

# TEAM-BASED LEARNING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Collaborative online learning experiences are a powerful way to solve today's high-stakes, high-impact business challenges. There is real oomph for corporations in team-based learning that leverages cohorts and creates lasting connections outside the org chart's deliniations. The technology is available to harness that power for high-quality collaborative learning at scale.

So why then are L&D departments overly focused on individual preference, adaptive and personalized content? This trend for programs that isolate individual learners, and place increasing accountability for professional growth on individual workers, in the guise of personal 'empowerment' and preference, neglects the value of team based learning. Why are learning leaders washing their hands of the responsibility of creating group learning opportunities at scale?





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# Introduction

Modern productivity tools and workplace practices increasingly center on teams and networking, because work is becoming more collaborative. Social media has provided the corporate world with models for sharing and developing information and learning collectively online. In addition, there are a plethora of collaboration tools for productivity, such as Microsoft Team, Facebook for Work, Workday, Atlassian, and Slack—all based on a central metaphor of projects and teams. They aim to liberate us from the isolation of a world constrained by our email inbox. And all offer a flexible environment of shared workspaces and threads, where collaboration and transparent communication streams foster and facilitate teamwork and a sense of belonging and organizational purpose.

But counter to these trends we see much of the recent innovation in learning technology and practice focused more on ‘empowering’ and as a consequence isolating the individual. Although aspects of even highly collaborative learning are done “on your own” (reading documents, watching videos, etc.), other technologies that leave the learning experience solitary and abstracted from the work environment miss opportunities to reinforce effective teaming. They also ignore the long-acknowledged value of learning in a cohort.

In this paper we will explore some of the best ways to utilize the vast power of digital learning to make meaningful and necessary connections: learner to learner, learner to content, and content to work.





# Motivation To Learn: Individual Vs. Organization

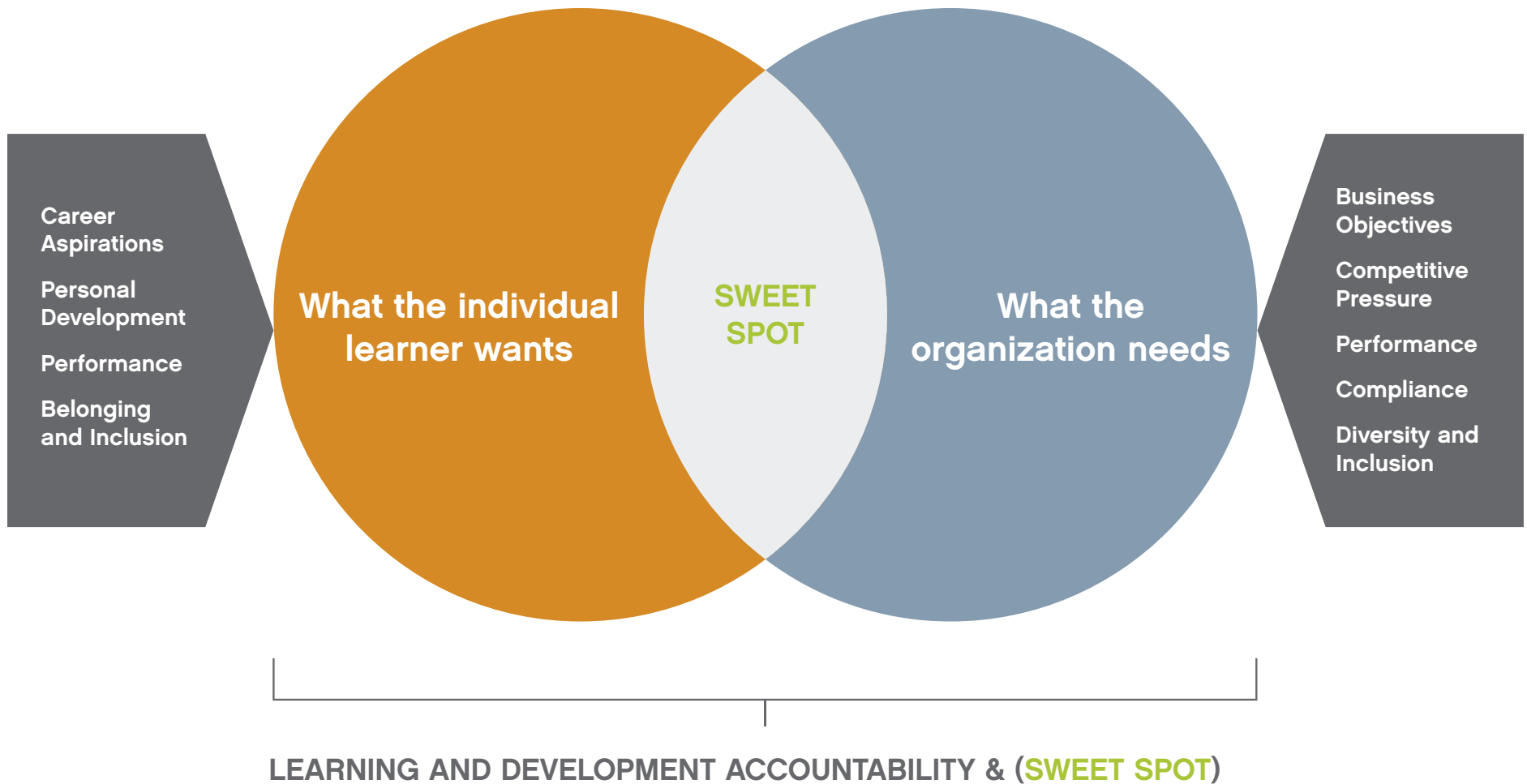
## **WE BELIEVE:**

1. **There is real power for corporations in providing learning opportunities in a cohort.**
2. **The reality of an increasingly team-driven workplace cannot be uncoupled from the learning environment.**
3. **Aligning individual performance to corporate priorities through context and collaboration drives organizational performance.**

