D2L

Invest, Upskill, Excel

Employers and employees identify enhanced learning and development as keys for success.

Executive Summary

Two trends are actively shaping workforce conversations in 2024:

1. A tight labor market has made recruitment and retention a top priority and underscored the need for investments in skills developmentfor new and existing employees.

2. The rapid pace of technology-driven transformation has further increased pressure to keep workforce skills current.

A continuous learning culture is a key marker of high-performing organizations, but keeping up with changing skills needs presents new challenges for even the most established employers as the shelf life of skills grows shorter.

To better understand the perspectives of both employers and employees in navigating this critical issue of workforce upskilling, early in 2024, D2L commissioned Morning Consult to conduct two surveys: one of learning and development leadership and another of full-time employed adults. The findings highlight the critical role of skills development in addressing talent retention and readiness for future disruption.

Insights from employers:

Recruitment and retention are the top human resources concerns for 82% of organizations, outranking concerns about employee engagement and productivity, leadership and management development, and adapting to innovation and technology.

An overwhelming majority—**92%—of learning leaders agree that effective training and development programs contribute to higher employee retention.**

Employers recognize the value in investing in the development of their current workforce, with 55% saying they would invest more in developing current employees compared with only 12% who say they would invest more in new hires to address their top human resources concerns.

Although 42% of employees prefer online education or training to in-person-only offerings, only 29% of organizations report using technology to deliver training.

Insights from employees:

83% of employees recognize that ongoing skills development is important to their overall job performance, signaling a strong interest in continuous upskilling opportunities. However, only half of employees (51%) have completed any formal education or training outside work in the past five years.

The primary motivators for employees pursuing additional education or training are increased earning potential (64%) and career advancement opportunities (44%). Employees are most likely to say that relevance to their work (58%) or opportunities for practical application (41%) are the most important aspects of an effective training program.

41% of employees would look to their current employer first for building job- or industry-specific skills, while only 17% would look to a community college and only 14% would seek out a university for the same training.

For employees, **time constraints (42%) and a lack of motivation (35%) are the top-rated barriers** to pursuing additional training or education at their jobs. One in three employees (33%) reports seeking out skills development or training opportunities only as needed.

Effective learning and development offerings have the potential to be real differentiators for employers— if they're done right. This paper will explore these findings in greater detail and share recommendations based on D2L's experience in the learning space on best practices and common pitfalls.

Introduction

2024 marks an important milestone for D2L: It's our 25th anniversary as a company dedicated to transforming the way the world learns. When D2L was founded in 1999, conversations about the future of work and learning ("Wait, we can put a syllabus online?") looked quite different from today ("How can artificial intelligence [AI] help enhance instruction?"). Now, we are proud to power the technology-enabled learning experiences of 18.5 million users in K-12 schools, higher education institutions and corporate learning.

For the past four years, D2L has commissioned original survey research on the key trends we are observing in higher education, workforce development and talent management.[i] This body of work has advanced a common message: In today's learning landscape, a confluence of transformational shifts is reshaping the ways in which we work and learn.

Two words often dominate this conversation: **unprecedented** and **change**. The reality is change arrived a long time ago and is no longer unprecedented. The forces we have written about in prior years—demographic shifts, rapid advancements in technology and a shortened half-life of skills—continue to impact the ways in which we work and our need for learning, but they are now happening at an accelerated pace.

We are currently experiencing what is widely considered one of the most transformative and rapid technological periods of change with the rise of generative AI.

A sampling of recent headlines illustrates the frenzy that has accompanied advancements in AI. We have already reached a stage where generative AI can support interactions with customers, generate creative content for marketing and sales, and draft computer code based on natural language prompts.

