



D2L

What is Programmatic Learning?

A beginners' guide to complex skills development

Introduction

Corporate learning continues to evolve (albeit slowly at times). Some say that post-Covid workplace training will never be the same, and whilst that may be true, we have been in a state of flux for many years.

Business needs and requirements change as their customers demand more. The proclivity of the Internet of Things (IoT) and the growing emphasis on the 'customer experience' has meant that many organisations are grappling to get to grips with hugely complex challenges. Yes, the changes 2020 has already seen may well have accelerated digital transformation at work and put it front and centre in many business agendas, but this is not the only challenge many are experiencing.

Declining employee engagement, upskilling and reskilling employees to close the ever-growing skills gap, building robust, scalable supply chains and operational efficiencies, to name a few. But what role do our people play in solving these complicated, multi-faceted challenges?

After all, they are the heart of any business; they are the ones delivering on that stellar customer experience. They're the ones driving profit and results for you. They're keeping your business rolling and truly are the lifeblood of your organisation. It's not a huge leap to understand how integral they are in solving these complicated business challenges.

Supporting and upskilling our employees is vital in these changeable times, but some learning solutions just aren't equipped to enable and empower employees in solving these challenges. Sure, elearning, videos and even Learning Experience Platforms have their place. All these digital, modern approaches are great, but at times they fall short when solving complicated business challenges. That's why many organisations are leaning into programmatic learning. It's certainly not a new concept, but in these modern times their merits, when interwoven with the modern approaches and technology we now have at our disposal, are proving a vital part of any L&D strategy.

So whether you're new to the concept of programmatic learning or not, we're going to explore what it looks like amidst a modern business landscape, and highlight why this old approach, with new strategies, modern technologies and fresh mindsets, may well be the real recipe for success. Not only for learning, but for the business as a whole.

Using technology as the fundamental driver of our learning programmes is what really makes them programmatic. Leveraging AI, digital coaching and roleplay opportunities, and even facilitating group work and collaboration online, not only reaches more people, but it extends the capabilities of what L&D can deliver within the programmes. This wasn't something we could do ten years ago.

This is learning programmes, but not as you know it. Let's look at how we can shake up some old thinking to get better results.

What is programmatic learning?

As we've already briefly explored, the concept of programmatic learning has been around for a long time; in fact, learning programmes often formed a very large part of many learning propositions. However, as technology has improved and learner demands have increased, so has the emphasis on learning programmes been lost. Which is a real shame, because technology supercharges learning programmes. But let us continue.

For a while, there was a clear reason why our focus shifted. Our learners were (and still are) commanding more from their workplace training experiences; there is a clear mandate to treat our people more like consumers.

So we doubled down on new technology and more modern content. We evolved away from formulaic, prescriptive learning environments and opened our doors to content libraries, on-demand learning and self-driven propositions which empowered and enabled our employees to own their learning experience.

In terms of engaging employees and shifting learning cultures, these have had a notable positive impact. They have. But where they are successfully meeting the needs of the learner, so they are struggling to satiate some of the bigger business challenges. And really, don't we need learning to do both?



Aligning learning with business outcomes

So, why is an old learning idea proving potent in modern business? Josh Bersin has already talked about this at length, exploring the evolution of the L&D function and highlighting an overarching need from businesses to deliver learning differently, particularly when looking to better align learning and performance to better business outcomes. He calls them capability academies, others prefer programme-based learning or Competency-Based Learning; but whatever your organisation chooses to call them, there is a compelling argument for their validity and application in the highly complex organisational landscape many of us find ourselves in.

Generally speaking, programmatic learning is a much more detailed, blended learning intervention which spans months, not minutes. Rather than target specific, small skills or just-in-time learning needs—which the likes of social learning and on-demand learning resources do well, by the way—this learning experience is specifically designed to target more complex organisational issues through new skills and knowledge acquisition and application.

solve real business challenges in a way which one-off learning interventions just cannot.

These days, organisations are making heavy use of sophisticated technology to spearhead the delivery of programmatic learning to

Although the solutions can be quite complicated once they're mapped out, fundamentally a 'learning programme' is a variety of different learning experiences spanned over a prolonged period of time. They are commonly led by a combination of in-house SMEs and supported by enhanced digital technology. Fundamentally, they are focused on developing more diverse skill sets within employees. Commonly, these employees are rarely from one function or silo - the logic with programmatic learning is that each department plays a pivotal role in battling broader business challenges.