The positive shift to recognizing the importance of the learner's experience has been sidetracked by the "Netflixization" of learning. Yes, the learner's experience in an online program should be on par with consumer expectations. But putting the onus of learning motivation, learning absorption, and learning application solely on individual people misses the point when it comes to how work actually gets done. Why should today's employees have to deal with such a disconnect?

Dani Johnson of RedTread Research, in her article "Humanizing Learning," identifies how forward-thinking leaders are leveraging the characteristics that make us uniquely human to make their organizations more competitive. According to her research, which combines anthropological and psychological studies, collaboration is one of the four traits things that separate us from our nearest animal relative (chimps) and, as Machine Learning technology marches us quickly into the fourth industrial revolution, the robots:

# MOTIVATION TO LEARN INDIVIDUAL VS. ORGANIZATION



**‘While other animals collaborate to survive, humans collaborate far longer than it is beneficial to them personally. In common with other animals, we are devoted to ensuring the survival of the next generation. Unlike other animals, we have an innate desire to share information, help our fellow humans, and work together toward something greater, even if we personally won’t see the benefit.’**

But increasingly L&D groups are making Learning a solitary endeavor, relying on large libraries of content that learners self-select. Or they offer subsidies for employees to attend third-party courses or college MOOCs of their choice. Or provide an overwhelming amount of “microlearning” in CRM systems. Or go with learning experience platforms, which operate from the principle that when the individual is empowered to be in charge of their own professional development great things will magically happen. In other words, employees are being told to polish up your growth mindset and be accountable for your own learning, we in L&D are right behind you!

And indeed, at first blush the individual approach sounds compelling, efficient, and employee-centric. But it’s ultimately missing the boat. Collaborative learning experiences are enhanced by individual inputs, and can be a powerful technique to drive learning programs that solve for not only individual upskilling, but, critically, and collectively, high-impact business challenges.

We believe that the trend of L&D departments to “outsource” or “empower” (choose your verb) the responsibility of a learning culture to their learners is not the best way to build a learning culture and truly effect behavior change at the organizational level. Worse, it might be an abdication of L&D’s core job to get the workforce aligned and prepared to support the corporate mission and strategy. At the least it misses the opportunity to build cohesion in a division or across an organization, and only sporadically helps people get their work done better.

Approaches that build networks, strengthen team bonds, and build on the tradition of cohort-based learning with the advantages of a modern digital approach can also foster a vibrant learning culture. In this more holistic setup, when the individual learns the organization changes as well.





# The Answer To The Critical Challenges Facing L&D Leaders

Learning leaders face a myriad of big challenges, not the least of which is how to keep the onus of change management strategies and business trajectories within the purview of the learning organization. Other critical challenges facing leaders today include:

- **Need to create a culture of learning**
- **Need to scale quality learning experiences, at speed**
- **Need to give learners highly relevant, easily applicable online learning experiences**

*Collaborative learning is the way to solve all these challenges.*

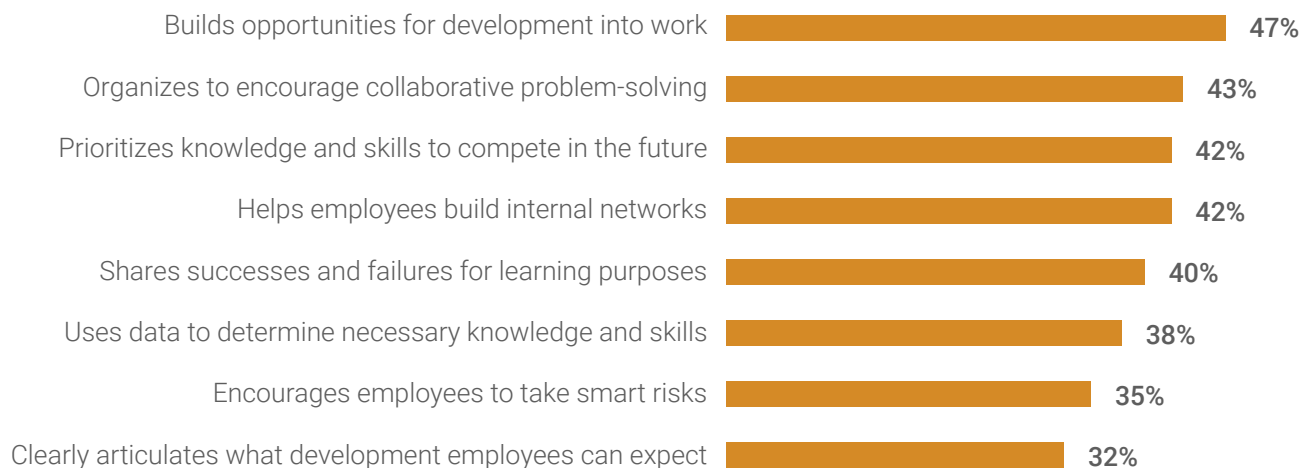
Leaving everything up to the individual is, in our opinion, a risky endeavor when it comes to creating a culture of learning. Individuals have good intentions and are motivated to learn at work, but carving out the time to find what they really need to improve their job performance amongst the overload of options is an unrealistic ask in today's always-on business culture. Learners need context so that the leap from the learning to the work is direct, guided, and therefore easy to make.