> **"Hottest Job in Corporate America? The Executive in Charge of A.I."**
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> Many feared that AI would kill jobs. But hospitals, insurance companies and others are creating roles to navigate and harness the disruptive technology.[ii]
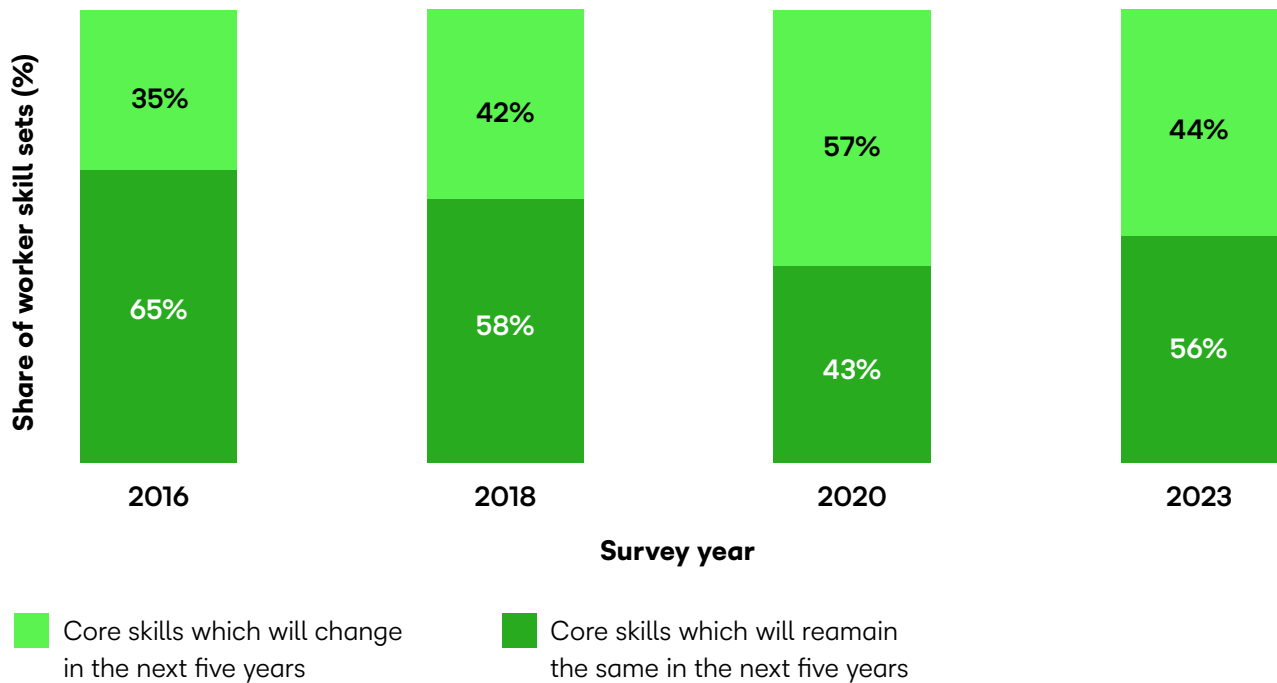>
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> **"IBM CEO says AI will impact white-collar jobs first, but could help workers instead of displacing them"**
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> As working-age populations decline, IBM chairman and CEO Arvind Krishna said AI presents one of the only solutions to addressing potential productivity shortfalls.[iii]
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> **"The world's top tech companies are launching a consortium to address AI's impact on the workforce"**
>
> The consortium will recommend reskilling and upskilling opportunities to ensure workers can adapt.[iv]

DISRUPTIONS TO SKILLS — WEF FUTURE OF JOBS REPORT 2023

Share of worker skill sets (%)

Year	Core skills which will change	Core skills which will remain
2016	35%	65%
2018	42%	58%
2020	57%	43%
2023	44%	56%

