

Learning Trends Report



What trends are shaping corporate learning and development? What's next for heads of HR and directors of L&D? In this report we zoom in on four trends we're hearing about in conversations with Coursera for Business customers and that we're experimenting with for our own team. Get the scoop on gamification, social learning, continuous learning, and measuring the ROI of L&D.

Gamification

Games are engaging, even addictive. We play games for entertainment on our phones and around kitchen tables, watch others in higher-stakes contests on TV and in stadiums, and spar informally with our friends, colleagues, and families on a daily basis. Given the role that competitive and collaborative games play in so many other areas of life, it's no surprise that employers are beginning to invest in games and gamification to help employees learn.

In a 2017 study by Bottom-Line Performance, 35 percent of the employers surveyed said that they were incorporating games and gamification into their learning strategies.

Games are powerful learning tools because they harness several key elements of learning:



Motivation

We all want to win, and a game is a perfect way to dial up motivation and competition. There is evidence that every time we engage in an activity with a clear goal and an uncertain outcome — elements of every game — we get a hit of dopamine that motivates us to keep trying. Games push us to work toward rewards.



Relevant Practice Spaced Over Time

Through repeated efforts to succeed in a game, we get a chance to practice new skills. This is true both in physical games, like the 10 frames of a round of bowling, and in video games, where players are granted multiple “lives” or attempts and encouraged to keep trying.



Specific, Timely Feedback

Many games provide rich, constant feedback. In a learning context, these frequent nudges and corrections allow learners to adjust their behavior in real time to improve, instead of waiting for a grade at the end of a course. Didn't answer that question correctly? You can't move to the next level or hit your goal until you course-correct.



Narratives and Stories

The entertaining storylines in our favorite games are there for a reason: They pull us in and keep us interested. Stories serve as powerful memory stimulators and emotional triggers. We remember stories, and adding even a basic narrative or example can cement lessons and ideas for learners.

While comprehensive learning games are a great way to help employees learn, you can benefit from the gaming trend without developing brand-new learning programs. Try gamifying your current program by incorporating basic game elements. For example, motivate employees with a leaderboard or points.

“The point of adding game elements to any business process is not to hide something inherently boring with flashy pop-ups,” explains Wharton associate professor Kevin Werbach and instructor of the popular “Gamification” course on Coursera. “It’s to find the fun that makes the process into a more game-like experience.”

Coursera helps people learn by applying the principles of games:

- Instead of learning in long stretches, Coursera learners process short, achievable chunks of information. The average Coursera video is only 13 minutes long.
- Learners have many opportunities for practice and repetition — they can take any quiz an infinite number of times until they ace it. Real-time tests and questions provide constant, immediate, and actionable feedback.

Social & Blended Learning

While you've probably heard a lot about "social learning" lately, it's not a new idea. In the 1960s, psychologist Albert Bandura studied the theory that humans learn through watching and modeling others' behavior. He was interested in the idea that learning is not a solitary endeavor.

Social learning takes place both in person and online these days — we connect with others in online groups and forums as frequently as we meet in person. Programs that combine online and in-person training and interaction are often referred to as "blended learning" programs. In blended learning, in-person connections augment online learning, and vice versa.

We know that adding a social or group element to any learning program can drive retention and motivation. For example, a [2016 study by Towards Maturity](#) found that employees at "sharing organizations" put what they learn into practice more quickly than employees at companies where people don't freely share knowledge. Oxygen Learning CEO Juliana Stancampiano notes that high-performing organizations are moving toward more blended learning. Including an online component in a learning program creates more time and space for in-person interaction.

Every Coursera course includes an element of social learning. More than 1,300 trained Coursera mentors lead online discussions alongside course materials and answer learners' questions. In addition, learners from around the world use discussion forums to have online conversations about the material.

With our own employees at Coursera, we experimented with blended learning by **creating learning groups** for four popular online courses. Each group was led by one or more employees who were passionate about or had experience with the course topic. The groups met weekly to discuss what they were learning, dive deeper into the most interesting ideas, and apply the lessons to their day-to-day work at Coursera.

Results

We've seen great results from our employee study groups program thus far. Employees who participated in a study group were much more likely to complete the course, and said they loved having a venue to discuss the on-the-job implications of key course lessons. Participants tell us that being part of a study group makes them feel connected to Coursera and our culture. We even have a group of enthusiastic novice programmers who've tackled multiple courses together. The end goal for any social learning is to create a self-sustaining community in which employees learn from each other, with occasional guidance from L&D leaders.

We're working on more ideas to foster this kind of community at Coursera — for example, creating manager communities to support new managers during training.

Continuous Learning

Today's workers need to learn constantly. Thomas Friedman **recently wrote** about the need for continuous learning: "The notion that we can go to college for four years and then spend that knowledge for the next 30 is over. If you want to be a lifelong employee anywhere today, you have to be a lifelong learner."

We're all learning constantly — by Googling unfamiliar concepts and terms, watching YouTube tutorials, and reading industry-relevant blogs and forums. These moments of "microlearning" are a natural part of the modern work day: You encounter a question or a new idea and work to find an answer.

But we all need to engage in two types of learning: quick microlearning and more substantive, deep learning. Ian Stuart, Director of Learning and Development at Coursera, says microlearning brings up new challenges for L&D leaders: "How do you bring structure, rigor, and intention to the microlearning that's already happening? And how do you help employees revisit those mini-lessons as part of a culture of effective, long-term learning?" He's been thinking about how to transition "microlearners" to more long-term, continuous learners who build deeper, focused skills over time.