In addition, it seems silly to waste the many ways in which digital learning enables peer-to-peer learning and human interaction in a way that traditional classrooms and isolated e-learning just can't. Learning leaders must never lose sight of how people learn best: from each other. Regardless of the modality.

Sharing ideas, best practices, and questions with peers is the way humans learn most effectively. Online learning enables this in a multitude of ways. After all, as Red Thread's research concludes, "As markets require organizations to move more quickly, stories about the what, the how, and the why behind new directions are crucial to nimbleness."

In this e-book we will explore some of the best ways to utilize the vast power of digital learning to make meaningful and necessary connections: learner to learner, learner to content, and content to work.

### Percentage of "agree/strongly agree" responses for the eight critical elements, entire survey population



Source: RedThread Research

# The Focus On Teaming In the Modern Workplace

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## teaming (present participle)

/VERB/

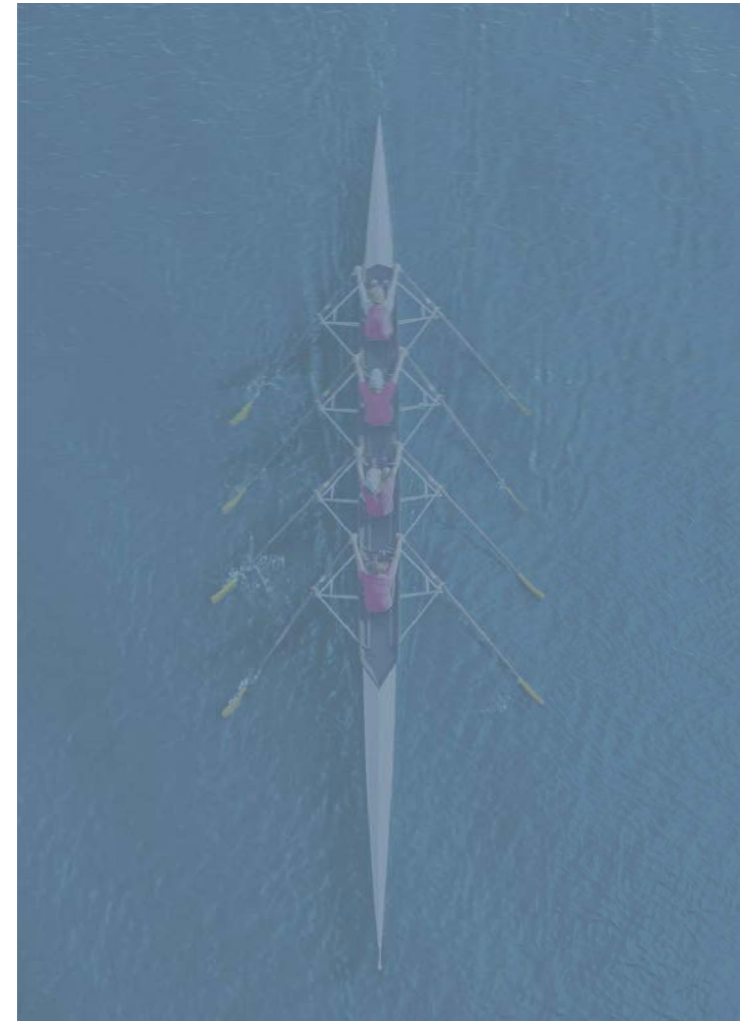
1. come together as a team to achieve a common goal.
- 

Thought leaders are talking about teams in droves. For example, in her book *Teaming*, Professor Amy Edmondson deeply links the concept of learning with teaming as a modern approach to work. She describes teaming as a fluid organizational model that can rapidly learn from and respond to changes and opportunities, an approach that has the act of learning at its very core. But the approach itself needs to be learned and practiced.

**“Simply put, teaming is a way of working that brings people together to generate new ideas, find new answers, and solve problems. But people have to learn to team it doesn’t come naturally in most organizations.”**

An individual team’s composition may change at any given moment given new needs and opportunities. But the techniques for effective collaboration with and across those teams need repeated and deliberate practice. Among the approaches Johnson cites:

- Asking questions
- Sharing information openly
- Seeking and offering help
- Experimenting and reviewing
- Tolerating and talking about mistakes
- Actively seeking and offering feedback



All essential ingredients of any great learning experience and all impossible to do alone!

Rob Cross of the Connected Commons, as well as several other organization network analysts, are researching and unraveling the power of explicit and implicit networks. Real and virtual teams are a profound force that operates in organizations, often decoupled from the shape of org chart. In Cross's excellent article "Collaborative Overload," which looks at how individuals can become choke points in these critical informal networks, he lays out the macro trends:

**"As business becomes increasingly global and cross-functional, silos are breaking down, connectivity is increasing, and teamwork is seen as a key to organizational success. According to data we have collected over the past two decades, the time spent by managers and employees in collaborative activities has ballooned by 50% or more..."**

One implication that he discusses is that certain critical individuals, those in the most in demand by their colleagues, are often the least engaged—burned out by collaborative overload. The point is that building thoughtful and effective personal networks, knowing when and how to collaborate, is a skill. It can and must be studied, learned and practiced, in order to be done in an inclusive and effective way.

