

8 Jun 2021

Learning methods

Outlines the main types of learning method, and what to consider when choosing between them

Introduction

Any method of workplace learning must support individuals, teams or the organisation as a whole to build capability that meets business needs. As working environments become more complex and greater agility is needed to ensure employees' capability, it's more important than ever to apply the breadth of different learning methods available.

This factsheet defines 'learning', 'training' and 'development' and examines the main factors to consider when choosing between learning methods. It gives an overview of the various types, from workplace-based learning, like on-the-job training and in-house development programmes, to externally-based learning, such as formal qualifications. It also looks at distance learning and explores emerging learning methods.

The CIPD is at the heart of change happening across L&D, supporting practitioners in providing insights and resources. Connect with us through our Leading in Learning network.

What are learning methods?

Learning methods are any activity deliberately undertaken, or resources provided, to help the learning process at individual, team or organisational level.

In rapidly changing business environments, employees need to be able to adapt their capabilities to support the organisation's strategy. Organisations can keep pace with changing needs by looking ahead to define requirements and plan effective learning interventions that support business objectives. Read more in our factsheet on [learning and development strategy and policy](#).

Defining training, learning and development

The terms 'training' and 'learning' are used broadly and at times interchangeably, within the people profession and a workplace setting, but can be summarised as:

- **Training** is an instructor-led, content-based intervention designed to lead to skills or behaviour changes.
- **Learning** is a self-directed, work-based process that leads to increased adaptive potential (as might be provided by coaching or mentoring opportunities or being part of an online community or personal learning network, for example).
- **Development** implies a longer-term or broader process – acquiring skills or knowledge by a range of different means such as coaching, formal and informal learning interventions, education or planned experience.

As these are broad definitions, it's important for organisations to know what these terms mean in their context. There's been a change of emphasis in recent years from a limited perception of formal training to a broader concept of learning and development - becoming learner-centred rather than trainer-centred.

With learning and development (L&D) provision evolving from instructor-led, content-based face-to-face training towards a wider focus on a range of learning resources, people development has moved into a much wider, more holistic space. See more about [evolving practice in L&D](#).

The role of line managers

The shift from course-led learning experiences to bringing learning directly into everyday work brings a greater role for line managers in the learning process. This is a new role for many managers who may see learning as a separate activity provided by L&D and happening away from the workplace. See our factsheet on [line managers' role in supporting people professionals](#).

Choosing learning and training methods

There's a vast array of methods to choose from. Selecting an appropriate technique for each need will depend on factors such as:

- Organisational priorities, budget and required expectations.
- Data gathered on the effectiveness of previous learning interventions.
- Complexity of knowledge, skill or behaviour the learning intervention covers along with employees existing skill set.
- Performance targets and how that links to employee needs, experience and perception.

Recognising the cognitive processes associated with learning is important when selecting, developing and delivering learning. Knowing your people and organisation well, and not making assumptions, feeds into decisions on appropriate methods. Employees need to be able to relate any learning activity to their own unique context. However, whilst user choice is important, choice may sometimes be limited, after all, whilst an employee may like self-directed learning such as reading or watching videos, to master a practical skill, they have to actually practise it!

Our related factsheets on identifying learning and development needs, evaluating learning and development and costing and benchmarking learning and development will also be useful when making choices on learning methods.

Types of learning method

Although definitions and classifications may overlap, it's possible to categorise learning methods in various ways including:

- Formal or informal techniques.
- Internal or external provision.
- Team or individual arrangements.
- Digital or face-to-face.
- Created or curated resources.
- Formal course or a series of accessible resources on a given topic.
- Learning directly at the place of work ('in the flow') or away from the workplace.

Increasingly there's an emphasis on the blend of methods used and the explicit inclusion of social collaborative elements.

Workplace-based learning methods

On-the-job training

Typically, on-the-job training is learning through observing and/or being assisted by a colleague with more experience of performing a task. It's usually:

- Delivered on a one-to-one basis at the trainee's place of work.
- Allocated time to take place, including potential periods when there is little or no useful output of products or services.
- A specified, planned and structured activity.

This method may prove useful in certain circumstances and is usually immediately relevant to basic job needs. However, work colleagues or line managers who do the training need to ensure that:

- Trainees are able to practise what they have learned immediately to enhance recall.
- Instruction is paced to avoid information overload.
- The trainee's current level of knowledge, skill or behaviour is taken into account and can be used in the training.
- Positive feedback is given to encourage the trainee.
- The person undertaking the role of the 'trainer' is adequately skilled to develop others.

Learning 'in the flow' of work

Our [Learning in the flow of work factsheet](#) shows how this approach to learning has evolved from traditional on-the-job approaches to training. Learning 'in the flow' allows resources to be accessed at a point of need, rather than wait for a formal intervention. The challenge for L&D practitioners is to provide resources that are credible. One benefit of this approach is that it can encourage a greater proportion of self-directed learning.

In-house development programmes

This category covers a very diverse range of learning interventions that are longer-term, broader and/or of a higher level than basic on-the-job training. Development programmes could blend with elements as coaching and mentoring or secondment, often with more formal or off-the-job learning or educational arrangements. In-house programmes are often used for [management or leadership development](#) activities but are not limited to these.