Survey year

■ Core skills which will change in the next five years

■ Core skills which will reamain the same in the next five years

There are big changes underway for every industry, and with them come big questions on how we upskill workforces—impacting everyone from employees in executive and management positions to workers who will now need to use AI in their roles and those who will need to retrain.
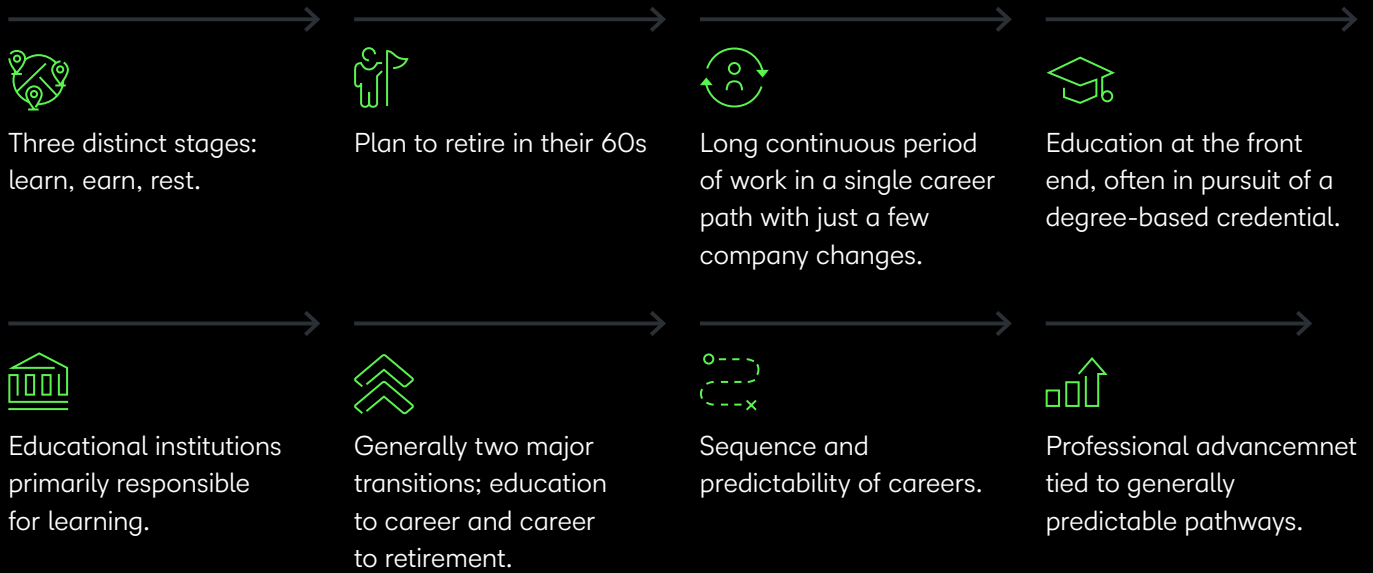
The World Economic Forum's latest Future of Jobs report projected that 44% of workers' skills will be disrupted by 2027, with complex problem-solving, creative thinking and technology literacy—especially in AI and big data—among the top skills growing in importance.[v] This isn't a new trend. There's been a steady need for individuals to upskill around half of their core skills in all the previous years that this survey was done.
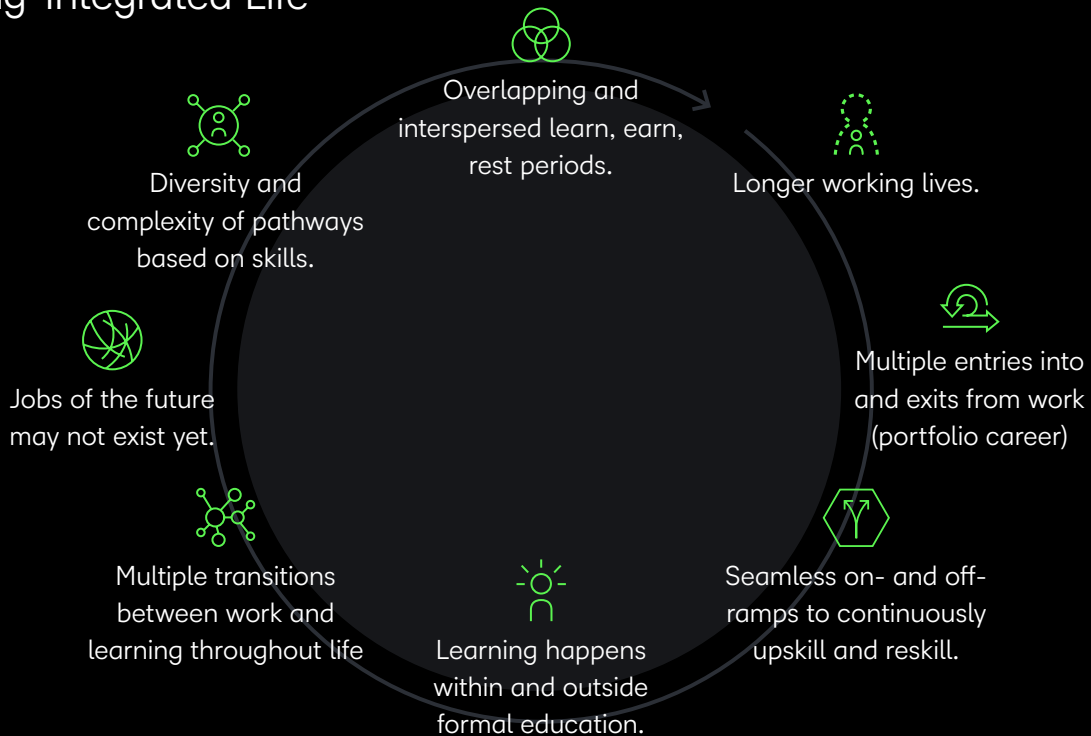
Our current model for skills attainment is still catching up to the reality that we no longer have an economy in which job skills have a long shelf life.