How then can digital learning programs and strategies align with and reinforce these concepts of effective teaming? How can we leverage learning programs to help of learners build sustainable and persistent networks, long after the program is finished?





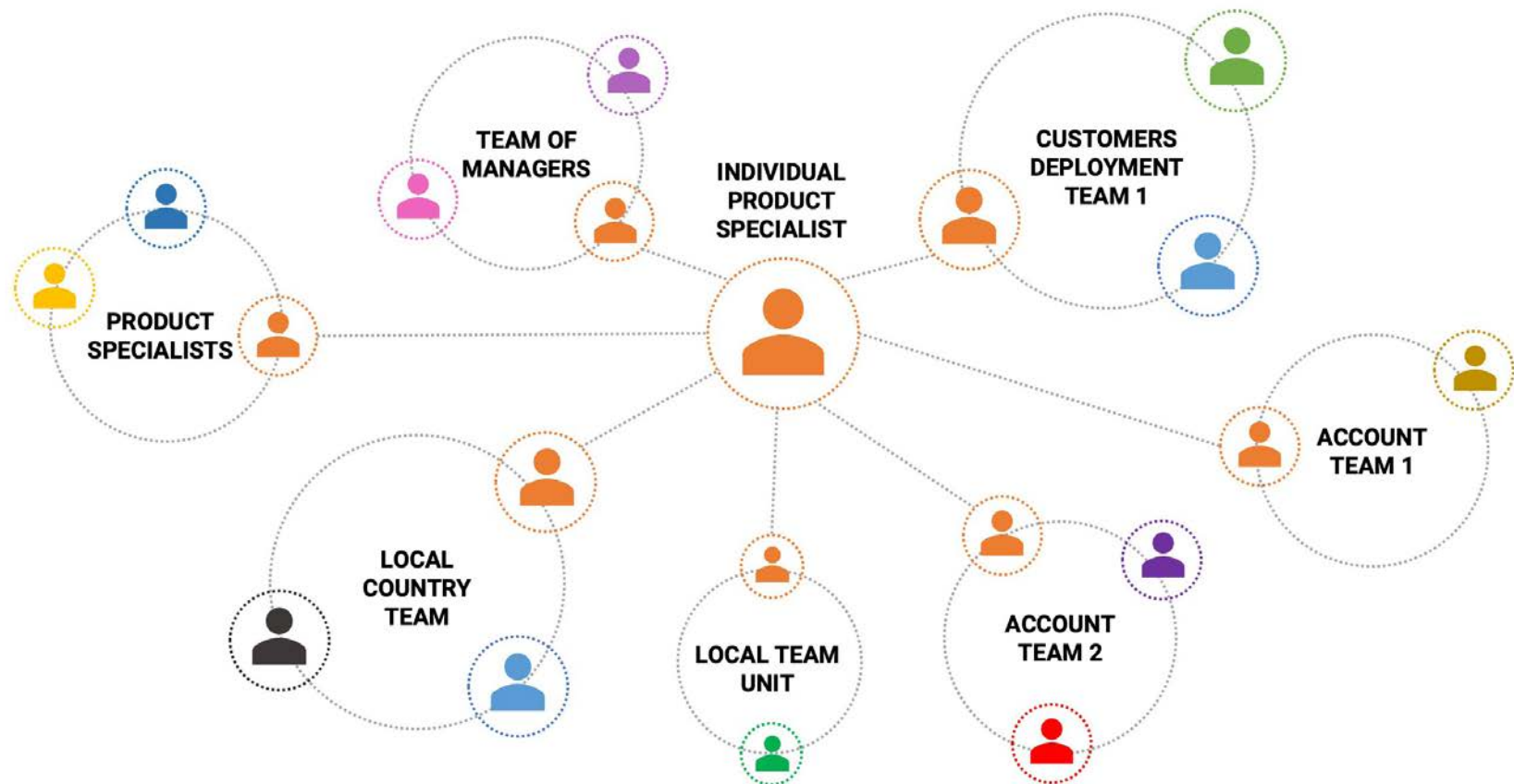
# The Attributes Of Team-Based Learning

We have been learning in cohorts for millennia (i.e. classes), in large part because cohorts can help motivate, focus, and facilitate the learning process. Digital learning breaks down geographical and organizational boundaries to create meaningful work teams for specific challenges.

Teams in business today are fluid and everyone belongs to multiple teams. In addition, there are purpose-built teams designed to come together, solve a problem (learning problem or business problem), then dissolve.



## COMPLEX NETWORK OF TEAMS



# Why is online collaborative learning so powerful?

Because it aligns to modern work practices such as Agile and Scrum, and reflects the reality of teams that form and reform quickly to respond to specific issues and opportunities.

Because it provides peer motivation.

Because it taps the often elusive tacit knowledge of organizations. Because it helps build a strong learning culture and supports inclusive work practices. Because it maps across networks and creates new ones.

Because it unearths and connects pockets of expertise that help learners on the job.

And because it forms persistent relationships across immediate and secondary teams.