Coaching and mentoring

[Coaching and mentoring](#) are development techniques based on one-to-one discussions to enhance an individual's skills, knowledge or work performance – often for the current job, but also to support career transitions.

Job rotation, project work, secondment and shadowing

Learning from the experience of secondment - that is, the temporary loan of an employee to another department or role, often for a particular project, or sometimes to an external organisation - is widely recognised as valuable for both employee and organisation development.

Job rotation and shadowing are useful in supporting employees to develop the skills and competencies required for moves to new or higher-level roles. The support process for the employee here is important and time needs to be factored in for achieving the desired performance outputs.

Other learning methods

Learning away from the workplace is generally the easiest to record and cost, although this doesn't mean it should be perceived as the main way in which learning happens.

Courses and classroom training

Formal courses have advantages in certain circumstances,. They offer:

- Protected time for learning.
- Opportunity to practise, share ideas and experience in a structured risk free setting.
- The ability to signal what matters to the organisation.

Internal courses provide an opportunity to focus on organisation-specific issues, which may increase the possibility of learning transfer. External courses involving interaction with people from other organisations may help individuals see situations from a fresh perspective and develop skills in a different knowledge-sharing context.

Qualifications

A variation on the theme of formal courses, vocational and management education may be a useful way of meeting learning needs while allowing learners to acquire qualifications. Understanding the application of learning and the actual skills developed will help decisions about the best course and/or qualifications to choose.

More information on workplace qualifications is available via links in Useful contacts.

Action learning

Action learning is a form of collaborative learning where a small group of learners (an 'action learning set') meet regularly to reflect on real work issues. Its basic philosophy is that the most effective learning takes place when individuals are faced with a real problem to solve.

Distance learning

Distance learning involves the use of learning materials delivered electronically (traditionally this was done via the post). This makes it possible to provide large groups with consistent material, and access is flexible so that people can learn in their own time, if appropriate. Embracing distance learning via digital methods has benefits of scale and reach. It's important to think about how learners are supported through distance learning.

Effective distance learning engages learners in a forum or collaborative community in some way, perhaps via interactive classroom or webinars, as well as through materials provided for self-directed learning.

Blended and 'bite-size' learning

Some forms of learning can have greater impact when used in a blended approach. For example, digital resources may produce more results when blended with other types of learning. A blend offers an effective way of moving learning away from one knowledge 'dump' event such as a one day course, towards a programme which helps the learner to retain and use the knowledge over a longer time period.

A related approach is to offer small chunks of formal training of an hour or two and in varying formats, perhaps linked with other techniques such as online resources.

Recent developments affecting learning methods

Social learning

Online collaboration tools enable employees to learn from each other through sharing material. Social media platforms support the development of online communities of practice where shared ideas support learning and practice.

There are also free tools such as animation, infographics, video, word clouds, and self-authored e-learning, which enable anyone to create and share learning content.

MOOCs

Massive open online courses, or MOOCs, are free-open access courses available to anyone. They're available in business or language skills as well as a vast range of other topics which can be good at getting adults back into the habit of learning. Organisations can connect employees to existing MOOCs or create bespoke corporate MOOCs. We offer

[two MOOCs available via Future Learn](#) covering the principles of people management and HR fundamentals.

Neuroscience

Developments in fields such as [neuroscience](#) are influencing how learning initiatives are best optimised for learning retention. Insights from neuroscience can be applied to both which learning method is selected, and how the learning is designed to enable it to stick.

Gamification

‘Gamification’ is the process of applying game design theories to everyday situations. It can support L&D by enabling employees to build competence in a safe environment. Gamification in both physical and online learning can encourage greater engagement and retention of knowledge. Whilst often perceived as applying to digital learning, gamified principles can be easily incorporated into offline learning too, playing towards competitive human nature.

Knowledge management and content curation

Gathering teams together at the end of projects to review how they’ve worked and to record ‘lessons learned’ can be very effective. Such events allow learning about better ways of working together or improve processes and outputs that can be shared with future project teams.

Social tools, self-authoring tools and learning management systems allow learners to be curators of knowledge and to share amongst their networks. L&D professionals are moving to the role of ‘content curator’. Rather than selecting and designing learning methods, they are providing the tools and content for employees to direct their own learning. Curation and facilitation both feature in the [Learning and development specialist knowledge area](#) of our Profession Map.

Useful contacts and further reading

Contacts

[Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation: Ofqual](#)

[Future Learn – free online courses](#)

[Open Learn – free courses from the Open University](#)

Books and reports

BEEVERS, K., REA, A. and HAYDEN, D. (2019) *Learning and development practice in the workplace*. 4th ed. London: Kogan Page.

LANCASTER, A. (2019) *Driving performance through learning*. London: Kogan Page.

OVERTON, L. (2014) *In-Focus: lessons from MOOCs for corporate learning [online]*. Towards Maturity.

PARRY-SLATER, M. (2020) *The learning and development handbook*. London: Kogan Page.

Visit the [CIPD and Kogan Page Bookshop](#) to see all our priced publications currently in print.

Journal articles

FARAGHER, J. (2018) *Why fresh approaches to L&D are presenting new problems*. *People Management* (online). 25 October.

VAN DAM, N. (2012) Designing learning for a 21st century workforce. *T+D*. Vol 66, No 4, April. pp48-53.

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This factsheet was last updated by David Hayden.