

A research-forward field paper for learning leaders

The Top 5 Things Learning Leaders Must Get Right in 2026

Why the old L&D playbook won't survive the next wave of workplace change



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	P. 3
<hr/>	
The Old Operating System of L&D	P. 4
<hr/>	
Strategy 1: Stop Building Courses, Start Designing Capability Systems	P. 5
<hr/>	
Strategy 2: Treat AI as Infrastructure, Not a Shiny Sidekick	P. 7
<hr/>	
Strategy 3: Turn Skills Data into Strategic Intelligence	P. 9
<hr/>	
Strategy 4: Extend Learning into the Flow of Revenue	P. 11
<hr/>	
Strategy 5: Measure Learning Like a Business Function	P. 13
<hr/>	
Conclusion: The Next Operating Model for Learning	P. 15

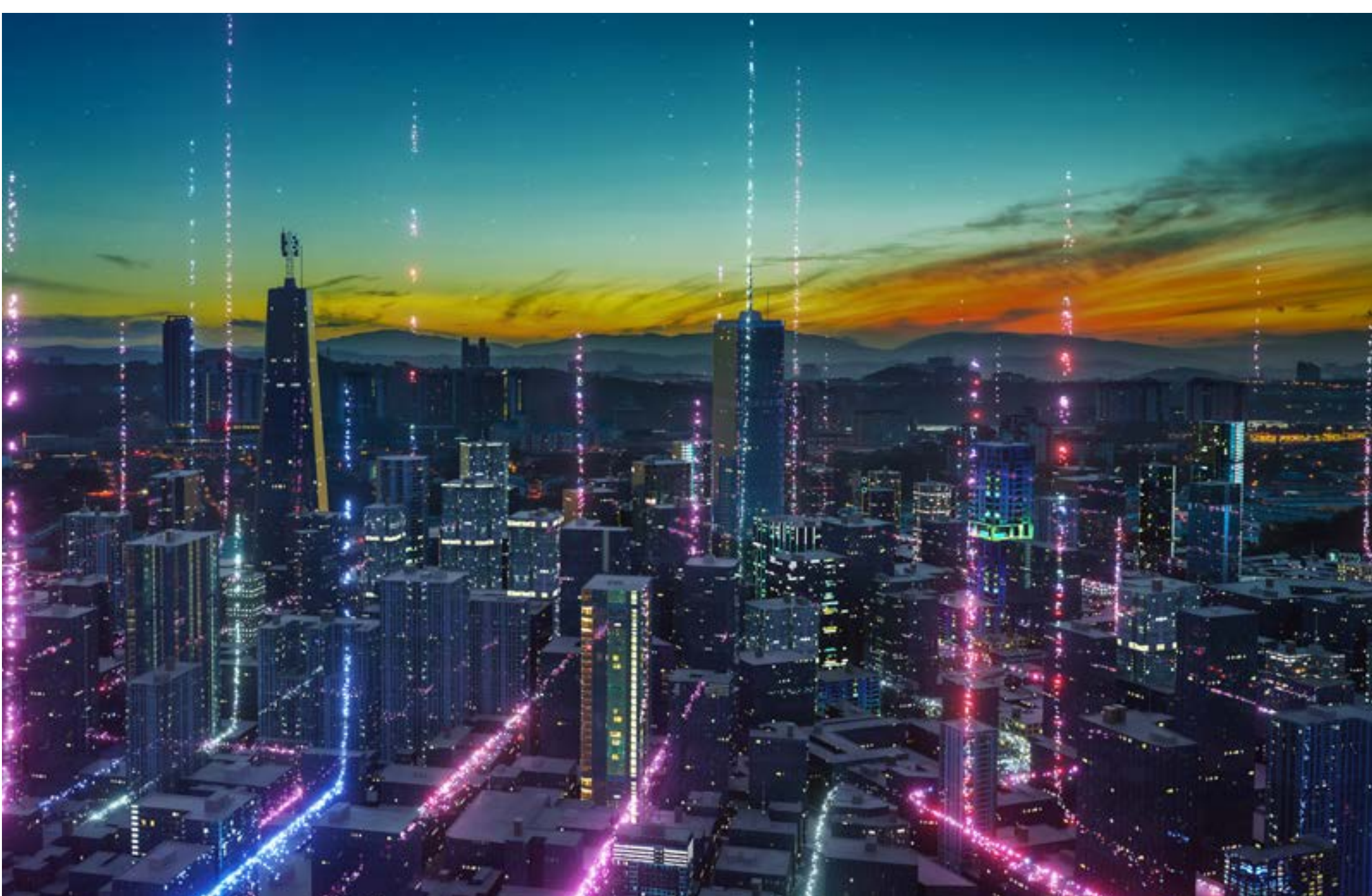
INTRODUCTION

For a long time, learning and development could get away with being the team that built courses, launched programs, and reported completions. That version of the job is running out of road.

In 2026, the real work is bigger and more interesting. Learning leaders need to build capability, not just content.

They need to use AI as part of the operating system, not as a cute add-on. They need skills data that drives decisions, not just dashboards. They need to reach beyond employees into customers and partners. And they need to measure learning like a real business function.

This paper makes the case for five big shifts that can help L&D stay useful in a world where work is changing fast.



“
***Learning
leaders
need to
build
capability,
not just
content.***”

The **Old** Operating System of L&D

If you dropped a learning leader from 1998 into a lot of L&D teams today, they would notice the new tools right away. Then, pretty quickly, they would realize the basic playbook still looks weirdly familiar.



Analyze. Design. Build. Deliver. Evaluate. That sequence has had an incredible run. We traded classrooms for webinars, binders for learning platforms, workshops for eLearning, and course catalogs for slick portals. But underneath all that, the basic logic stayed the same: someone asks for training, the team builds the thing, people take the thing, and then everyone hopes something good happens.

The issue is not that content is bad. Content can be useful. The issue is that content was never the outcome the business actually wanted. Businesses are not buying learning content because they love content. They want faster ramp time, better execution, stronger judgment, fewer mistakes, better customer outcomes, and teams that can handle real-world messiness without falling apart.