The traditional linear life—three distinct stages of learn, earn, rest, with education at the front end followed by generally predictable pathways to growth and career advancement—is not realistic.

Traditional Linear Life[vi]

Three distinct stages: learn, earn, rest.

Plan to retire in their 60s

Long continuous period of work in a single career path with just a few company changes.

Education at the front end, often in pursuit of a degree-based credential.

Educational institutions primarily responsible for learning.

Generally two major transitions; education to career and career to retirement.

Sequence and predictability of careers.

Professional advancemnet tied to generally predictable pathways.

Learning-Integrated Life

Overlapping and interspersed learn, earn, rest periods.

Diversity and complexity of pathways based on skills.

Longer working lives.

Jobs of the future may not exist yet.

Multiple entries into and exits from work (portfolio career)

Multiple transitions between work and learning throughout life

Learning happens within and outside formal education.

Seamless on- and off-ramps to continuously upskill and reskill.

The speed of change we're experiencing requires what we at D2L refer to as a **learning-integrated life:**[iiv]

- Individuals are always in a learning mindset.

- Intensive and episodic opportunities for learning are woven throughout the fabric of our lives, preparing us for successful careers and rich experiences.

- This should be available to **all**—regardless of prior education attainment, income level or work experience.

The reality is we are somewhere in the middle today—between the linear and the integrated. There is a lot of talk about upskilling and all the new ways people can learn, but there are also ongoing challenges in creating a cohesive system that is navigable, accessible, affordable and seamless.

We are in an incredibly tight labor market today. Businesses of every size, in every state and across every sector continue to face immense challenges trying to find skilled workers to fill open jobs. The latest data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that while there are 8.5 million job openings in the U.S., there are only 6.5 million unemployed workers.[ix] So it's even more important than ever that employers think seriously about the value proposition they're offering to employees.

Higher education institutions—particularly in continuing education—and training organizations are actively working to design high-quality, flexible and industry-aligned training to better serve working learners. To ensure continued interest and relevancy for this type of consumer, organizations will benefit from designing programs that ensure learners gain clear, industry-relevant skills that boost their employability and that they leverage institutional strengths to meet industry needs. While this paper focuses on the employer side of the equation, D2L has written about this before in a recent white paper, *Enabling Learning for Life.*[iiv]

Perspectives on upskilling from employers and employees

D2L wanted to better understand the perspectives of learning and development (L&D) leaders on key organizational challenges and their approaches to investing in employee upskilling, as well as the experiences of employees in navigating upskilling offerings. In January 2024, D2L commissioned Morning Consult to conduct two surveys in the United States, one of full-time employed adults (n=857) and another of L&D leaders with the title of director or above (n=313).[1]

1 Each data set was weighted to approximate a target sample based on age, gender, race, educational attainment and region. For the employee survey, results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points. For the L&D survey, results from the full survey have a margin of error of plus or minus six percentage points.

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Employers see recruitment and retention as a top HR concern

KEY FINDINGS:

- 82% of L&D leadership rank talent acquisition and retention as the most concerning human resources (HR) challenge facing their organizations today.

- 92% of L&D leadership feel that effective training and development programs contribute to higher employee retention, and 77% of employees feel the same.

When asked how concerning several HR challenges are for their organizations, recruitment and retention came out on top. A significant majority—**82% of L&D leadership—rank talent acquisition and retention as the most concerning HR challenge facing their organizations** today. Also significant but ranked 11 percentage points lower is the concern about employee engagement and productivity.
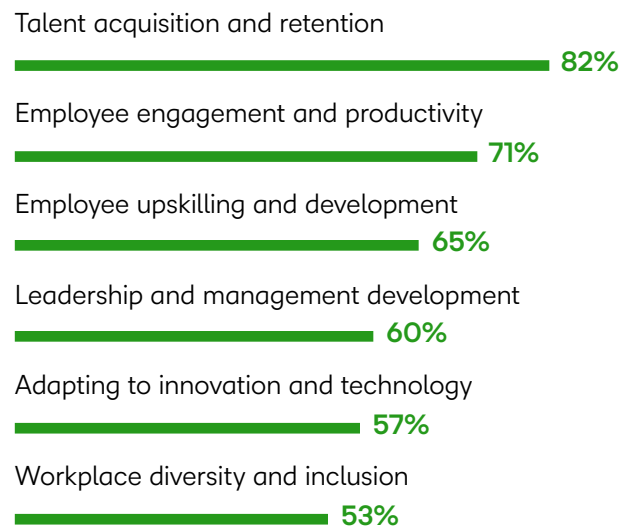
The traditional focus for learning leaders in organizations has been on designing and delivering training programs to enhance employee skills, knowledge and performance, covering areas such as onboarding, compliance and leadership development. However, with rapid technological advancements, changing workforce demographics and the rise of remote and hybrid work models, L&D is increasingly seen as a strategic partner in business, contributing directly to broader organizational goals such as talent acquisition, retention and engagement. This evolution is elevating the value of training and development, making it a crucial component of addressing recruitment and retention challenges.

