

Overcoming the Learning & Development Engagement Problem With Personalized Learning



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Executive Summary

According to recent research conducted by Accenture Research and Deloitte Consulting, there are two daunting trends that continue to plague businesses today: the increasing skills gap and the lack of employee engagement. And the problems appear to be getting worse.

The increasing skills gap

In the research study [Accenture 2013 skills and employment trends survey: Perspectives on Training](#), they found nearly half of the businesses (46%), confirmed that a skills gap existed for their business. The executives surveyed see a clear link between skills shortages and a variety of negative business results. For example, 69% believe that a lack of critical skills will result in increased operating costs. Two-thirds anticipate a loss of business to competitors, and 64% expect an impact both on revenues and on reaching revenue growth objectives.

The Number 1 impact on the company? Employee performance and productivity. Accenture found that 87 percent of those surveyed believe that a skills gap increases stress on existing employees who need to cope with new challenges without the required skills.

Lack of employee engagement

Lacking the appropriate skills to perform their assigned role is one of the major factors contributing to the other trend: lack of employee engagement. When employees become frustrated due to lack of skills, they become disengaged not only in their own personal development process, but also in their execution of their responsibilities. In the Deloitte study, the lack of engagement was the top issue facing 87% of HR and business leaders. In the study, [Global Human Capital Trends 2015: Leading in the new world of work](#), they describe how companies are facing a looming crisis of retention and engagement, and how they are intimately connected to each other. They also discuss how important it is for companies to actively explore new approaches to corporate Learning and Development (L&D) as they confront increasing skill gaps and engagement issues. Unfortunately, many corporate training departments are falling behind.

The impact

The skill gap and engagement issues faced by business and HR leaders are impacting the perception of Learning & Development across the organization. According to additional recent research from Deloitte, there is a learning and development engagement problem. Employees, managers and executives are becoming increasingly disengaged from the L&D department and their offerings. The Deloitte study, [Reimagining L&D Capabilities to Drive Continuous Learning](#), reflects that 66% of L&D professionals are having a hard time getting employees to engage with their offerings. It also states that less than 25% of Line Managers think their L&D departments are critical to achieving their business goals. Perhaps most disconcerting is the finding that only 14% of the L&D leaders believe business leaders view them as strategic partners, with 52% seen as mediocre partners or worse.

This paper is dedicated to explaining:

- Why the problems of skill gaps and engagement are impacting how L&D is perceived by key stakeholders
- Why existing approaches are not working
- How a new approach can change that perception and create a culture of learning that can positively impact the skills gap and lack of engagement

The Learning Engagement Problem

Employee Disengagement

Learning engagement, or the lack thereof, can be significantly impacted in numerous ways. If the learner does not buy into the need to participate in a learning activity¹, or training in general, then they will not be engaged in the process. If the learner does not feel that the training activity is relevant to their job, they will not be engaged. If they think the learning activity will not help them do their job better, they will consider it not worthy of their time. So learning engagement is critical before the learning activity begins.

Learning engagement is also directly linked to how much is learned from the training activity, and how long it is retained. For example, using Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Theory concerning how people get completely immersed in an activity, you can expect:

- If the level of challenge in a specific training activity is too low, the learner will get bored and disengaged.
- If the level of challenge is too high, the learner will get anxious, then frustrated, then disengage.
- If the challenge of the activity matches the learner's needs and capabilities, and is relevant to their job, engagement occurs.

Given these causes of learner disengagement:

- How can you motivate the learner to buy in to the process?
- How can you make it relevant to their job?
- How can you make sure that the learning activity will help them increase their capabilities?

These are not new questions. HR and L&D have been attempting to solve them with Talent Management Systems and Learning Management Systems. Both of these types of systems serve their purpose, but neither of them address the learner disengagement issue. Actually, they could be making the problem worse.

¹ We will use "learning activity" to generically represent a learning opportunity, learning activity, training activity, whether formal or informal.

Talent Management Systems / Human Capital Management Systems

Talent Management Systems are essentially designed to keep score. They track employee performance, they provide an infrastructure for succession planning, and they even dabble in professional development. However, when you mix annual performance reviews and compensation planning with professional development, you can contribute to the learner disengagement. Why? First, if you do not include self-assessment/self-awareness as part of the professional development program design process for an adult learner, you have already lost the battle as the learner/employee will not likely buy into the program. Dating back to Malcolm Knowles theory on adult learning, it is now widely accepted that adults need to participate in the design of their learning (self-directed) for the learning programs to be fully embraced. Second, even if you do include a self-assessment but link its results to the performance review process, even if only for development planning, then you are risking the accuracy and the integrity of the results. Expecting someone to assess themselves accurately when compensation and promotions are at stake is noble, but not likely to occur. It is human nature to overestimate your capabilities if you know the results of your input can have an immediate impact on your pay and your chances of a promotion.

By utilizing Talent Management Systems to build your professional development programs, you risk creating development plans that are understated, do not effectively address actual skill gaps, and contribute to ongoing learner disengagement by asking them to participate in activities that may not be relevant to their actual needs. You cannot mix professional development plans with performance reviews and expect to solve the learner engagement problem.