And the work itself is moving fast. The [World Economic Forum](#) estimates that 39% of workers' core skills will change by 2030, and 63% of employers say skill gaps are the biggest barrier to business transformation. Microsoft adds another loud signal: 82% of leaders say this is a pivotal year to rethink strategy and operations. In other words, the ground is shifting whether L&D is ready or not.

Translation: the business does not just need more learning. It needs more capability. That is a tougher standard, but a better one. Capability is what happens when people and teams can actually perform under real conditions, with real pressure, in real workflows. Once you see the job that way, the old L&D operating model starts to look pretty tiny.

Signals That Make This Urgent

- **39%** of workers' core skills are expected to change by 2030. ([World Economic Forum, 2025](#))
- **63%** of employers say skill gaps are the biggest barrier to business transformation. ([World Economic Forum, 2025](#))
- **82%** of leaders say this is a pivotal year to rethink strategy and operations. ([Microsoft, 2025](#))
- **81%** of leaders expect AI agents to be integrated into their AI strategy in the next 12 to 18 months. ([Microsoft, 2025](#))

That is the backdrop for the five shifts in this paper. None of them are about making L&D feel trendier or more buzzword-compliant. They are about making it more useful.

1. Stop Building Courses, Start Designing **Capability** Systems

Content can introduce a behavior. It usually cannot make that behavior stick on its own.

For years, content volume got treated like proof that something serious was happening. More courses meant more progress. More programs meant more value. It felt operationally clean because the work was visible: a launch date, a curriculum, a completion report, a slide that proved the team had been very, very busy.

But the business does not actually need busy. It needs capability. And capability almost never shows up because somebody watched 43 minutes of content and passed a quiz. It usually comes from repeated practice, coaching, feedback, manager reinforcement, workflow support, and clear expectations in the moments that actually matter.