## **Attributes of modern learning technology which can be harnessed for collaborative learning experiences:**

- Learning in cohorts (determined by program timeframe, physical geography, company division, role, or organization-wide)
- Learning applied to create real-work products instead of “check me” quizzes
- Individual and group assignments which add up to a targeted learning goal
- Team-based workspaces for online collaboration during the learning experience
- Peer review, which harnesses wisdom of the crowds as well as offers coworkers empathy and support
- Mentors and moderators at group and team level to guide discussions and add context
- Time-bound but semi-synchronous programs, allowing for individuals to learn when they learn best and collaborate without constraints, but with a motivational deadline



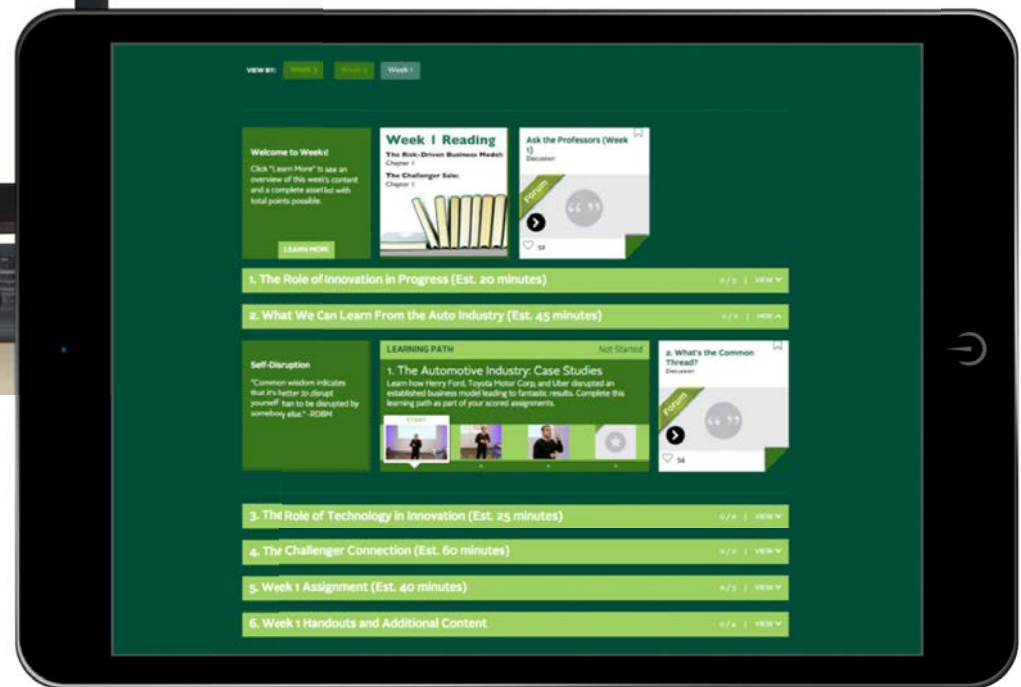
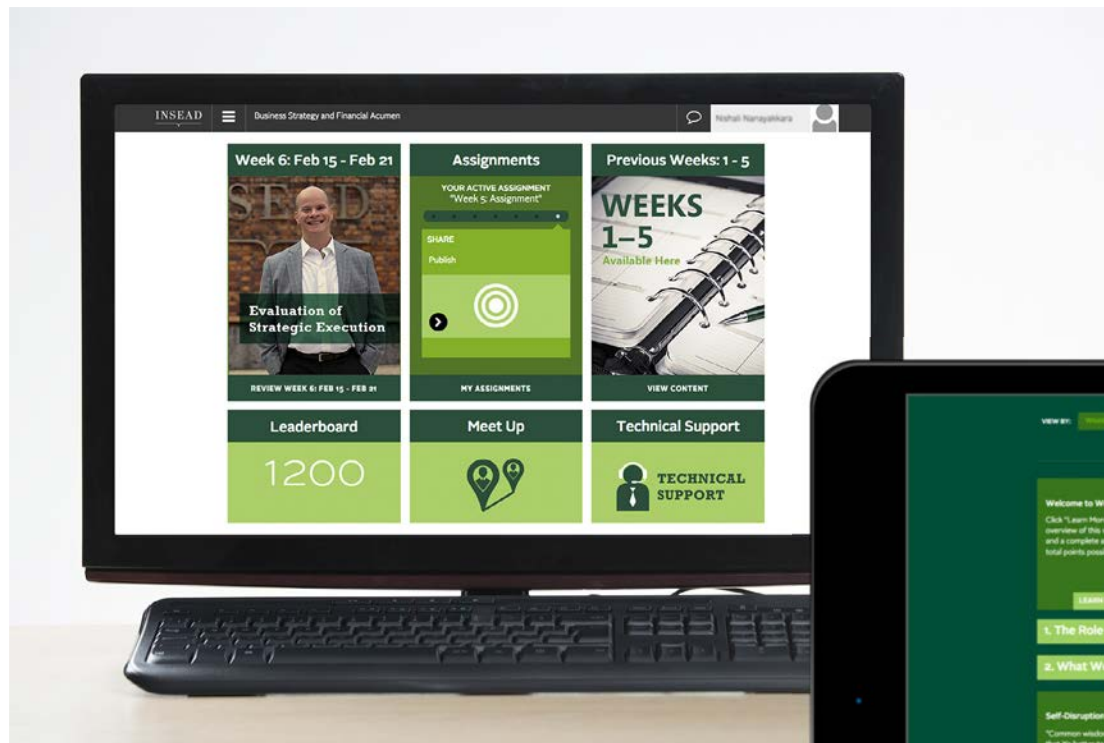


# Learner to Learner Connections: Example

Microsoft needed a new training regimen for their global sales teams to support the organization's overall business strategy paradigm shift to a mobile-first, cloud-first company. For the sales team, this meant a change from selling to an IT manager to selling to a business decision maker, an audience requiring a very different approach by the global salesforce. Microsoft teamed with Intrepid and global business schools INSEAD and Wharton to deliver a 3-course "Microsoft Business School" using a then-revolutionary corporate MOOC approach.

