The Modern Corporate Learner

How Are They Different?
How Must L&D Adapt?
About the Author

Bryan Austin has been a citizen of the corporate learning industry for over 25 years. He was a member of the leadership teams for Skillsoft, NETg, Kaplan Financial and AchieveGlobal, among others. Bryan founded Game On! Learning in early 2012 and served as its Chief Game Changer. Game On! Learning became a reselling partner for mLevel in 2013, and Bryan began to realize mLevel's huge potential to improve the effectiveness of corporate learning. He also came to believe that mLevel provides significant leverage to corporate L&D organizations as they seek to manage tight budgets and scarce resources while improving service levels to the businesses they serve.

Bryan accepted an invitation to join mLevel in 2015. A pioneer in the rapidly emerging microlearning, game-based and mobile learning space, Bryan serves mLevel and their customers as Vice President of Learning Innovation.

Author’s Note...

There is certainly no question that learners in today’s corporations face many challenges as they continue to develop their knowledge, experience and skills to both further their careers and bring more value to their employers.

As the employment landscape quickly evolves, however, what are the implications of this rapid evolution on effectively developing talent and performance in our workforces?

This white paper will reveal the attributes of today’s "Modern Corporate Learner" while examining the significance of those characteristics on Learning & Development (L&D). These insights will not only help your organization stay ahead of the curve, but more importantly, show you how to adopt new strategies to support learners both now and in the years to come.
Contents

4 The Modern Corporate Learner
4 “Generational” Impact
5 “Business Landscape” Impact
6 Developing Modern Corporate Learners: The Challenges
8 Developing Modern Corporate Learners: The Imperatives
8 Enable Continuous Learning
9 Fully Embrace 70:20:10
9 Ramp up Learning Engagement
10 Leverage “Agile” Learning
10 Meet Them Where They Are (Social Media)
11 Communicate About Learning Using WIIFM
12 Conclusions
13 Terms & Articles Referenced/Researched
The Modern Corporate Learner

Those of us involved in Learning & Development for the last ten years (or longer) can attest to the rapid evolution of the workforces we have served, and continue to serve, over the past decade. Let’s examine the two most significant reasons for this.

“Generational” Impact

Part of it, of course, is generational. I have done extensive research on millennials and how L&D must evolve to leverage the astute characteristics of this growing segment of our workforce.

The differences in perception between how “we” in HR/L&D view millennials and how millennials view themselves is very intriguing to us at mLevel. Below is the recap of a recent survey conducted by Beyond.com that illustrates the difference in perception that seasoned HR professionals have about millennials compared to how millennial job seekers view themselves. 6,361 individuals took the survey in all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Millennials Describe Themselves</th>
<th>How HR Professionals Describe Millennials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent who say they are:</td>
<td>Percent who say Millennials are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65% People-savvy</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35% Tech-savvy</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82% Loyal to Their Employers</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14% Fun-loving</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86% Hard Working</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The differences in the self-perception of millennials versus the perspectives of HR professionals is quite stark, especially as it relates to the topics of people skills, loyalty and work ethic. For the purposes of this white paper, we won’t assess which perception is more accurate. I’d venture to say, however, that the differences in perception would probably be similar if we traveled back in time and compared the outlook HR professionals had on the baby boomer generation as young adults versus the perception baby boomers had of themselves at that time. Thus, this distinct difference in perception is likely inevitable for every generation as they enter the workforce.
Studies from the last few years clearly show that corporate training, as it’s currently delivered, is only marginally effective for the younger generations in our workforce today. What has been less clear, until now, is how L&D must change in order to meet the younger generations’ needs.

“Business Landscape” Impact

For the last several years, I have closely followed the writing and research of Josh Bersin and Bersin by Deloitte. About a year ago, Bersin by Deloitte published an infographic titled *Meet the Modern Learner*. It is available on a complimentary basis to both Bersin members and non-members, and can be accessed via your Bersin login (or a guest login) from this link: https://www.bersin.com/Practice/Detail.aspx?id=18071. I encourage each reader of this white paper to review and download it.