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Learning Management Systems also serve a meaningful purpose, but by themselves they can also contribute to the learner disengagement problem. These systems serve as a storage depot for content, and they essentially keep track of consumption. They keep track of learner history, and they provide a centralized place learners can search when they know they need training. The problem is that many of these systems make it very difficult for the learner to find what they truly need.

Imagine a learner who wants to improve their presentation skills searching an LMS with thousands of learning activities. They are already motivated to close their skill gap. Remember that if the challenge of the activity matches the learner's needs and capabilities, and is relevant

to their job, engagement occurs. The LMS could provide 10, 20, or 50 options for the learner to consider. If the learner selects the wrong one, the learner becomes frustrated with the experience, contributing to further disengagement, not to mention the business and personal impact created by wasting the time invested with the wrong training event. This disengagement often leads to lack of motivation to search for ways to close skill gaps with the LMS in the future.

The marketplace for Talent Management and Learning Management Systems has grown dramatically for the past several years and continues to do so. So why are learning engagement, skill gaps and employee engagement still issues, and growing? It is because they are not designed to fix these problems. The answer to solving the issue of learner engagement is personalized learning. If you fix the learner engagement issue, you will help address the engagement issue. If you address the engagement issue, you will make an impact on the skill gaps issue.

Manager Beliefs

In the Deloitte study, less than 25% of Line Managers believed their L&D departments were critical to achieving their business goals. That is not surprising given the findings on learner disengagement. It is cause and effect.

- If the employee is disengaged in the learning process, then the efforts of the L&D department are mitigated.
- If the employee is not engaged, then the training activities will have minimal effect.
- If minimal effect occurs, then skill levels do not improve.
- If skill levels do not improve, then business results do not improve.
- If employees participate in training programs, and positive business results do not follow, then Line Managers are likely to lose faith in the ability of L&D to contribute.

The key to changing this belief is reversing the cause and effect dynamic.

- The key to changing results is to uplift the skill levels.
- The key to uplifting the skill levels is to change the behavior of the learner after a training activity occurs.
- The key to changing behavior on behalf of the learner is to change the attitude of the learner about the value of the activity, before they begin. If the learner feels that the activity is relevant, timely, is easy to find, matches their needs, and could help them get better in their job, then they will be more engaged.
- The key to increasing engagement is to personalize the learning experience.

The key to changing manager beliefs is personalized learning.

Executive Perception

The Deloitte study found that only 14% of the L&D leaders they surveyed believed that business leaders viewed them as strategic partners, and 52% were seen as mediocre partners or worse. Given the fact that learners are disengaged at alarmingly high levels, and that managers do not believe in the ability of L&D to impact results, it is not a surprise to find that L&D rarely has a seat at the strategy table.

Unfortunately, today, even without the L&D engagement problem, L&D leaders face many challenges.

- They must deal with changing skill requirements, not seen since the industrial revolution, both in terms of the scope and speed of the changes.
- They are being asked to do more with fewer resources, less budget and in shorter time.
- They are being asked to contribute to retention and engagement when the balance of power has shifted to the employee, with more transparency about corporate culture and more demand for highly skilled workers.
- They are being asked to serve a more geographically dispersed audience, often globally, encompassing multiple cultures and languages.

They are being asked to do all these things, while delivering more value to the organization they support.

However, if the learners are not engaged, the managers don't believe in L&D's ability, and the skill gaps continue to increase, then L&D's perceived value to the executive leadership will continue to erode at a time when it should become more strategic. In the Deloitte study on Human Capital Trends in 2015, skill gaps and employee engagement problems are at the top of mind of 87% of the leaders in HR and executive management.

Learning and Development can and should help mitigate both of these issues.

The answer is personalized learning.

An Action Plan To Overcome Learning Disengagement

The solution to overcoming employee disengagement, and addressing manager beliefs and executive perception starts with the employee, from the bottom up. You must increase their intrinsic motivation and engagement in the professional development process. Engagement will not increase unless you personalize their development programs and include them in the design and the execution of their development.

- ✗ It will not come from a top-down, performance review-driven development program.
- ✗ It will not come from a one-size-fits-all training program.

It will come from a bottom up, self-directed, personalized learning approach to identifying and closing skill gaps using competency models and/or job task analysis data.

Let's look at how you can solve this problem in 3 steps.

Step 1: Develop a Competency Model

Communicate what is expected from each employee with a role-based competency model that is easy to understand, access, and measure against. The competency model identifies the skill requirements that are expected from someone in a particular role, and also should define how to separate "good" from "great". They need to:

- Understand the various levels of proficiency that separate someone who is adequate in that role from someone who is an expert in that role.
- Gain access to the model easily so that they can refer to it as often as needed as they grow in their role.
- Easily measure themselves against the competencies in the model to help guide them in their development efforts.