Learners were able to connect with peers across the globe trying to solve similar problems – for instance a seller in Latin America exchanging ideas about selling cloud solutions to railway companies with a seller in Africa with whom they would never have had interpersonal contact in a classroom or typical e-learning course.

In addition, because everyone's assignment "field reports" were available for review by the entire cohort, ideas from one department flowed across to the rest easily, sparking new ways of thinking and solving the challenges inherent in this massive shift in how sellers at Microsoft needed to approach their jobs.



# Learner to Content Connections: Example

It's one thing to launch a bold strategic plan. But it's another thing entirely to deliver that bold strategic plan to every professional in your company so that they not only understand it, but know how to execute it in their everyday jobs and feel empowered and excited to do so.

A venerable global consumer goods manufacturing firm delivered the largest portion of their strategic change management leadership development cascade digitally, placing leadership content from a prestigious business school in context in an online collaborative environment.

Individuals had the opportunity to engage with other mid-level managers in meaningful ways – all focused on how to disseminate the business strategy's key principles. Company executives would respond to discussion posts, generating even greater insights through further back and forth. Each module's "mission" challenged learners to apply new learning to their departments.

Learners reported that the platform activities made the content come alive – they were no longer just passive receivers, but were challenged with applying this world-class content to their jobs.

The company also added motivation and prestige to the business school's rich content by incorporating recorded video segments from senior executives relating to each module's focus.

In addition, company leaders served as online community coaches by participating in online discussions for each module, answering questions, pre-recording video segments, providing general support and, most importantly, encouraging learners to complete the program.

Discussion forums posed questions relating to the content, but always within the context of the company's business and the learners' day-to-day jobs. For instance, one discussion thread was called "What Keeps You Up at Night?" and asked employees to reflect on what aspects of the business strategy concern them most.



# Content to Work Connections: Example

A global management consulting firm with a highly competitive workplace captured and shared intrinsic legacy knowledge with an online collaborative course. The program leveraged both face-to-face and online coaching from tenured partner mentors to increase the client engagement skills newly-appointed partners lacked. The key: centering the assignments around creating real work products for actual critical client prospects. The “coaching pods” included both cohort and mentor review of the assignments, with insights and takeaways shared across cohorts.

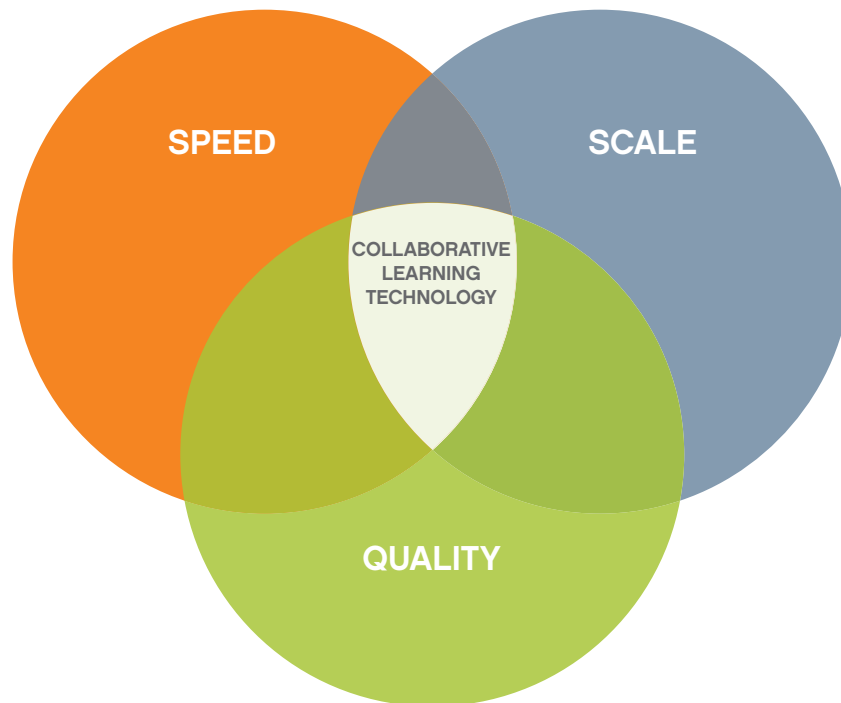
One of the unexpected ROI from this program was junior partners learning who across the company are subject matter experts they can turn to in the future when specific client opportunities arise. The peer-to-peer interaction within the program allowed for new and lasting connections to be made across divisions and reporting structures, in a way that enhanced the ability of junior partners to sell more effectively.