The chart below details a few of the key points relating to employees and how they function in today’s business landscape as well as their behaviors, habits and preferences.

Increasingly, most L&D organizations get “sufficient” access to employees for training only during their onboarding programs and, depending on the industry, regulated and mandatory training requirements. Beyond that, the *Modern Corporate Learner*—reflecting both the generational and business landscape that define their behaviors, habits and preferences—is a very challenging target for our learning programs.

It is challenging indeed, but who among us in L&D doesn’t love a challenge? Therefore, let’s briefly look at some of the issues resulting from the nature of the *Modern Corporate Learner* as described above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your average learner does this every day...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of times online every day</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early days of the Internet: <strong>5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today: <strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distraction/Attention Span</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Won’t watch a video for longer than: <strong>4 minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlock their smartphones hourly up to: <strong>9 times</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impatience</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of time that online designers have to grab someone’s attention before they click away: <strong>5-10 seconds</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interruptions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers now get interrupted as frequently as every: <strong>5 minutes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time for Training &amp; Development</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1% of a typical work week.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where Employees Work</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30% of employees do most of their work outside of their employer’s location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where Employees Learn</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engines are used up to 40% more than online courses for on-the-job learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How Employees Learn</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80% of workforce learning happens via on-the-job interactions with peers, teammates and managers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Empowerment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only 38% of employees say they have opportunities for learning &amp; growth at their workplace.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing Modern Corporate Learners: The Challenges

The business landscape is shifting at an unprecedented rate. There seem to be as many recommendations out there on how to adapt as there are recommenders! What is clear, however, is that L&D must change their current methods for developing workforce talent. The survival of corporate L&D functions likely depends on it.

Why?

Per Josh Bersin’s opening keynote at the Bersin IMPACT 2016 conference, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) for surveyed L&D functions is -31. You don’t have to know a lot about Net Promoter Scores to figure out that -31 is not a good score. In fact, other research shows L&D has one of the lowest Net Promoter Scores of any corporate function measured. Some of the data found in Bersin by Deloitte’s Meet the Modern Learner infographic (referenced earlier) indicates the cause for these dismal outcomes.

That being said, the last thing L&D professionals can afford is to be complacent. This includes individuals on the business side in addition to those of us on the vendor side as well. Listed below are a few specific challenges we all face in L&D.

• Demands from the business to make learning program durations shorter & shorter. This point, despite what our experience might tell us, encompasses the necessary time required to acquire, cognitively assimilate and apply the learning. For example, have you ever left a learning program requirements meeting wondering how you were going to meet the expectations for improved performance given the limited amount of time allocated for employees to complete the training at hand?

• Employees stay away in droves. Elliott Masie, Founder of The MASIE Center, is tracking a sharp rise in the abandonment rate in eLearning courses. Maisie’s findings show that there is often in excess of 85% abandonment rates amongst learners registered for training. In other words, only 15% of employees complete the learning programs assigned to them. This statistic includes “required” programs. Statistics focused on learning completion rates are hard to come by partly because the numbers indicated in the reports generally aren’t very impressive. For this reason, most organizations (be they learning content vendors or corporate learning functions) aren’t keen on publishing them. When I’ve shared the preceding percentage from Maisie’s Learning TRENDS (issue 903) with L&D professionals, they’re generally not surprised.

• Ample lead times to develop new learning programs continue to shrink. The business needs the new learning program urgently, but the program development process is sometimes hindered by late starts, impeded access to SMEs, extended sign-off turnarounds, and much more. To makes matters worse, the program launch dates are typically fixed and
cannot be postponed to a later date. In those situations, compromises in program quality and/or scope must be made. Most of us realize that L&D serves the business (not the other way around), and are commissioned to do the best we can under these constraints. But that doesn’t mean we don’t realize the performance implications.