That is why the main design question has to change. Instead of asking, ‘What training should we build?’ learning leaders should ask, **‘What capability does the business need, and what full system would help people get good at it?’** That is a much better question, because it pulls the conversation out of content mode and into performance mode.

Take enterprise sales. A training course on consultative selling can definitely help. But a capability system goes further: discovery call practice, live deal reviews, manager coaching guides, feedback loops, in-the-flow prompts, and a shared language for what good looks like. The course might still exist. It just stops pretending it can do the whole job by itself.

There is also a warning tucked into the market data. The [World Economic Forum](#) reports that 50% of the workforce in surveyed organizations had completed training as part of L&D initiatives, up from 41% in 2023. That sounds encouraging until you remember the bigger problem: more training activity doesn’t automatically mean stronger capability. Volume isn’t impact.

When learning teams start designing capability systems, their identity changes. They stop behaving like internal content vendors and start behaving like architects of performance.

More training activity doesn’t automatically mean stronger capability.

+ Stop Building Courses, Start Designing Capability Systems

HOW TO GET STARTED

1

Pick one business-critical capability and redesign around that, not around a course request.

Start with something that the business already cares about. New sales ramp time. Escalation handling in customer support. Frontline managers giving better feedback.

The key is to anchor the work in a real capability that shows up in performance conversations, not in an L&D catalog. Then ask a simple question: If people were truly great at this capability, what would that look like in real work? Write down the observable behaviors. That becomes the north star.

2

Map the real performance moments.

Instead of mapping content topics, map the moments where people actually have to perform. Where do people need to:

- make a judgment call
- run an important conversation
- diagnose a problem
- recover from a mistake
- guide a customer or teammate through uncertainty

Those moments are the real curriculum. Everything you design should orbit around helping people succeed there.

3

Design the full capability system, not just the content.

Once the key moments are clear, build the support system around them. That system might include:

- short content that introduces the idea
- guided practice or roleplay
- job aids or prompts inside the workflow
- manager coaching questions
- peer review or deal reviews
- feedback loops so people can improve

Content is still useful. It just stops pretending it can carry the entire load.

2. Treat AI as Infrastructure, Not a Shiny Sidekick

Right now, a lot of AI in L&D looks like a caffeinated intern: fast, useful, and not really the point.

Most early AI use in learning has clustered around content production: outlines, summaries, quiz items, chatbot answers, translation, and draft copy. That stuff matters. It saves time and clears some bottlenecks. But if that is the end of the ambition, L&D is using a power plant to toast bread.

The bigger opportunity is to treat AI as part of the learning infrastructure itself. That means using it for scalable practice, dynamic simulation, real-time feedback, personalized coaching prompts, better discovery, smarter support, and adaptive experiences that move with the learner instead of making the learner adapt to the system.

[Microsoft's 2025 Work Trend Index](#) points in that direction. The report found that 47% of leaders are prioritizing AI-specific skilling of the existing workforce, 45% are prioritizing expanded capacity with digital labor, and 46% are automating workflows with agents. That is not a side quest. It is a sign that human work and machine support are being redesigned together.



Human work and machine support are being redesigned together.

That has big implications for learning design. If the future of work includes human-agent teams, then practice stops being optional. New managers should practice tough conversations before having them for real. Sellers should pressure-test discovery and negotiation moves before they hit a live customer call. Support teams should work through tricky edge cases before a frustrated customer lands in their queue. AI can make that kind of practice cheaper, faster, and a lot easier to scale.

The trick is not to mistake scalable feedback for flawless judgment. AI should handle repetition, variation, and instant response. Humans should still handle ethics, nuance, escalation, coaching quality, and the places where context matters more than pattern matching. This is not about replacing instructors or managers. It is about giving them leverage.

+ Treat AI as Infrastructure, Not a Shiny Sidekick

HOW TO GET STARTED

1

Identify the high-stakes scenarios where practice actually matters.