# Balancing Scale And Speed With Quality

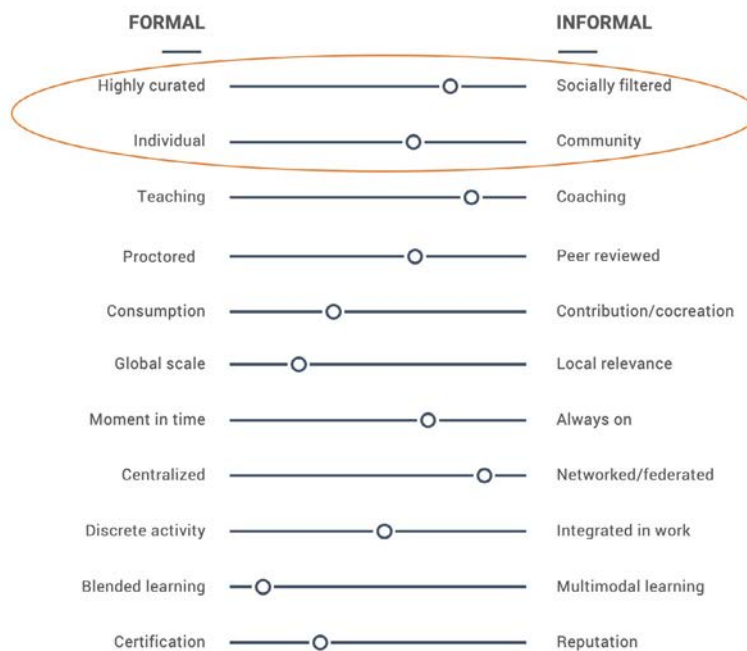
## Among the downsides of the “individual responsibility” approach:

- Learning leaders can't guide the learning culture to align with corporate goals and opportunities
- Disconnect between genericized learning and work context
- Isolation, and the limitations of learning entirely by yourself
- Lack of peer-to-peer learning, mentoring, and connection-making
- Lack of scale: ensuring the same message and training is getting to everyone across a department or whole company





Collaborative learning technologies which utilize discussion forums, “liking” and sharing of user-generated content, leaderboards and light gamification, peer review, and other peer-to-peer interaction opportunities give learning leaders the magical intersection of scale, speed, and quality, all in a way that helps learners focus on learning and human interactions in a world that is increasingly automated. Collaborative learning, in which new networks outside the limitations of the org chart are formed, is how you can drive transformation and alignment at scale and speed without sacrificing quality, and leverage the power of compelling individual learning experiences in the context of a common organizational alignment.



# Conclusion

We believe it's a shirking of corporate L&D's primary function to "outsource" everything to their learners. Leaving it all up to the individual doesn't build a learning culture, doesn't build cohesion in a division or organization, and only sporadically helps people get their work done better.

Surveys saying people prefer to learn by themselves are missing the nuances of modern work. The preference towards learning by themselves, we believe, speaks to the modern workers' desire to learn at their own pace rather than be pulled out of their job for a specific period of time that may or may not be highly inconvenient to their work duties. It does not mean, as many conclude, that collaborative learning is on the outs with modern learners. Quite the opposite.

The most powerful elements of digital learning enable human-level connection and teamwork. This is the way of business learning's future, because it's the way business gets done. The best path forward for learning leaders is to follow the example of successful collaborative online programs and align business practices and learning approaches ever more closely, so that work and learning, and the application of learning to work, become one and the same.



