



WHITE PAPER

# What Is Corporate Digital Learning?

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## Introduction

Corporate learning behavior is inseparable—and often indistinguishable—from the behavior of digitally connected, curious citizens and consumers. Makes sense, right? Corporate learners are citizens and consumers and generally curious people who learn and problem-solve in their daily lives.

But somehow, when those people get to the office, the expectation is that their behavior will be different. That's a mistake. Recognizing that behavior around how people live and learn has changed as a result of digital technology—and exploring those changes—is the key to understanding how this behavior will drive change in the learning and development industry. The eLearning Guild describes these behavior changes, and the resulting shift in learning and training paradigms, as an evolution of **corporate digital learning**.

The Guild launched a conversation about corporate digital learning ahead of our DevLearn 2017 Conference & Expo, via a series of *Learning Solutions* articles and [TWIST blog](#) posts. At DevLearn 2017, several sessions and the Executive Forum invited community participation in the dialogue. The conversation continues on our [Learning Solutions](#) content site, at Guild events like [Learning Solutions 2018 Conference & Expo](#) and the May 16 – 17 [Digital Learning Summit](#)— and here.

Corporate digital learning is not an approach to training employees. It is not a format for content delivery, nor is it a set of instructions for creating eLearning content.

### **Digital learning is a new paradigm.**

It is an openness to adapting corporate skills acquisition and performance support to the needs, goals, and behaviors of [modern learners](#). It is a recognition that some of the ways we've "always done" corporate training may not work anymore—that they're giving way to self-service problem-solving using digital tools. And it is a willingness to forge new approaches.

This white paper will not tell you what digital learning is; more importantly, this paper is not an instruction manual for creating digital learning.

No, this white paper is an invitation: Join the conversation. Explore what modern learner-consumers want, study what they do, and learn how to support them on their digital learning journeys. Be part of the Guild's exploration of how learning behavior is evolving and how our role, as learning and development professionals, must evolve in tandem.

This white paper will identify some of the paradigm shifts emblematic of digital learning and digital transformation in corporate learning spaces. It will describe behaviors and raise issues that L&D professionals are grappling with as their organizations adjust to keep pace with digital learners. It will suggest ways that L&D can respond, cope, evolve—so that L&D teams emerge as strong corporate digital learning hubs. But, rather than prescribe solutions, it will invite the eLearning community to join the conversation and find those solutions together.

## **The Digital Consumer Goes to Work**

A corporate culture concept that has gained buzzword status is “bring your whole self to work.” The idea is that employees are also complex humans with families and interests (and biases and problems) and that people are better employees if they can be their true selves at work.

Applying the “whole self” concept to digital learning is perhaps even more natural than applying it to interoffice relations: Employees learn at work the way they learn and behave when they are not at work. Thus, to reach modern learners, it is essential to understand



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modern consumers and citizens. Modern consumers are connected consumers; their digital devices are always within easy reach. Modern citizens learn, answer questions, engage in conversation, and connect with family, friends, and broader communities via their digital devices.

And a defining feature of the smartphone (and tablet) era is this: access to information. Instant access, anywhere, any time.

For generations, people simply didn't have access to the information they needed to do many things for themselves. These "things" ranged from booking travel to fixing their toilets. The solution was usually the same, though: Call a professional. Only travel agents could look at all the flights available to a particular destination and wangle discounts. Only a plumber could solve the mystery of that weird whiny noise your washing machine was making.

At work, the solution was usually to take a course. A learning professional, in consultation with a subject matter expert, designed and developed the course. Perhaps an instructor would deliver it; perhaps it would be offered as asynchronous eLearning. Even as technology improved and various forms of eLearning replaced much face-to-face instruction, though, one thing remained constant: Training and performance support content was designed and presented by professionals.

That's changing.

While it's likely that few people—consumers or employees—self-identify as "self-directed learners," that is exactly what is happening. Rather than turn to professionals or attend courses to learn the skills needed to solve problems, most people turn to Google. Seeking information online is as natural as breathing. As Guild executive vice president David Kelly wrote in a [TWIST blog post](#), "There's not a conscious shift among individuals toward self-directed learning; what does exist is a cultural shift in behavior as people realize that they can find answers on their own."

## Technology Drives the New Paradigm

A convergence of new technologies allows individuals to tap into resources and data that were previously unavailable to the general public.

Consumers can access information on every flight to their destination and compare schedules and costs. They can choose among hotels, Airbnb, VRBO, and myriad other



lodging options. It's easier to look at a travel website that aggregates data from dozens of airlines than to call each airline individually, wait on hold, and quiz the agents about schedules and fares. It's easier to look up public records online than to go to the courthouse or police station, fill out a bunch of forms, and pore over physical copies. And it's easier to type a "How do I..." question into your browser, find a three-minute video, and figure out how to fix the washer—or fill out an insurance contract—than to sit through a two-hour class that covers the process you need, as well as about an hour and 55 minutes' worth of material you already know or don't need.

So, as consumers, modern learners generally do a lot more for themselves than they might have done only 10 or 15 years ago. Digitally connected adults know where to look for information, and they expect to find it, quickly and easily, when they need it.