Start by looking for situations where people are expected to perform well but rarely get safe opportunities to practice. These are usually moments like:

- difficult customer conversations
- handling objections in sales
- managing escalation calls
- delivering tough feedback
- diagnosing complex problems under pressure

Pick two or three scenarios where better performance would clearly improve outcomes. Those become the starting point for simulation and role-play.

2

Pilot AI-enabled practice where the business case is obvious.

Rather than launching a large initiative, run a focused experiment.

Choose one team or function where the impact will be easy to see. Sales discovery calls, customer support escalations, or frontline manager conversations are often good starting points.

Use AI-enabled role-play or feedback to give people a place to practice those scenarios repeatedly. The goal is not perfect simulation. The goal is giving people safe, repeatable practice before the real moment happens.

3

Build the guardrails and habits that make AI useful at work.

AI can be powerful for learning, but it also needs clear boundaries. Set expectations early around:

- privacy and data protection
- what information should not be entered into AI systems
- where human review still matters
- how feedback from AI should be interpreted

Most organizations are still figuring out how AI fits into day-to-day work, so expect a learning curve. Start small, encourage experimentation, and focus on practical use cases where people can quickly see the value.

3. Turn Skills Data into Strategic Intelligence

A skills framework can be a beautiful artifact. It can also become the corporate version of a spice rack nobody actually cooks with.

Over the last several years, many organizations have invested heavily in skills data - frameworks, taxonomies, capability libraries, and role maps. That work matters. Shared language is useful. It helps organizations define what good looks like, align around priorities, and create more consistency across talent practices. But for L&D, a static skills library is not the finish line. It is just the foundation.

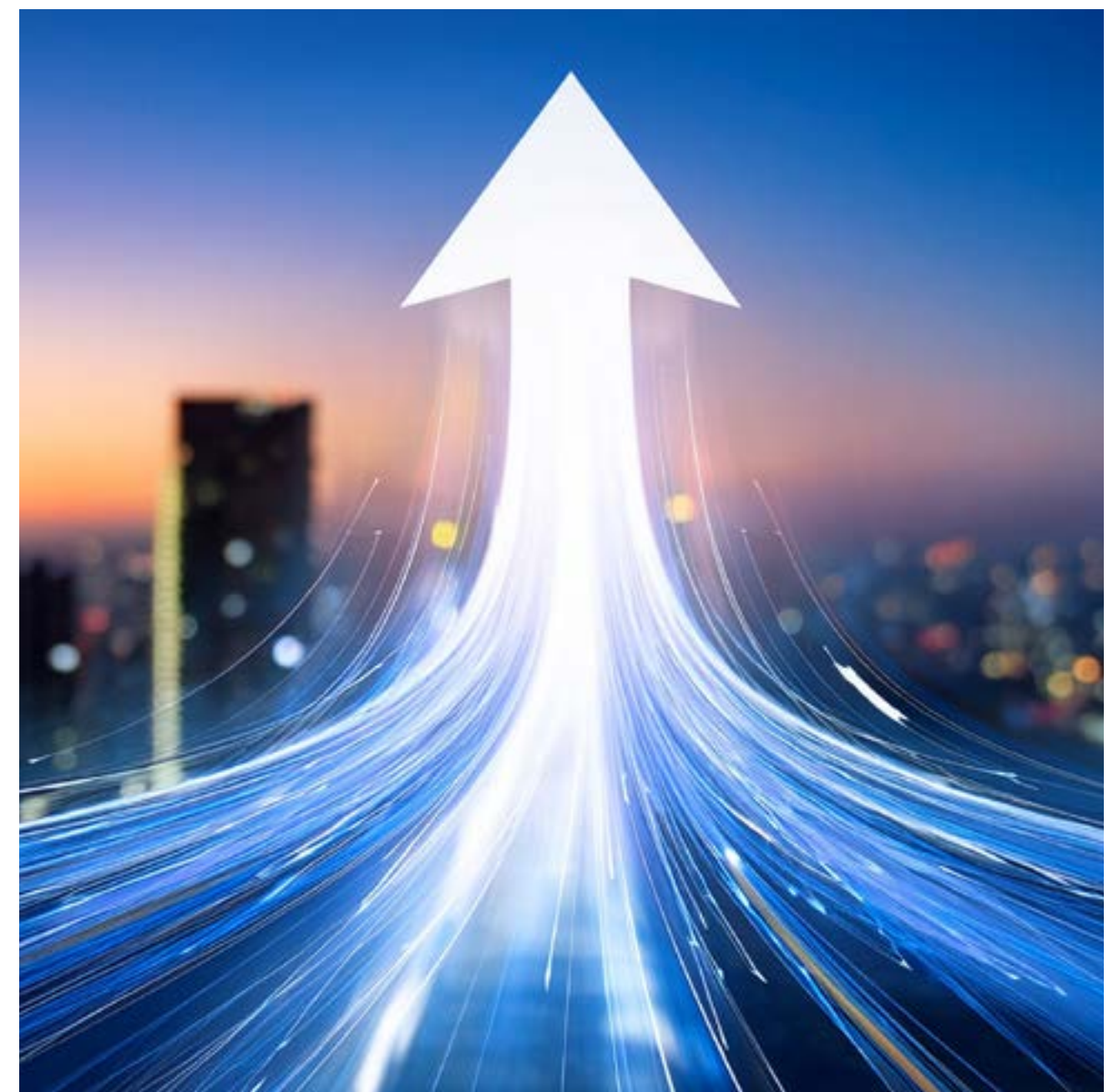
The real opportunity is turning skills data into skills intelligence. For learning leaders, that means using skills data to shape where development efforts go, which capabilities need to be built fastest, where skill gaps are widening, and how learning investments can support workforce priorities in a more targeted way. It also means helping the business think more clearly about redeployment, mobility, and role evolution, not just training completions.