• Those learning “chunks” are getting smaller and smaller!
  In regards to the online learning segment of L&D, were you around when the raging debate was whether eLearning courses lasting less than one hour could be worthwhile? Similarly, do you remember when most IT online courses powered by pre-packaged eLearning library providers were four to six hours in length while soft skills online courses lasted “only” two to three hours? At the time, we marveled at the fact that these online alternatives proved less time consuming than their classroom equivalents. Little did we know that this would become an unfavorable trend considering that today the target duration of an online course developed within an organization ranges between 15 and 30 minutes long.

• It is more difficult to engage learners given all of the distractions.
  If employees are not “engaged” in the learning, then they really aren’t learning. This is the primary focus of another mLevel white paper titled “The Brain, Neuro-Science, and Effective Learning.” If you’re interested in reviewing it, click here to download it for free: http://www.mlevel.com/brainscience/. The gist of this challenge is that the brain must be activated to certain energy and focus levels for learning to happen. This challenge has become even more difficult to overcome considering that learners are unlocking their smartphones up to nine times per hour according to Bersin’s research.

Given the above challenges, do we in L&D even have a chance to succeed? Should we start looking for a new career?

Don’t abandon all hope yet! The current landscape may be more difficult to navigate than it was a decade ago, but many of the organizations I work with now are doing a masterful job of addressing the challenges associated with developing the Modern Corporate Learner.

There are two clear “clients” of L&D:

For L&D organizations to flourish in the coming years, we must serve both “masters” well. The mLevel organization is preparing a series of thought leadership articles, blogs and white papers
about how L&D must evolve to not only remain relevant, but to significantly increase its value to both learners and the business.

Developing Modern Corporate Learners: The Imperatives

In this section, we will share insights on the evolution required of L&D as it relates specifically to the Modern Corporate Learner. Many of the organizations we work with are already well on their way in this journey and perhaps yours is, too. Nonetheless, we view the following tenets as the most strategic approaches for providing value to the Modern Corporate Learner.

Enable Continuous Learning

Continuous learning is a very hot topic throughout the industry, and there are several good reasons why. The concept of continuous learning means more than just having employees “learn continuously.” A better description for continuous learning is that it’s the way an organization focuses its resources and culture to encourage learning. Often times this is accomplished by organizations that think outside the box and meet key employee constituencies where they are (for instance not requiring them to trek to where L&D wants them to go - be it a classroom or an LMS).

Continuous learning includes content managed by L&D, support tools, knowledge bases, search engines, learning that happens on the job, and the exchange of knowledge between managers, colleagues and/or mentors.

From an L&D point of view, it means expanding options beyond formal learning as well as making learning and knowledge available on-demand in bite-sized chunks (aka microlearning). It also means making learning and knowledge accessible anytime, anywhere, and from any device.

Learning portals and corporate universities are still ubiquitous, but many organizations are either looking to simplify access to them or broaden the types of learning available from them so that they include non-traditional tools for building knowledge, too.

At a conference recently, I had the privilege of observing an impressive presentation by a medical device company that has implemented a subject matter expert (SME) “channel” that included hundreds of short videos created by the SMEs and others. Its purpose is to help field engineers solve installation issues and troubleshooting procedures for their devices. All of the information is available via keyword searches to allow the person at a customer location to
watch a short troubleshooting video, or to connect to others that had encountered a similar issue or challenge in the field. For example, a tech who solves a problem in China could record a video on the spot and post it so that others could access it when they encounter a similar problem.

As a result, these types of videos then become great resources for like-minded techs located around the world!

**Fully Embrace 70:20:10**

If you’re only partially up to speed on the 70:20:10 Model for Learning and Development, please check the last page of this paper. There you will find references to a couple of excellent articles that explain the formula behind 70:20:10, and why it’s important. The 70:20:10 model holds that formal learning, traditionally provided by L&D, represents about 10% of what employees learn; about 70% is job-related experience and 20% is learned via interactions with others.