This is a vastly different playing field than what most L&D professionals are accustomed to dealing with. To be fair, some types of information and some processes and procedures cannot be found online. Some information is task- or field- or company-specific. But even in these cases, the learners expect access to that information to be available on their terms in a way that learners of the past did not even dream of.

Under the old paradigm, L&D created learning content. This content was designed around the needs of the learners—as defined by their managers—and it was presented in a format, at a time and place, and to a group of employees selected and controlled by managers, instructors, and eLearning developers. L&D professionals "trained" employees and then perhaps supported them in their work, and managers and instructional designers exercised considerable control over every step of the process.

The new "self-directed" paradigm requires relinquishing some of that control to the employees—the learners—themselves.

## **Adjusting to a Shifting Locus of Control**

The shift of control over learning from instructional designers, eLearning developers, and learners' managers to the learners themselves raises a host of issues. Let's explore a few of these.

## Content Is Not Vetted or Verified

Employees seeking information on the internet might turn up excellent resources; they might also turn up inaccurate, misleading, or otherwise deplorable resources. And since they are searching and using that content on their own, there's no way for managers or L&D professionals to provide guidance.

Or is there?

Rather than mandating specific courses or in-house-developed content, L&D teams could take on a curating and path-building role. For areas of work or problem-solving where information is likely to be abundant online (think "leadership" or "advice for new managers," rather than "how component A communicates with component B of your company's proprietary system"), L&D can maintain and oversee a curated library of content. This does require regular attention to weed out broken links and replace dated content with newer content. It's also possible—and advisable—to encourage collaboration and sharing. That is, employees should be lauded for finding and sharing high-quality resources on this curated site.

An additional option is "after-the-fact" vetting of content. If employees share their sources, managers or L&D pros can evaluate those sources—and steer employees to other sites if needed.

Finally, managers might need to adjust to a paradigm where, rather than funneling all employees through the same training, they make peace with the idea that each employee might follow a different road to the same destination. In other words, if the employee has solved the problem and completed the task, the managers might turn their focus to measuring and assessing results rather than worrying about the learning content. L&D teams can play a key role in figuring out how to assess the skills that employees have mastered through independent learning.

Some caveats:

- While the instinctual response of many veteran L&D pros might be to try to control learners' access to outside resources or dictate which resources they can use, that is unlikely to succeed. A better approach might be to focus on how to guide them to higher-quality resources and facilitate access to great content, whether L&D identified those resources or employees did.
- The assess and vet after-the-fact options apply only to topic areas that are general and broad; training on proprietary processes or knowledge will, obviously, not be available



online. L&D will still play an important role in developing this training, but it, too, must exist within the digital learning paradigm.

- Employees who have chosen learning resources poorly will need some mentoring and remedial coaching to recover from errors and learn the correct way to do things. This is where curated content becomes especially valuable; managers and L&D teams alike will need to provide both access to materials and coaching to employees.

## Google Doesn't Know *Everything*

Despite the vast amount of information and misinformation on the internet, not all topics are Googleable. Companies with proprietary information and processes will still need to educate and train employees on those company-specific topics. Likewise, employees in many companies will always require onboarding training that introduces them to the culture and mores of their new workplace.

L&D clearly still plays a role here in designing, developing, and delivering this training.

But.

There's always a "but." The digital learning paradigm looms large here; modern consumer-learners have an increasing appetite for new modalities of training that offer flexibility and don't overload them with superfluous information. The digital learning approach demands changes in the format that eLearning takes.

Empowered digital learners expect resources to be:

- **Available on-demand.** Learners complete training or look for how to solve problems in the moment—when the knowledge is needed—or at times they choose.
- **Multimodal.** The days of text-heavy eLearning or formulaic slide decks are, mercifully, gone. Content should be offered in multiple formats, such as podcasts, videos, games, flash cards, chats, and more, to allow employees the flexibility to choose the format they prefer or that works best for the circumstances where they'll use it. A five-minute video might be ideal during a commute by train, but annoying when the learner needs one specific piece of information that can be found in a searchable database.
- **Focused.** Short content that fills a specific need is vastly preferable to comprehensive courses that cover A to Z, soup to nuts—and make it impossible to find the specific information needed *right now*.

- **Searchable.** Internet search is where it all begins. When an individual has a question or a problem, that person whips out a smartphone or tablet and starts searching. Even if an employee is seeking in-house, L&D-developed content, that employee wants to be able to search for it easily and find it fast—not wade through cumbersome menus and files filled with information she already knows.

Therefore, when L&D does create content, that content will look and feel different from much of what L&D has created in the past. Perhaps subject matter experts can be coached in presenting content as mini-webinars or narrated [screencasts](#) to share their expertise within the company. Some L&D teams already recruit colleagues to voice roles in [podcasts](#) or participate in video games and simulations. Others build and facilitate collaborative social spaces where employees can discuss (curated) content, share questions and solutions, and form [learning communities](#). These and other possibilities are limited only by the creativity of the L&D teams!