That shift is becoming more urgent.

The [World Economic Forum](#) reports that 85% of employers expect to prioritize upskilling, 70% plan to hire people with emerging in-demand skills, and 50% expect to move employees from declining roles into growing ones. For L&D, that raises the bar. Skills can't just live in a framework or learning catalog. They need to inform capability-building priorities, talent strategy, internal mobility, and business planning.

Take AI literacy. A broad awareness program may increase familiarity. It may even make everyone feel responsibly futuristic for a moment. But an L&D-led skills intelligence approach asks sharper questions. Which roles need baseline literacy versus hands-on fluency? Where does AI create real leverage, and where does it introduce risk? Which teams need practice and application, not just exposure? Where should learning support augmentation, and where should it help people prepare for redesigned work?

This is where many organizations get stuck in skills theater: polished taxonomies, elegant dashboards, and a lot of discussion, but very little change in how learning priorities are set or how workforce capability is actually built. L&D should not settle for making skills visible. It should push to make skills actionable. Skills data describes the workforce you have. Skills intelligence helps you shape the workforce you need.



A static skills library is not the finish line. It's just the foundation.

+ Turn Skills Data into Strategic Intelligence

HOW TO GET STARTED

You do not need a perfect skills architecture to start making better learning decisions. The goal is to move from cataloging skills to using skills insight to guide capability building. Start with one area where better skills visibility could improve a real learning or talent decision.

1 Test whether your skills work is shaping learning priorities.

Start with an honest audit. Look at the frameworks, taxonomies, and dashboards your organization has already built and ask: where are these actually influencing learning strategy? For example:

- Are learning priorities tied to the capabilities the business says matter most?
- Are academies, programs, or pathways being built around real capability gaps?
- Are managers and business leaders using skills data to inform development decisions?
- Is L&D using skills insight to guide reskilling or internal mobility efforts?

If the answer is “not really,” that is the opportunity. Skills frameworks become valuable when they influence what gets built, funded, prioritized, and measured.

2 Focus on a small set of business-critical capabilities.

One of the fastest ways skills work loses credibility is by trying to map everything. Massive taxonomies may look comprehensive, but they rarely help L&D make better decisions.