Josh Bersin **thinks about** two complementary kinds of learning: microlearning and macrolearning. Both, he says, are needed on an employee's learning journey. Stuart agrees that learning opportunities can offer two distinct benefits: meeting immediate needs and training employees to keep pace with constant change.



So while microlearning is a valuable way to meet immediate information needs, employees need consistent followup to really master new concepts. Googling something once probably won't create a long-term insight, but if you build on one idea over many different moments, you're more likely to learn and grow.

And to keep employees engaged in continuous learning over many repetitions, you have to tie the lessons to more than just today's task — they need to know how learning new skills will affect their performance and goals.

Learning has to be integrated into everyday work, giving employees a chance to learn over time and on the job. Look for learning opportunities in moments throughout the day (client phone calls, presentations, conversations with co-workers, etc.). Frame every new experience as a learning opportunity, and help employees find time to reflect on what they've learned each day.

Learners use Coursera courses to learn slowly over time. The courses are designed based on the principle of spaced repetition, maximizing learners' retention. Short quizzes, questions, and assignments throughout the course help learners apply the material to their own work. Learners gain deep, lasting knowledge.



Mobile Learning

Mobile is a trend that's changing everything, not just L&D. Seventy-seven percent of Americans [own a smartphone](#), a number that has jumped dramatically from just 35 percent in 2011. That rapid adoption of new technology is pushing anyone who works with people to rethink the way they communicate.

"In the short term, the single largest impact on the workplace and L&D is mobile," says [Brandon Carson](#), author of "Learning in the Age of Immediacy." "As the digital transformation unfolds, more and more of us will traverse multiple devices throughout our day, and learning will become less and less of a separate activity from everything else we do."

Carson says that L&D has been slow to respond to the rise of mobile. At a recent conference, he asked the L&D audience how many were currently offering mobile learning solutions. Only a few said they were fully committed to mobile. He recommends asking a few fundamental questions to shape a mobile learning strategy:

- How does your workforce use mobile technology now?
- Does your organization have a policy regarding the use of mobile devices at work?
- Are productivity apps currently being used across the workforce?
- Do you have the necessary skills on your L&D team to create mobile learning solutions, or will you need to look outside your organization for resources?
- Do you have the organizational sponsorship (including from enterprise IT) to make the transition to mobile?

There are many advantages of extending your L&D strategy with mobile. Carson shares two benefits:

- Offer faster training. Reach your audience with targeted knowledge and skills in shorter bursts, at the moment they need it.
- Reinforce prior training. With mobile, employees can refresh their memories about what they learned in the classroom. Mobile provides critical information when it's needed, without "fire-hosing" learners with too much information at the wrong times. By reinforcing prior learning, mobile can have a big impact on performance.



95% of Coursera courses can be taken from beginning to end on mobile.



More than 40% of Coursera learners regularly log in on mobile.



Creative Ways to Measure the ROI of L&D

Some learning progress is straightforward to measure. You roll out a new sales methodology and watch sales increase the next quarter. You implement a new productivity program on the warehouse floor and you ship more products each week.

But most learning — especially “soft skills” like management and leadership — is more difficult to track. That’s a big hurdle for L&D and HR managers who need to sell the impact of their programs to the C-suite. A [2017 Human Capital Institute and Oxygen Learning research report](#) shared that only a third of talent development professionals regularly evaluate the business impact of their L&D programs.

That lack of data blurs out any narrative of progress: In a [2017 LinkedIn study](#), only 8 percent of CEOs said they see impact from L&D programs.

Jack Phillips, chairman of the ROI Institute, has spent his career working to improve the way leaders think about measurement. His [ROI methodology](#) outlines the [levels of data](#) that L&D professionals should understand:

- 1. Basic Data Capture:** How many people are involved in the course, and what is the cost per person?
- 2. Reaction and Satisfaction:** Is the content relevant to employees’ roles and success? Is the experience user-friendly?
- 3. Learning:** Do users understand the concepts?
- 4. Application:** Are people actually using the skills and knowledge they learned? (This, Philips says, is where you start to get executives’ attention.)
- 5. Impact:** How does the application of new skills and knowledge affect business goals?
- 6. ROI:** How can we convert that impact into dollars, compared to the cost of the learning program?

Instead of looking at the results of a companywide learning program, Coursera's Stuart suggests zooming in. Measure the impact on individual employees' behavior and performance.

Ask employees to rank their individual progress against their goals, and continue to track their progress over time. Look at how teams are getting small but meaningful results in support of larger goals.

Aggregate individual stories to help build a bigger narrative about the reach and results of L&D.

While it's still hard to show direct cause and effect, you can show correlation between learning programs and business results. For example, your narrative might show:

- Asking employees to report progress on their action plans showed an increase in the number and quality of feedback conversations.
- Updating the onboarding program led to a quicker ramp-up to full productivity.
- Rolling out targeted leadership development opportunities resulted in more internal promotions into key roles.

Finally, Coursera instructor Barb Oakley, an expert on learning, has this advice for employers:

Encourage learning for learning's sake. Don't get too fixated on immediate outcomes. Sometimes studying a subject that seems irrelevant (like medieval manuscripts) can bring fresh ideas because the brain is excited. Ideas that come up in one discipline often show up elsewhere.



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