Why are competency based learning models more necessary than ever before? Companies have always needed to create competitive advantage, so a competency model has always had value. What's different is that:

- As the pace of change has accelerated, so have the skills required to be successful continue to change.
- To survive today, companies must continuously innovate, which only increases the changing skills required.

- People stay in the same job for less time, and therefore people need to be able to become “great” without as much experience as they had in the past.
- New workers entering the workforce want to be able to make an impact more quickly – they want to know how to be “great” right away and are motivated to get there.

If you don’t know what skills are required to be “great”, that is, you don’t have a competency model for each job, how can you innovate, keep up with a changing global environment, maximize your human capital, and make employees motivated to stay?

Step 2: Create a learner-centric professional development environment

With less time, less money, and fewer resources, the challenge to keep pace with increased learning requirements are difficult enough without the complications associated with disengaged learners. As such, it is imperative that L&D leaders create an environment where employees can own their own development and be motivated and inspired to see it through. Without such an environment, L&D will continue to struggle to impact business results and the perception that they are less than strategic. The key to creating such an environment where the employee is motivated to own their own development is through learning personalization. Personalized learning allows the learner to have a **voice** in what they need, and a **choice** in how they get it.

In a personalized learning environment, the learner:

- Self-directs the learning process
- Owns their own development
- Has a voice in what type of learning they engage
- Pursues learning that is relevant to their needs and goals
- Builds a network of mentors to supplement their learning requirements
- Seeks task/skill level proficiency in a competency based system

The benefits of a learner-centric professional development environment that accompanies a personalized learning approach are numerous.

- The employee benefits because they know what is expected of them and they are motivated to own their own development. They are engaged in the learning process because they see relevance to their job and their career.
- Management benefits from more effective results from changed behavior that accompanies an employee more engaged in the professional development process.
- Executive leadership benefits by increasing their chances of executing corporate strategy effectively through enhanced skill sets within each role of the organization.

- L&D benefits by actually impacting business results and being invited to the strategy table with senior executive leadership.

Step 3: Leverage technology to deliver on the promise of Personalized Learning

If personalized learning has such promise, then why haven't more companies pursued the holy grail of a learner-centric environment? It is usually because they don't have the time or labor resources to create it manually. Or they have not had the technology or the tools to facilitate it, despite their investments in Talent Management and Learning Management systems. That is until now.

The promise of personalized learning can be obtained through technology for creating a learner-centric environment called the **Self-Directed Learning Engine™** (SDLE).

This self-directed learning technology:

- Enables the employee to assess themselves against the requirements of the job they have and the job they want next
- Allows them to have a **voice** into what development they need and a **choice** in how they can experience it
- Builds them a personalized roadmap for improving their skills in minutes instead of months, delivering relevancy to their job, their career, and their aspirations
- Prevents them from wasting time searching for the right course and spending time with training activities that are not relevant to their specific needs, which are two of the primary contributors to learner disengagement
- Allows them to own their own development, creating buy in to the process, the lack of which is probably the single biggest factor contributing to learner disengagement

The SDLE allows the professional development process to be removed from the annual performance review process, which according to research, is the among the most damaging and disheartening processes employees face each year. In the article "Becoming Irresistible: A New Model for Employee Engagement"² they found that only 8% of the companies surveyed think the annual performance review process is worthwhile, yet companies that continue to drive professional development through this process wonder why they have an engagement issue.

² "Becoming Irresistible: A New Model for Employee Engagement ". Deloitte Review. Issue 16. 2015.

We take a different approach. The SDLE allows the manager to use the data from the system to **coach** and **develop** their people instead of **rank** and **rate** them, further increasing the engagement on behalf of the learner.

This technology also delivers strategic skills intelligence to the business. By aggregating the assessment data across the employee population, Learning & Development leaders gain tremendous insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the workforce. With this insight, executive leadership is better equipped to make appropriate strategy decisions about what campaigns will succeed and which ones are at risk. L&D leadership also gains tremendous insight from the assessment data into the development needs of the organizations they support. The SDLE essentially serves as a demand planning system for L&D by equipping them with strategic data about what training is actually needed, where it is needed, and what can happen if it is not available. Armed with this kind of insight, L&D will find itself a strategic business partner to executive leaders, and a key player in conversations about the capabilities of the organization to execute strategy.

Summary

With personalized learning enabled by the Self-Directed Learning Engine, the domino effect on engagement goes in a positive direction.

- Learners are more engaged.
- Managers are better equipped to coach and see the benefits of changed behavior.
- Executive leadership sees the benefits of engaged learners through improved skill sets and the accompanying ability to execute corporate strategy.
- And L&D benefits from all of the above, a more engaged audience, a more supportive management team, and a new seat at the strategy table with executive leadership.

If you want to see how personalized learning can resolve your Learning & Development engagement problem, contact us.

About SkillDirector

SkillDirector provides technology that helps organizations and associations close their skill gaps and drive employee engagement through personalized learning. We do this by enabling each person to own their own development, for the job they have or the job they want next, providing each person with the opportunity to grow at their own pace.



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