In a nutshell, the idea behind programmatic learning in the modern day is to develop new knowledge and expertise over time (ideally these days, leveraged by technology). These approaches expose the learner to a depth and breadth of information—in tandem with real-life application—to help tackle more complex organisational challenges.





Source: Fosway Group Limited.

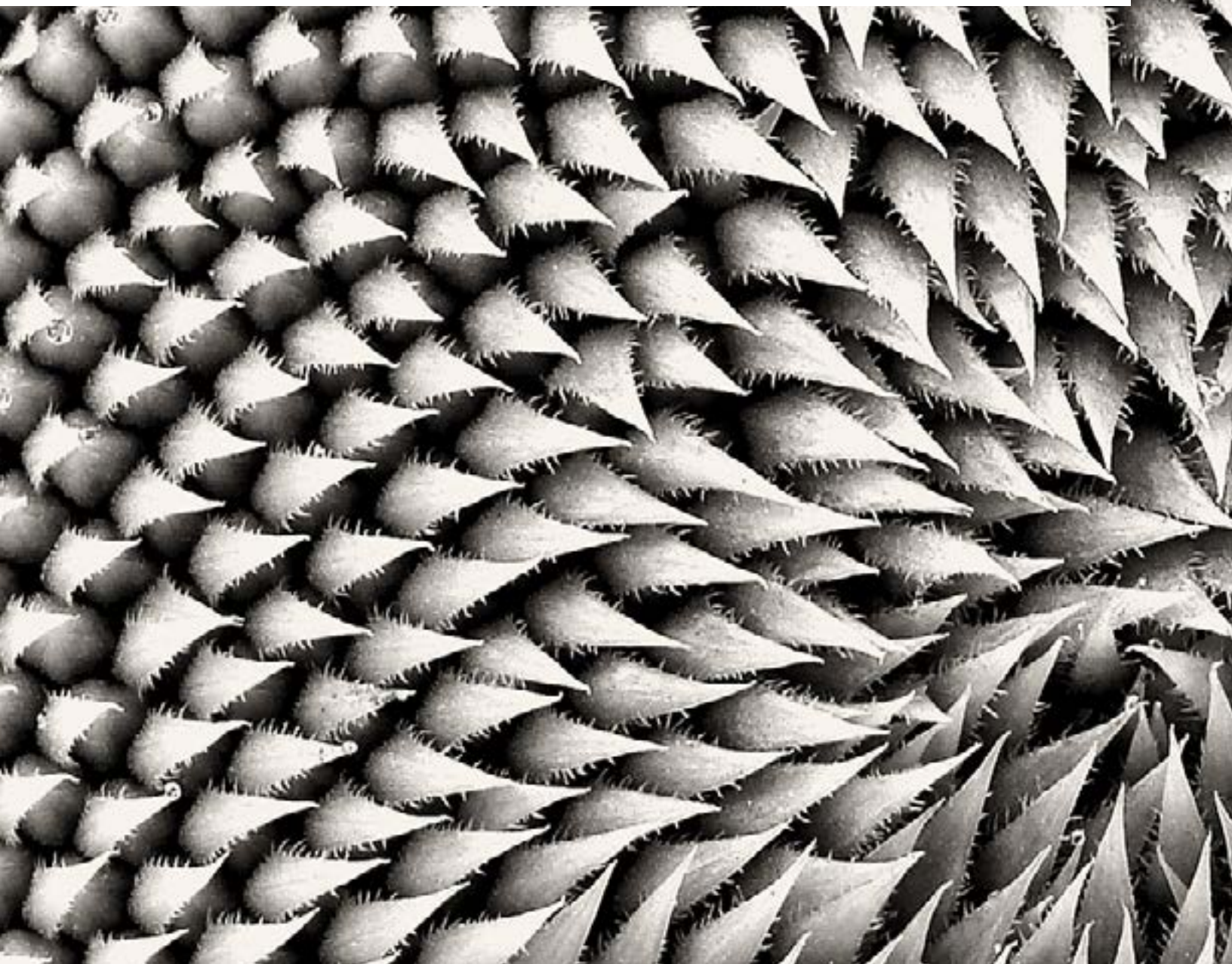
The reason these are gaining traction now is that these complex challenges, such as digital transformation, cannot be tackled by just one function or through a single elearning module or video. On top of that, any face-to-face interaction is likely scuppered for the foreseeable future.

