and surprising (for example, when a new team comes together for the first time). In between lies the self-organizing zone, where the system begins to sort out and respond to its environment.

Today, we're seeing most modern organizations move towards the unorganizing landscape at the top right corner of the diagram. And since COVID-19, most, if not all organizations have had to adapt in these times of accelerated change and prepare for an uncertain future. This shift has huge implications on organizational learning, as both the substance (what) and the way (how) we learn must also change as the organization's position in the landscape evolves.

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To demonstrate this shift, let's look at an example. In traditional blue-collar industries like construction, manufacturing, and transportation, substance and hard skills matter more than creative problem-solving and social skills. And that's why training in those industries is heavily focused on building practical skills and substance knowledge through formal learning programs, modules, and courses.

However, if you ask most white-collar employees what they'd like to learn about next, the answers are likely to range from leadership skills to agile process frameworks. In other words, they're interested in complex theoretical phenomena that mainly require developing social and organizational skills like facilitation, prioritization, and logical reasoning. Instead of learning exactly how to deal with a thousand possible scenarios, the focal point of learning is on transferable capabilities, rather than skills.

That's why in the future, the ability to quickly adopt and apply new information, will become more important than any number of hard skills. In fact, most modern companies have already started investing in building enduring capabilities, such as teaming and sense-making, as they are much more transferable to different roles and situations than skills.

According to [McKinsey](#), however, despite the changing needs of organizations and their employees, most executives say that they still rely on the same methods to deliver learning as they did four years ago. Additionally, not many of them are using experiential environments or digital interventions such as mobile learning exercises or group-based online courses yet.

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Examples of enduring capabilities

Instead of hard skills, most modern organizations are looking to build these enduring capabilities:

- Emotional intelligence: How to understand and react to the emotions and experiences of others?
- Teaming: How to collaborate effectively with people who don't share our physical space, language, or organizational context?
- Social intelligence: How to understand the interpersonal dynamics and behavioral impacts of human interaction?
- Sense-making: How to create meaning out of shared experiences?
- Critical thinking: How to analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and reconstruct information?
- Adaptive thinking: How to recognize and apply new patterns?

Source: [Deloitte, Skills Change but Capabilities Endure](#)

4. UNDERSTANDING AND MEASURING LEARNING IMPACT

How to prove the direct and indirect benefits of learning?

Since most large corporations already have a formalized L&D function, it's safe to assume that these organizations recognize the value of learning. However, with an increasing pressure to drive profitability and efficiency, many businesses are looking to measure and prove the impact of their learning initiatives more accurately.

As [Steve Glaveski points out in a recent article in Harvard Business Review](#), the problem is that education in organizations often becomes about “showing off” or signaling, rather than learning useful job skills. In other words, many ambitious employees are in the bad habit of using their professional education credits simply to make the case for a speedy promotion.

And needless to say, in an environment like this, it's increasingly difficult to measure the real impact of learning. But just because something is difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't try. To quote [experiential learning leader Rik Dryfoos from GE](#):

“If we don't measure learning outcomes, we can't expect to improve them. This measurement can be hard, and is often skipped. But as professionals, we need to tackle this issue.”

While the idea of quantifying the return on learning investment seems great on paper, the truth is that such calculations are anything but simple to conduct. After all, while learning undoubtedly has many benefits to a business, most of them have indirect revenue implications. For example, a line manager's ability to coach her team members will likely have a positive effect on morale and therefore a negative effect on employee turnover. The problem, however, is that such correlations are nearly impossible to prove.

On the other hand, it's also good to remember that not everything has to be measured in dollars. The effect of learning can also be measured in behavioral impacts, i.e. how well a learning initiative has been able to



influence employees' behavior. For example, in addition to financial impact, you might also want to measure whether your employees have started using new platforms, whether they're taking part in discussions more actively, or whether leaders has started having 1:1s with their team members more often.

And so to effectively measure the impact of learning, you'll want to combine qualitative data like employee feedback, behavioral patterns, and other observations with quantitative data from various sources, including your learning platforms and quantitative surveys. While you may never be able to accurately measure the real bottom-line impact of your learning initiatives, by combining data from various sources, you'll get one step closer to understanding all the different ways in which effective learning improves business performance, employee satisfaction, and organizational well-being.

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5. INSPIRATIONAL MICROLEARNING

Microlearning helps keep important topics top of mind.

Microlearning itself isn't exactly a new concept. But while it's been traditionally used to brush up employees' skills on mandatory and "boring" topics like health, safety, and cyber security, learning experts have also found ways to apply it to more complex themes, such as leadership development, communications, and innovation.

The big change we're seeing here is that microlearning is increasingly used as a device for reflection and group work. As a facilitator, you can ask questions, send out small group assignments, or simply ask the learning program participants to comment on an article you've shared. Such daily interactions with complex topics are designed to deepen the participants' engagement with not only the content but also the learning community around them.