Instead, focus on a small number of capabilities that are directly tied to business performance, transformation, or risk. These are the areas where targeted learning investment can make a visible difference. Examples might include:

- AI fluency for specific technical or knowledge-work roles
- Consultative selling in enterprise sales
- Data-informed decision-making for people managers
- Complex problem diagnosis in support or operations

When the list is short and strategically relevant, learning leaders are much more likely to align programs to it, and business leaders are much more likely to care.

3 Connect skills data to a real talent or development decision.

The real shift happens when skills data starts influencing how the organization builds capability, not just how it describes it. That might mean using skills insight to:

- prioritize where upskilling efforts should focus
- identify populations most in need of reskilling
- support internal mobility through targeted development pathways
- guide cohort selection for academies or capability-building programs
- determine where learning can help people adapt to automated, augmented, or redesigned work

This is the moment where a skills framework stops being a reference tool and starts becoming a strategic input for L&D.

4. Extend Learning into the Flow of Revenue

Learning in the flow of work was a smart evolution. Learning in the flow of revenue is the next move.

For years, L&D leaders have talked about embedding learning into everyday work so people can use it when it counts. That still matters. But more organizations are now pushing learning beyond the employee audience and into the broader ecosystem that drives growth.

Customer education, partner enablement, and certification ecosystems are not side projects anymore. They're increasingly part of how companies speed up adoption, improve time to value, reduce friction, strengthen loyalty, and create differentiated experiences around their products and platforms.

You can see the pattern clearly in the market. Salesforce Trailhead ties learning to hands-on practice, community, and a certification ecosystem used by millions. HubSpot Academy turns education into an engine for adoption and professional identity. Atlassian Learning connects product know-how to pathways and credentials that help users get more value, faster.

These aren't just help centers in a slightly nicer outfit. They are examples of companies teaching their ecosystems how to win with the product, the platform, and the surrounding workflow. That is strategic. It expands what learning can do.

For learning leaders, this changes both the size of the audience and the shape of the partnership map. Employees still matter, obviously. But modern learning ecosystems increasingly include customers, partners, prospective talent, and communities that influence growth long before a deal closes and long after onboarding ends.

Organizations are now pushing learning into the broader ecosystem that drives growth.

+ Extend Learning into the Flow of Revenue

HOW TO GET STARTED

You don't need to launch a full customer academy to start extending learning into the flow of revenue. Start by identifying one place where education could clearly improve adoption, performance, or time to value.

1

Find the moment where learning affects revenue.

Look for the points where customers, partners, or prospects struggle to get the most value from your product or platform. These moments often show up as:

- slow product adoption after purchase
- repeated support questions
- partners struggling to position or implement the solution
- customers failing to use high-value features

Those friction points are often learning problems in disguise. If education helps people succeed faster, it also helps the business grow.

2

Partner with the teams closest to the revenue motion.

Learning teams rarely see these moments clearly on their own. The signal usually lives with customer success, product, support, and sales. Sit down with those teams and ask a few simple questions:

- Where do customers get stuck most often?
- What do your best customers or partners do differently?
- Which mistakes slow down adoption or expansion?

Those answers reveal the learning moments that matter most to the business.

3

Design the ecosystem that helps people succeed.

Once the key moments are clear, think beyond content. High-performing customer education ecosystems usually combine:

- guided learning paths for key roles
- certifications that signal capability
- communities where people share solutions
- hands-on practice tied to real product use