To really overcome big challenges like this, you need the whole business bought in and developed together, creating more cohesion and a higher likelihood of success. Technology-supported programmatic learning supports that.

Why introduce programmatic learning into your business?

For many, it is very clearly understood how a more formulaic, structured approach to delivery workplace learning could well contribute to solving bigger business problems. When used in tandem with sophisticated technology and other modern practices such as social learning and user-generated and on-demand content, programmatic learning can be a formidable strategy for delivering real Competency-based Learning and for tackling those big, meaty business challenges. You know the ones we're talking about, the ones which are keeping everyone awake at night.

So why could they be a real salve for our growing business challenges and pains?



Six business benefits of programmatic learning

01

Those big, gargantuan business challenges are tackled

Broad, complex capability issues, which are often governed by the business and the challenges it needs to solve, are more likely to be effectively tackled through programme-based learning. Due to the complicated nature of these challenges, point-of-need learning just will not solve these issues.

02

Employees get opportunities for real learning in the workflow

Because they span a much longer period of time when compared to one-off learning interventions, learning programmes give employees a chance to not only apply what they have learned but have access to mentoring and coaching (if you're using good tech, you could even do this digitally) to complement what they're learning.

03

Learners are able to understand and apply more complex concepts

The lengthier duration of a learning programme helps individuals to learn more complex skills. And with theories such as spaced practice being applied too, organisations can ensure the knowledge they're imparting sticks as learners build habits and create more neural pathways. Time to truly tackle that forgetting curve.

04

Programmatic learning actively supports growing skills gaps

This is not a drill. It's estimated that by 2022, 42% of the core skills needed to perform existing jobs are expected to change. We are in a period of an immense shift, and businesses must prepare their people for the skills of the future. In many cases, more informal learning scenarios are not equipped to undertake a full employee reskilling challenge; learning programmes are.

05

Actively supports a variety of different audience cohorts and promotes collaboration and cohesion

Because programmatic learning tackles bigger business challenges, which often involve audiences and stakeholders from across the organisation, audience cohorts are working together to achieve business goals. This structured, collaborative approach ensures wider business cohesion across departments and actively supports resolving more complex challenges.

06

Makes use of modern technological innovations for modern learning experiences

Your learners just expect more, and whilst face-to-face learning can still play a role in learning at work, digital is now the way to go. Develop complex soft skills through role playing, coaching, collaboration and more easily with the right technology, meaning learners get what they need more quickly and in a way they expect to.

The reality is, big business problems will not be resolved purely through elearning or social learning. Challenges such as digital transformation (and the skills your business will need to support the looming digital shifts) cannot be overcome through on-demand and informal learning environments alone.

These may well complement the more structured, longer-term learning format of a learning programme, but on their own, they will never affect these bigger changes. By considering how you can truly introduce new skills, processes or ways of working into your workplace through learning programmes and technology, you will begin to understand the complementary nature of programmatic learning to your existing L&D strategies.



When should you use programmatic learning?

To be clear—programmatic learning is not fit for every single desired learning outcome. Indeed, there are many contexts where other strategies will be better equipped to meet your goals. But:

when implemented correctly learning programmes can be highly effective to target complex skills gaps and needs.

We have put together a few examples so you can better understand when and where programme-based learning proves most effective.

Let's look at a hypothetical retailer which has both brick and mortar stores and a sophisticated online commerce channel. They employ over 45,000 employees globally and are grappling with a variety of granular training challenges, as well as much more complex business challenges.



Business Challenge

Keeping employees aware of new products to maximise sales in-store

Minimise employee turnover and increase customer satisfaction scores

Upskill new hires quickly, ensuring engagement and reducing staff churn

Employees are not engaged and display apathetic tendencies towards learning

What's Required?