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## Learning Is Closely Integrated with Doing

Training used to be something employees “went to.” That is, it was separate from “working.”

Digital citizens are increasingly accustomed to finding solutions and answers as problems and questions occur—in the midst of whatever they are doing at the time. Shopping for furniture? Call up price comparisons instantly. Even better: Take photos of the furniture, open an app, and see how it will look in the living room, accurately scaled. Arguing with friends over who starred in that 1980s sitcom? Ask Google. Stymied by a field in a tax form? Online advice and how-to videos abound.

As employee learners, those individuals want the same seamless integration.

- **Not:** Managers spend an hour in a course, learning how to conduct employee evaluations.
  - » **But:** Managers use a job aid or watch a short video that guides them through the evaluation process.
- **Not:** All sales reps attend a daylong training session to learn about new product features.
  - » **But:** Sales reps learn to use a phone app that introduces the new features and tests their recall with flash cards, memory games, or other interactive features. Best of all, the app is highly searchable, so they can look up a specific detail that’s escaped their memory.

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## Big Changes Ahead

The evolution of digital learning is very much ongoing, yet it's already possible to anticipate some ways that the role and daily tasks of L&D professionals will change.

As employees show greater autonomy in their learning, the role of L&D will likely involve less designing and creating content (and measuring mastery of that content) and more evaluating employees' performance, possibly with little or no knowledge of the materials used for learning.

Emerging technologies, such as xAPI, offer L&D teams ways to track employees' learning activities. L&D teams might also need to find new methods of encouraging self-reporting of learning activities. But measuring learning activities is only one angle; measuring results is another. Developing metrics that meaningfully show whether an employee has mastered a body of content or a skill will require some creativity from L&D teams. However it is done, the focus is already shifting to evaluating performance and outcomes—and away from counting the number of learners who spent a specific number of hours in training.

L&D team members are already ceding control on another front: finding and vetting resources. Social networks, like Slack and Yammer, encourage employees to share resources that they've used as well as share workarounds and solutions. Modern employers are increasingly encouraging and facilitating this collaboration and social learning, and L&D teams need to find ways to become engaged. The possibility of facilitating and overseeing curated content libraries is one option. Creative teams will no doubt come up with more options; sharing these in the Guild community provides an opportunity to lead by example!

The shift in control over when, how, and what employees learn means that L&D teams are likely to become more selective about which learning materials they develop themselves versus sourcing them in other ways. Where collaboration, independent searches, and informal learning provide an adequate variety of high-quality materials, curation is likely to be a better investment than content creation. On the other hand, as noted previously, that existing content is unlikely to cover all of the learning needs in many organizations.

A potential downside to this shifting locus of control must also be mentioned: The "self-service learning" paradigm requires initiative on the part of learners. Some employees, by nature or by dint of workplace shaping, might expect any needed training or education to be provided and delivered to them; that is, some employees will not demonstrate the initiative needed to solve problems on their own.

In these cases, managers will need to serve as coaches and mentors. L&D can play a role here, too—by ensuring that job aids, tutorials, and other tools are available and that employees can easily learn how to access and use them. Whether these tools exist in a conventional LMS or a more casual library, L&D teams might consider investing some resources in developing how-to videos or other tools that teach employees how to find what they need and offer welcome packets or training kits to new or less technically savvy employees. L&D must also ensure that the search function in their curated and created content is intuitive and robust.

## Summary: Old Paradigm vs. New

Digital learning is not an education issue or a learning issue or a content issue. Digital learning describes behavior: Behavior of digitally savvy employee-learners. Behavior of managers. Behavior of instructional designers, eLearning developers, training managers, and CLOs. **Behavior of everyone in a learning ecosystem.**

A look at the basic elements of the old and new paradigms sums this up succinctly.

Old Paradigm: Control	New Paradigm: Guide and Empower
L&D creates all content	L&D vets and curates content on general knowledge topics
L&D vets and verifies all content before employees see it	Employees find resources—good and bad—on the internet via social and informal learning
Employees go to training	Employees engage in self-service learning
Managers mandate training	Managers coach and mentor employees who lack initiative to locate and use resources
Training materials lean heavily toward eLearning courses	eLearning and performance support materials lean heavily toward job aids
L&D creates traditional eLearning to teach proprietary skills and information	L&D creates job aids and short, narrowly focused training on proprietary skills and information
All employees take the same training and receive uniform materials	Employees find and share a broad variety of materials and solutions
L&D and managers track and measure number of learner hours	L&D and managers track and measure learner activities—and results
L&D tests employees on course material	L&D helps managers develop metrics to evaluate employees' performance
Learning and training occur separately from doing	Learning is integrated into working and doing

## About the Author



Pamela S. Hogle is the staff writer for *Learning Solutions*. She is an experienced journalist, technical writer, editor, and eLearning content developer who has worked in Israel and the United States. Pam has taught university students in person and online and created eLearning content for journalists, college students, and public officials through The Poynter Institute's News University, where she created courses on news literacy, grammar, and numeracy. Pam holds master's degrees in journalism and human-canine life sciences.