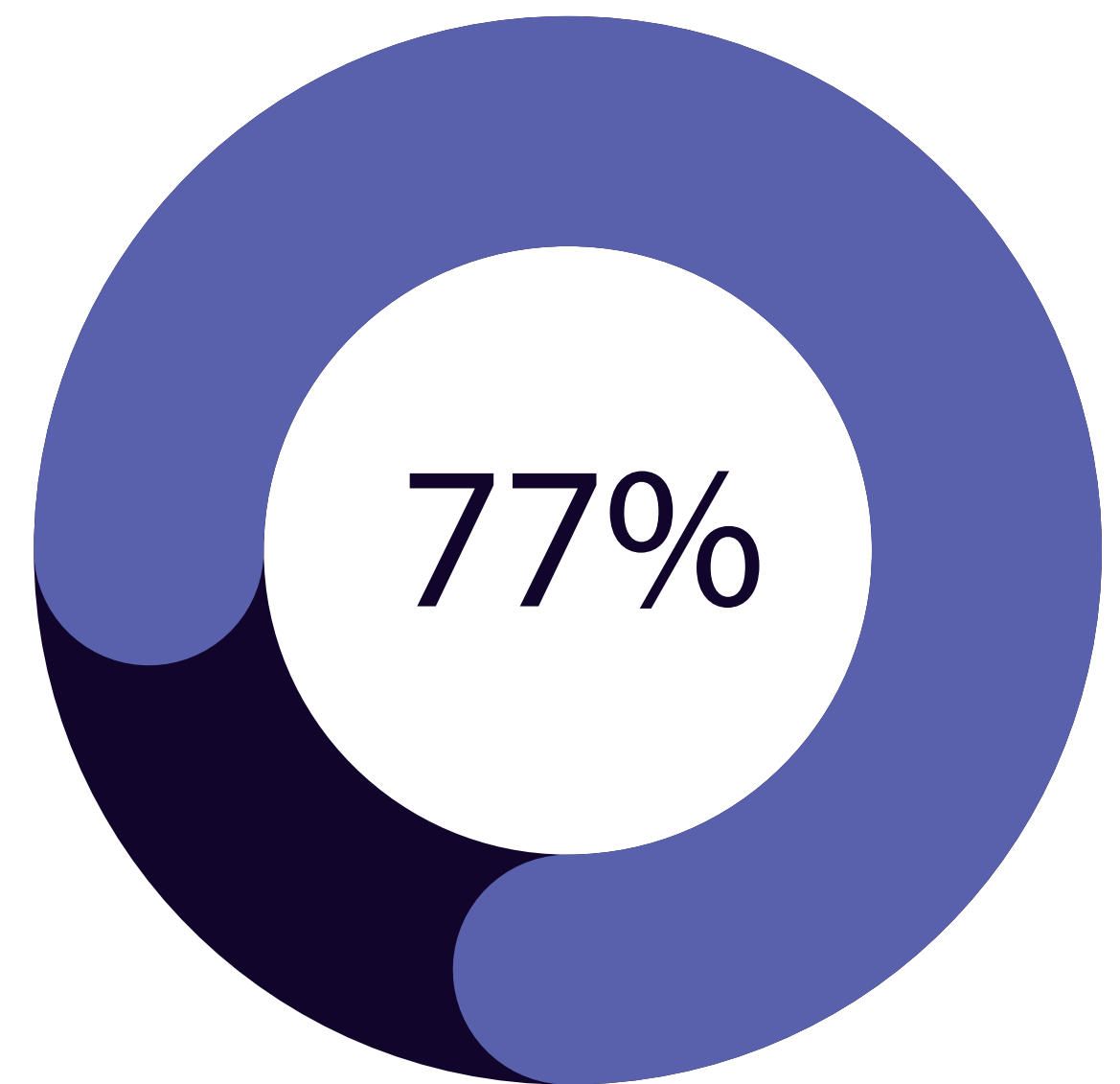
These aren't just content formats. They're design choices that help customers and partners succeed faster, which ultimately strengthens adoption, loyalty, and growth.

5. Measure Learning Like a Business Function

Learning measurement has been dominated for a long time by activity metrics: completions, attendance, satisfaction, consumption, participation. Those numbers aren't worthless. They can tell you whether something happened. They just can't tell you whether it mattered.

A better measurement model starts one step earlier. Before launch, define the business outcome, the key behaviors that should drive it, and the evidence that those behaviors are actually changing. Then learning can be evaluated as one part of a broader performance story instead of as a standalone event that lives and dies in the LMS.