Ongoing, continuous product knowledge

Leadership development

Both hard and soft skills - ranging from customer service, to how to use the till, conflict management and more

A learning culture shift

Solution

Just in time learning solutions, ideally accessible on mobile and in short, bite-size chunks

Technology enabled programmatic learning, designed to support the development of enhanced leadership skills

A pre boarding and onboarding programme will help to ensure employees are connected to the business and up-to-speed as quickly as possible

A mixture of learning programmes and on-demand, self-driven learning will likely deliver optimal results here

Starting with the business challenge and need, rather than the learning need, will help to better identify which learning solution will best solve your challenge. As you can see, in many cases where there are larger, more complex skills needed, programmatic learning becomes a worthy contender and well worth considering.

Key ways to introduce learning programmes in your business

When it comes to learning programmes, there truly are innumerable applications within your organisation. Let's explore two of the most common use-cases and applications we've come across.



Drive acquisition of high impact skills

Harking back to Bersin's definition, we often see the application of learning programmes as 'Capability Academies' when organisations have a clear need to deliver learning programmes. They're commonly applied to foster a high impact skill such as people leadership, customer service, sales enablement or technical, job-specific capabilities.

Similar to what we have already been discussing so far, this approach will often seek a hybrid learning approach, which combines self-paced learning with elements of application/practice, roleplaying and coaching and feedback from experts, usually by leveraging this 'practice and feedback' loop, organisations are better equipped to ensure tangible attainment of relevant skills.

LET'S LOOK AT IT IN PRACTICE:

A large, global consultancy business has a long-standing relationship with a business school. Every year it delivers a cohort-based program to its Senior Consultants and Consulting Managers focused on business strategy. They know that this complex skill isn't easily acquired, so they have developed an extensive programme to support employees through this process.

Using their learning platform, learners are placed into a cohort then broken into groups, with each group being assigned a Skill Advisor (a Consulting Partner/Principal from the consultancy business). The whole programme is then digitally facilitated by an instructor from the business school.

Skill Advisors can easily provide feedback on incremental work completed by their assigned groups, focused on real-life case applications. To add extra connectivity and engagement, both groups and individual learners earn points on the platform through participation in discussions and assignments which get surfaced on leaderboards on the course homepage.

Blend online and instructor-led training

In contrast to Capability Academies, this approach to learning programmes has a much wider emphasis on providing a blended learning experience. This is common when learning needs require organisations to make use of asynchronous and synchronous elements, both of which intend to make use of instructor-led training (ILT), whether delivered virtually or face-to-face.

This unique blend allows organisations to overcome some of the key challenges associated with ILT, such as difficulty scaling and costs to deliver. We often see organisations developing learning programs which allow instructors/facilitators to interact with their learning audiences asynchronously through tech, such as discussion boards, feedback on assignments/practice challenges and 1-on-1 chats.

LET'S LOOK AT IT IN PRACTICE:

An investment firm has developed a new hire training program for their phone-based customer service and sales roles in its 'Personal Investing' business unit. On their learning platform, new hires go through a combination of self-paced learning modules with their peers, introduce themselves to each other and their coach through discussion boards, then complete real-life exercises and quizzes throughout the course.

Instructors actively observe learner progress through a progress dashboard and schedule individual and group virtual ILT sessions aligned to specific topics of need. Using this method, the firm can reduce operational costs to deliver these programs digitally (which were solely delivered through in-classroom ILT) but also achieve marked improvements in their customer satisfaction scores and average call handling time too.

These are just two examples of how organisations can combine blended learning and modern digital approaches with more traditional coaching, mentoring and instructor-led training to deliver an extremely compelling digital learning programme which is ultimately targeted at resolving widespread business issues.