Does your organization have a formal 70:20:10 strategy? If not, rest assured, it’s happening anyway in your organization.

L&D has the opportunity to take a lead role to integrate nearly ALL learning into the talent development and learning fold over the coming years. Set the tone by promoting holistic learning, and evolving your learning technology to capture more information about the experiential and environmental learning that occurs throughout your organization. Of course we realize that this may take some time, but we strongly believe that directional progress is important. Regardless of the source, give associates credit for what they know and what they learn whether it be internally, on the job, or via other experiences. Give the learner credit for as much of their learning as you can. This credit is meaningful to the *Modern Corporate Learner*.

**Ramp up Learning Engagement**

Passive learning activities that involve reading, listening or watching something followed by a short assessment quiz don’t make the learning (or the brain!) active. These types of learning activities are barely keeping the learners’ attention now, much less in the future.

On the plus side, nearly all learning designers recognize that passive learning activities are ineffective. Unfortunately, they are simply too constrained by short timeframes, inadequate budgets and insufficient design resources to address the issue.

That said, many organizations still use the historic course model of 80% passive activities (reading, listening or watching) and 20% too-simple exercises and assessments. But it has to change.
Why is this change necessary? Neuro-scientific research suggests that if the brain doesn’t reach a certain level of activity and engagement during the training, learning won’t take place. In result, the learner’s retention of the content plummets shortly after the “training” occurs. mLevel advocates a learning model where the learner spends 80% or more of the learning experience engaging with brief highly-interactive activities that keep their full attention and leverage characteristics like individual and team competition to stimulate emotion. It is way past time for corporate learning (both learning that’s “pushed” to the employee or “pulled” on-demand by the employee) to become challenging, interactive, and fun.

When L&D advances from deploying learning that is created with too little time and too few resources, its poor perception by the Modern Corporate Learner will change dramatically. If you (the reader) are not sure how training that meets our 80% engagement model can be developed and deployed given the time, budget and resource constraints you now face, reach out, we’ll be glad to show you how.

Leverage “Agile” Learning

When it comes to organizational learning, L&D is beginning the move beyond the view that “one size fits all.” Most L&D professionals know this, but again, archaic learning development tools hamper their progress. New generation tools (yes, such as mLevel) incorporate adaptive learning, microlearning, mobile-ready learning and other innovations that give learners instant access to learning that allows them to create a “fast path” through the learning, that suits their needs and takes into account their existing knowledge.

Is one five minute microlearning activity all I need at this moment? Can I take an assessment that will determine what I know and don’t know, and then help identify learning to address my knowledge gaps? Can L&D review analytics dashboards to identify knowledge gaps across a given constituency (such as a sales force or a call center) and develop and deploy learning to remediate those gaps the following day?

“Agile” learning enables the Modern Corporate Learner to get what they need and get back to work faster than ever before. “Agile” learning also allows the L&D organization to precisely identify knowledge or skill gaps and respond with microlearning to address those identified gaps in a remarkably short period of time.

Meet Them Where They Are (Social Media)

I’ve recently met with some organizations that have invested heavily in building learning networks in Facebook and other social media networks. The reason why? It is evident if
you refer back to Bersin’s *Meet the Modern Learner* infographic summary from earlier in this document. Specifically, the item that mentions that many employees unlock their phones up to nine times per hour.

In short, the power of social media in learning is *at least partly* due to the strong influence the app notifications have on the learner.

Those notifications are pushed by the apps to the locked screen. The employee then unlocks the screen and the conditioned response to the notifications for each app appears, as seen in the illustration below.

- I’ve got a text.
- I’ve got a Twitter notification.
- Or Facebook.
- Or LinkedIn.
- Or YouTube.
- Or Skype.
- Or Flickr.
- Or Pinterest.
- Or Instagram.
- Maybe even – a few emails.

This is the world of not only the *Modern Corporate Learner*, but of all of us! Notifications are a big reason our attention span has shrunk to a maximum of five minutes on average.