The [World Economic Forum](#) reports that employers most often expect training investments to deliver enhanced productivity, cited by 77% of respondents, and improved competitiveness, cited by 70%. That's a useful clue. The business is already telling us the scoreboard it cares about. Learning teams should listen.



of employers expect training investments to deliver enhanced productivity

Imagine a frontline supervisor program in manufacturing. The usual report might highlight completion, confidence ratings, and facilitator feedback.

A more serious measurement design would connect the learning to observable behavior on the floor and then to business indicators like safety, quality, retention, or output. That kind of chain of evidence is what makes a learning function sound credible in the room where decisions get made.

This shift changes how L&D is seen. Teams that only report activity look operational.

Teams that can connect learning to performance look strategic. The difference is not presentation polish. It is whether the function can show how its work helps the business move.

Define the business outcome, the key behaviors that should drive it, and the evidence that the behaviors are actually changing.

+ Measure Learning Like a Business Function

HOW TO GET STARTED

1

Start with the business outcome, not the learning activity.

Before designing the program, ask what the business actually wants to improve. That might be things like:

- faster ramp time for new hires
- higher win rates in sales
- fewer support escalations
- improved safety or quality on the floor
- stronger retention of key talent

The outcome should be something a business leader already cares about. When that's clear, the learning effort has a scoreboard that actually matters.

2

Identify the behaviors that should move the metric.

Business results rarely change because people attended a program. They change because people start doing something differently. Ask: What behaviors would improve this outcome if they happened consistently? For example:

- sales reps asking stronger discovery questions
- supervisors giving clearer performance feedback
- support agents diagnosing problems faster
- managers coaching instead of escalating

These behaviors become the bridge between the learning design and the business result.

3

Build a simple chain of evidence.

Once the outcome and behaviors are clear, measurement becomes much more straightforward. For each major initiative, build a simple story that connects:

- the business outcome you're trying to improve
- the behaviors that influence it
- the learning design meant to support those behaviors
- early signals that behaviors are changing
- longer-term business results

Activity metrics like completion and participation can still be useful, but they should sit in the background. The headline is whether the work is helping the business move.

The **Next** Operating Model for Learning

The future of L&D was never supposed to be a bigger content factory. It was supposed to be a smarter, more human way to help organizations learn how to win.

Taken together, these five shifts point to a different operating model for learning. The old model focused on building content, delivering programs, and reporting participation. The emerging model is more connected to the business. It is about building capability systems, using AI as infrastructure, turning skills data into decision-making fuel, extending learning into revenue-driving ecosystems, and measuring outcomes that matter.

That makes the work harder. It also makes the work way more important. Learning leaders who make this shift will not look like internal course vendors. They will look like performance strategists, system designers, and business partners who know how people actually get better at doing hard things.

And that is the real opportunity. 2026, and every year after, won't be asking L&D to be louder. It will be asking it to be more useful. To stop confusing activity with impact, content with capability, and motion with progress. The teams that get this right will not just survive the next wave of change. They will help shape it.



The emerging model is more connected to the business.

Selected Research Behind this Paper

- World Economic Forum. The Future of Jobs Report 2025. January 7, 2025.
- Microsoft. Work Trend Index Annual Report 2025: The Year the Frontier Firm Is Born. April 23, 2025.
- Salesforce. Trailhead. accessed March 2026.
- HubSpot. HubSpot Academy. accessed March 2026.
- Atlassian. Learning. accessed March 2026.

Turning Insight into Action

See What **Capability-Based** Learning Looks Like in Practice

Many learning leaders recognize that the old content-driven model isn't enough, but redesigning how learning works can feel overwhelming.

Intrepid is built for applied capability development using practice, coaching, collaboration, and AI-enabled simulations that prepare people for real-world performance.

If you're exploring how to bring these ideas into your learning strategy, we'd love to show you what it looks like in practice.

Request a walk-through by visiting intrepidlearning.com or by scanning the QR code.