By sending the learners frequent reminders about some of the concepts you're currently working on, they'll be able to keep these important topics top of mind during busy days and observe how these concepts relate to their everyday work.

6. ON THE JOB LEARNING AS A PRIORITY

Make learning a daily routine.

In a recent webinar we organized with Sotos Poulimenos who currently works as Senior Learning Advisor at Deloitte, he suggested that according to new research by Deloitte, mature L&D teams deliver 16% less instructor-led training than their less developed counterparts.

More than anything, this surprising statistic is reflective of the changing world of work. In organizations where people are chronically short on time, it's more effective to make learning a part of their daily routine than to expect them to make room in their already busy schedules.

That's why mature learning organizations increasingly invest in on the job learning. This is perfectly in line with the [70/20/10 model of learning and development](#), which suggests that 70% of learning happens in the flow of work, while only 10% happens through formal training sessions, and the remaining 20% in developmental relationships with peers.

So far, however, the one thing that many companies have gotten wrong is that learning in the flow of work doesn't just happen organically. Instead, it needs to be supported and resourced for. Especially when we're all working from home, it's even more crucial for L&D professionals to design engaging virtual learning environments where people can learn and reflect together.

One of the best ways to sponsor on the job learning is by investing in collaborative digital platforms like Howspace that bring a learning community of peers to your employees' fingertips.

With the help of such platforms, L&D professionals are able to facilitate complex learning journeys without interrupting employees' busy schedules. The employees, on the other hand, are free to choose when and how they want to contribute to the shared learning community.



7. LEADERS AS TEACHERS

From teaching to coaching, and from coaching to facilitating.

In recent years, leadership and learning have become inseparable concepts. In fact, modern leaders often assume the role of teachers, coaches, or facilitators. Their responsibility is not necessarily to provide learners with the right answers but rather, to guide them in the right direction.

As Sydney Finkelstein writes in Harvard Business Review: “Ultimately great leaders understand that even a little bit of high-quality, one-on-one teaching can yield great dividends. [...] Teaching is not merely an “extra” for good managers; it’s an integral responsibility. If you’re not teaching, you’re not really leading.”

A great way through which leaders can demonstrate their commitment to learning is by sponsoring learning programs or initiatives. This typically entails advocating the importance of the program to the whole company, securing the resources required for learning (i.e. time and money), as well as acting as a positive example to the rest of the team.

The key is for leaders to let go of the myth of the all-knowing leader and admit that they don’t always have the right answer. As Ilkka Makitalo, Howspace CEO, likes to say: “As a leader, whenever you’re tempted to say something, you should ask a question instead.”

8. PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Create a community-of-practice around your learning initiative.

As we've established in the earlier chapters, learning enduring capabilities isn't something that can be taught using traditional methods. Instead, the best ways to learn these highly transferable capabilities are by practicing them in real-life settings and reflecting together with peers. Rather than having an authority to explain to the learners how things should be done, it often makes sense to let the learners experiment in practice and then reflect back on what they've observed.

Self-reflection and peer-to-peer coaching are where digital learning communities come in handy. Such communities are particularly useful in learning broad topics like communication, leadership, and innovation, where there really are no such things as right or wrong answers. Sure, some approaches are better than others, but rather than having an authority to point that out, it can be useful for learners to coach one another.

As [Steve Glaveski points out in Harvard Business Review](#): “When your employees want to learn a new skill, they typically don't Google it or refer to your learning management system (LMS) first; 55% of them ask a colleague. When you account for the fact that humans tend to learn as they teach, peer learning offers a way to support rapid, just-in-time learning, while strengthening the existing understanding your employees have about concepts.”

That's why in addition to a traditional LMS, it's a good idea to invest in creating and hosting an informal and collaborative learning community on a platform like [Howspace](#). Such digital learning communities allow employees to create organic communities-of-practice around the topics they're learning about.



CONCLUSIONS

The field of organizational learning is changing rapidly, and the virtual learning programs that were on the rise before COVID-19 are only going to accelerate in our increasingly digital world. The good news is that nearly all the trends we chose to highlight in this ebook point to a single megatrend: learner-centricity.

The pandemic has forced companies to adopt new learning styles and technologies, but simply copying face-to-face learning models won't lead to more effective and engaging organizational learning. Instead of approaching learning journeys and individual programs content or technology first, we must adopt a more collaborative, flexible, and inclusive way of designing learning initiatives.

In the coming years, we're expecting the forerunners in organizational learning to embrace the paradigm shift from one-off learning events towards a more holistic view of ongoing learning experiences.

On behalf of the whole Howspace team, we'd like to wish you good luck on your learning journey!

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