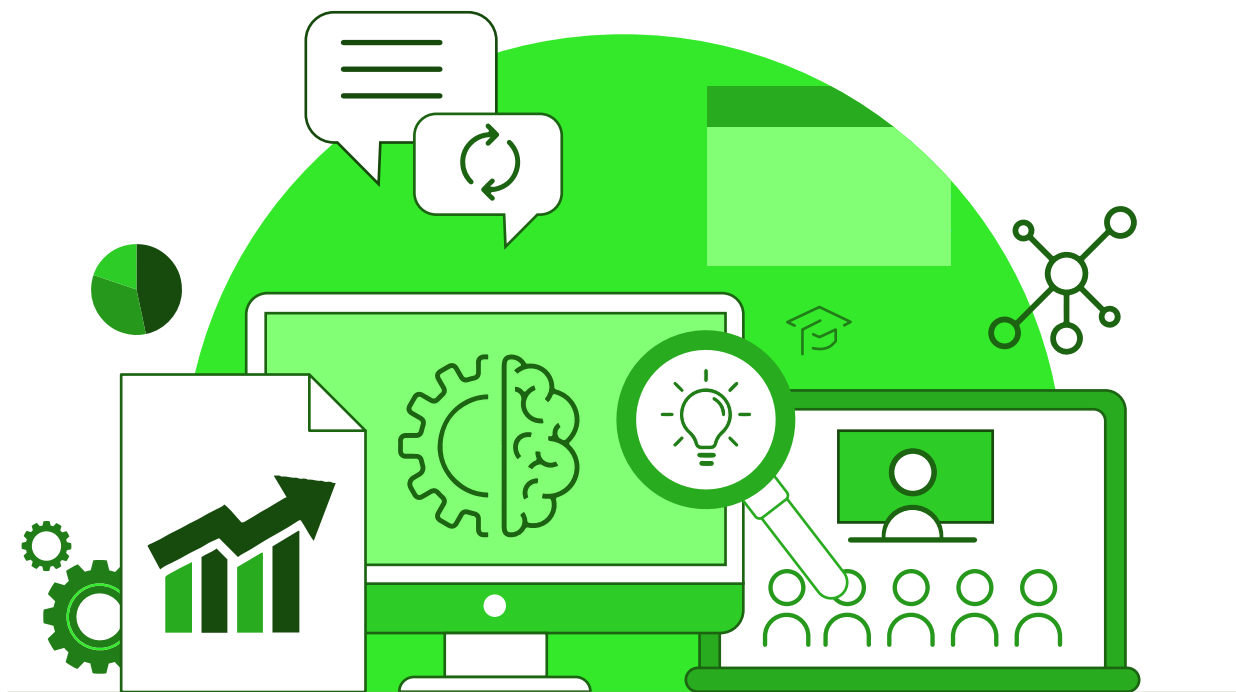
What you'll need to support programmatic learning

If you're starting to seriously think about legitimate applications for programmatic learning in your organisation, it isn't a case of just saying: "We're doing learning programmes now!" We'd love for that to be the case, but as with any real, strategic shifts, there are going to be changes and new resource requirements which you will need to consider.

For example, in both scenarios we just discussed with the investment firm, they clearly make use of SMEs, in-house coaches and instructors. But they also leveraged technology to deliver learning opportunities in both a synchronous and asynchronous manner.

Particularly, if you don't want to manually manage these programmes yourself, it's likely you're going to need some tech to support it.

That doesn't necessarily mean that you need to go out and buy a new learning platform. But you might. To truly understand whether your existing tech stack is truly equipped to support the delivery of sophisticated training programmes, consider the following when thinking of your tech.



AT THE MOMENT:

- Are you able to build adaptable learning pathways? It may well seem an obvious one, but many learning platforms aren't equipped to support long-term learning pathways. Look for systems which support personalisation and allow learners access to content as they progress. After all, learners seeing their entire 6-month programme all at once could feel quite overwhelming.
- Can you map specific learning directly to outcomes? Can you clearly correlate and map out performance vs learning?
- Will your platform allow learners to undertake structured assessments, ideally supported with a feedback framework?
- Does your platform support learning in the workflow? Is there scope for learners to evidence real-world practice such as asynchronous video assignments, discussions, reflection etc? Are SMEs/mentors able to grade and feedback on these elements?
- What online collaboration tools are available at your disposal? Look for social feeds, virtual classrooms, space for role play and chats and ideally, workspace integrations with the likes of MS Teams.
- Can you automate any elements of the programmes? The more you can reduce your administrative work, the better. Consider how AI and intelligence-driven solutions could best support you here.

This is absolutely not a finite list, but by starting to consider how equipped your L&D function is with tech, you'll start to understand how quickly you might be able to introduce programmatic learning into your organisation.

A final thought

The reality is, here in L&D we do need to go beyond the progress we've already made. The world, and business, is moving fast. Business is changing, skills are shifting and L&D needs to keep pace with these swift adjustments. We're not suggesting you throw the baby out with the bathwater; but definitely consider how introducing digitally-driven learning programmes into your learning mix could help you better align with business goals and really help conquer some of the more complex skills challenges which are headed your way in the not too near future.

Let's give them the skills they need to succeed;
your success is sure to follow.

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