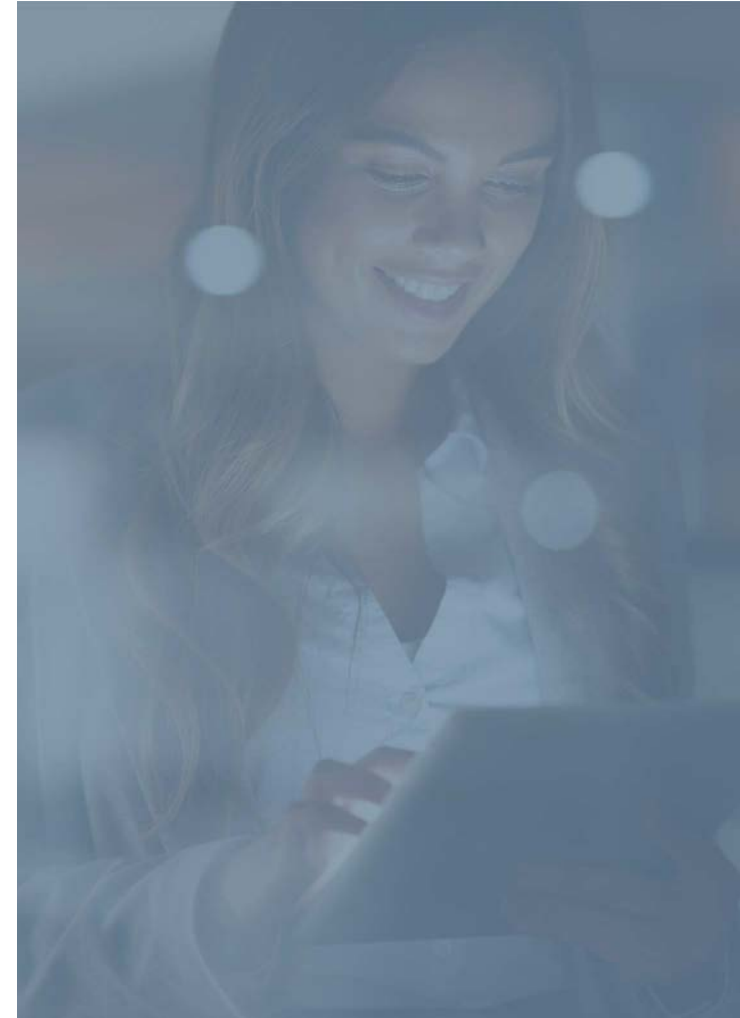
# Appendix

## **Learning Futures**

The Learning Futures Group is a rapidly-expanding global network of high-skill, high-energy veterans of the workplace learning and learning technology fields, with a focus on offering practical strategies to help organizations rethink their Learning and Development approach in the face of historic workplace disruption and change. Our skill base is composed of decades of experience at some of America's biggest technology companies creating change, in education, content creation and thought leadership. We are also fearless collaborators and believe in the power of the network and the team.

## **Intrepid by VitalSource**

Intrepid is the collaborative learning platform that empowers organizations to solve high stakes business challenges through engaging and applied learning at scale. We are disrupting old-school approaches to corporate training that simply focus on delivering content. Opportunities for real-world practice and peer-to-peer collaboration add the critical human element, radically improving learner engagement in the process. Which in turn results in amazing organizational improvement. An intuitive and vibrant UI helps to deliver an experience that can support twenty or twenty-thousand users. We've helped clients achieve tangible business results including increasing sales, reducing new hire cycle times, increasing speed and impact of strategic change initiatives, increasing employee engagement, reducing training costs, and more.

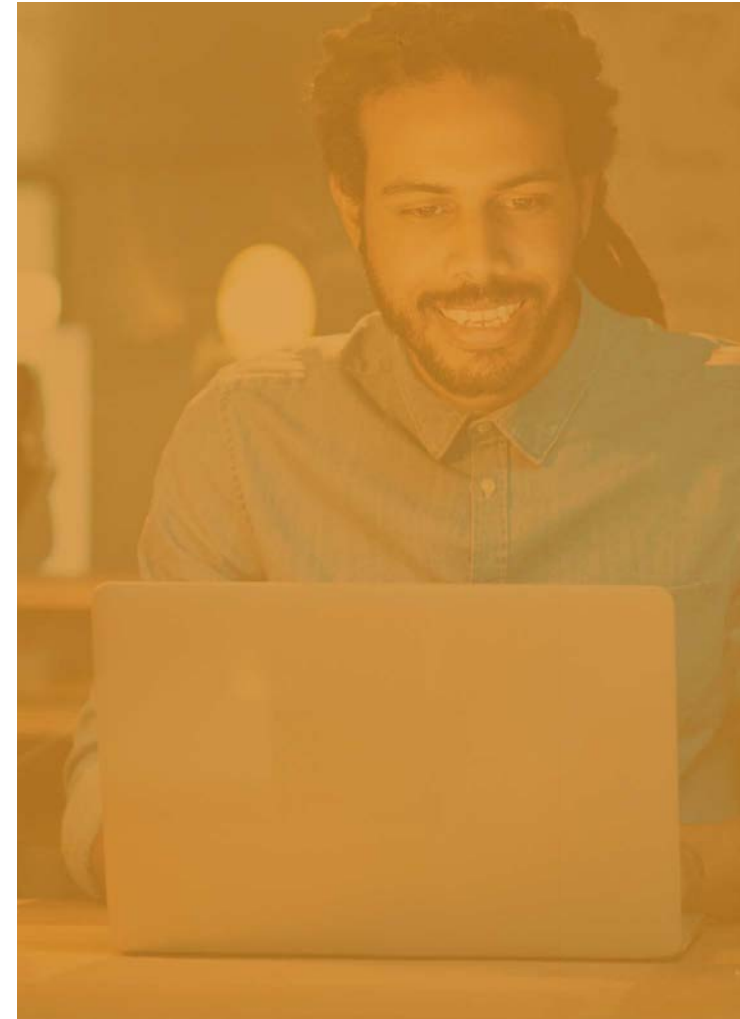


### Links to full case studies

- Microsoft <https://news.intrepidlearning.com/microsoft-transforms-global-salesforce>
- Leadership development cascade <https://news.intrepidlearning.com/leadership-development-cascade>
- Firm captures intrinsic legacy knowledge <https://news.intrepidlearning.com/global-management-firm-captures-intrinsic-legacy-knowledge>

### References

- Teaming: How Organizations Learn to Innovate and Compete in the Knowledge Economy by Amy Edmondson
- Rob Cross on networking
- Humanizing Learning by Red Thread Research
- Colaborative Overload by Rob Cross, Reb Rebele, and Adam Grant Harvard Business Review



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Co-sponsored by Intrepid and Learning Futures Group  
[learningfuturesgroup.com](http://learningfuturesgroup.com)

Chris Pirie is the Founder and CEO of The Learning Futures Group, formed to help organizations rethink their Learning and Development strategy in the face of historic workplace disruption and change. Formerly a Partner Level General Manager and Chief Learning Officer at Microsoft and Vice President of eLearning at Oracle, Chris has built deep expertise in the digital transformation of workplace learning and technology in areas including B2C product management, product marketing, enterprise software sales, channel partnerships, sales and technical field enablement, digital transformation, marketing and award winning large scale global talent development programs.



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