That said, social media has tremendous power for learning *way beyond* the conditioned response of the app notification. A great advantage provided by social media to workplace learning is the ability to create virtual communities where everyone on the team can interact, regardless of their location. This approach is especially appealing to corporate learners because it allows them to interact in essentially the same way they do outside of work.

Whether the learning leverages mixed media, articles or conversations, social media offers the opportunity to have either one, some, or all of these features at very little cost.

**Communicate About Learning Using WIIFM**

I was attending a panel discussion at a conference recently when a question near the end of the session brought complete silence to the room. An attendee asked, “Is there a place for learning and development professionals in the future of business?”

After some considered thought, the C-Level learning execs on the panel said, “yes, there is….“ But interestingly, the only competency mentioned by them that is currently part of the “go-to” suite in L&D was *learning design skill*. The one, however, they spent the most time on in the conversation that followed was *marketing skill*. 
One of the big contributors to the deplorable 15% learning completion rate that Elliott Masie reported is that L&D often does not do an adequate job of communication around “push” learning initiatives. mLevel has partnered with many of our clients’ L&D teams to create a communication plan for an initiative that promotes a clear “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me) mentality to the learner. As a result, we have seen significant increases in participation and completion rates within those initiatives.

We strongly suggest L&D think of learning launches as a “campaign” of impactful communication using proven marketing principles. Would you like more information on our best practices in this area? Email me at bryan.austin@mlevel.com using your company email address and I’ll forward you our Learning Initiative Communication & Marketing Best Practices Guide.

Marketing-oriented communication skills and best practices are a key survival skill for L&D organizations and professionals. Several months of hard work go into creating effective learning programs. That should not be put at risk by failing to spend the relatively brief amount of time it takes to create and execute an effective communication/marketing plan. Employees need to know the learning is available and essentially why it is important to them.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Most of us in L&D are from a different generation than the fastest growing segments of our workforce (although, personally, I’m admitting nothing in this paper). In all honesty, though, I am very fortunate to have a millennial daughter – she helps keep my perspectives on my chosen profession fresh and current. Unfortunately, as she enters today’s workforce, she is likely to find a learning environment quite foreign to the rest of her world.

The future value of L&D will be determined by our ability to “meet learners where they are”, both in terms of their jobs and their learning (and living) preferences.

We have a big choice to make in L&D. We can continue to change slowly while our perception, not to mention our Net Promoter Scores, further erode by the Modern Corporate Learner. I believe,
however, that L&D is becoming increasingly ready to implement the changes required to have a more positive impact on the Modern Corporate Learner.

We see it every day in our mLevel customer base, which includes dozens of household names, incredible brands, and some of the largest corporations in the world. I hope you see it in your organization as well.

There is much written today about the hyper-accelerated speed of business. Is your organization’s L&D organization evolving as rapidly? The mLevel organization will be providing a significant amount of thought leadership on the evolution of the L&D organization over the balance of 2016 in the form of more white papers, articles and blog posts. Our goal is to be one of the organizations leading these changes in L&D.

If you have any thoughts you’d like to share, please feel free to email me directly at bryan.austin@mlevel.com. I welcome your feedback and input. In fact, we would love to include your success stories in our future writings on how you are innovating L&D at your organization.

Terms & Articles referenced/researched

Beyond.com Survey Uncovers How Veteran HR Professionals Really Feel about Job Seekers from Millennial Generation

Meet the Modern Learner (Infographic)
https://www.bersin.com/Practice/Detail.aspx?id=18071

Net Promoter Scores

eLearning Course Abandonment

The 70:20:10 Model for Learning and Development

Three Reasons We Need 70:20:10 Now
http://www.dashe.com/blog/blended-learning/three-reasons-need-70-20-10-now/

The Brain, Neuro-Science, and Effective Learning
http://www.mlevel.com/brainscience/

How to Train Employees Using Social Media
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