As evidence of this point, D2L's survey results found that **92% of L&D leadership feel that effective training and development programs contribute to higher employee retention**, and 77% of employees feel the same.

By aligning L&D initiatives with organizational goals, companies can not only enhance employee performance but also create a more attractive and engaging workplace, ultimately supporting talent acquisition and retention efforts.

TOP HUMAN RESOURCES CONCERNS
How concerning is each of the following human resources challenges facing your organization today?

Talent acquisition and retention
82%

Employee engagement and productivity
71%

Employee upskilling and development
65%

Leadership and management development
60%

Adapting to innovation and technology
57%

Workplace diversity and inclusion
53%

*Total % very and somewhat concerning

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Employers recognize the value of investing in developing the current workforce

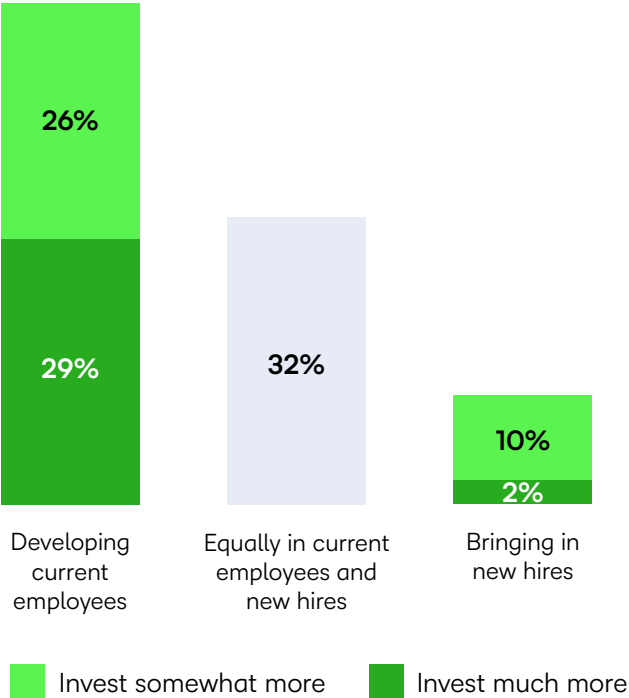We also wanted to understand how firms are prioritizing their investments to address talent shortages. The results are striking. While **55% of L&D leadership report their organizations would invest more in developing current employees** to address their most pressing HR challenges, only 12% say they would invest more in bringing in new hires. Thirty-two percent say they would invest equally in current employees' L&D and bringing in new hires.

According to new McKinsey & Co. research, employee disengagement and attrition could cost a midsize S&P 500 company between $228 million and $355 million a year in lost productivity.[x] Further underscoring the value of investing in existing employees to improve retention, earlier McKinsey research has found that, on average, replacing an employee can cost 20% to 30% of an annual salary, while reskilling costs less than 10%.[xi] Investing in skills development for existing employees can help an organization retain institutional knowledge, save time with onboarding and offboarding, and create trust in employees that they are worth the investment.

INVESTMENTS IN CURRENT EMPLOYEES VS. NEW HIRES
To address your most pressing human resources challenges, will you invest primarily in developing current employees, or will you invest more into hiring outside talent?

	Developing current employees	Equally in current employees and new hires	Bringing in new hires
Invest somewhat more	26%		10%
Invest much more	29%		2%
Equally		32%	

Invest somewhat more   Invest much more

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Employers feel the urgency of preparing their workforce for AI changes

KEY FINDINGS:

- 75% of L&D leadership express a strong sense of urgency in preparing their organizations for the effects of AI and automation on their work.

- AI and machine learning are among the top skills employees and L&D leadership see as the most important to develop in the next three years, along with human skills and leadership and management skills.

The integration of AI into business processes has the potential to significantly enhance operational efficiency and innovation. However, the true benefits will only be realized when employees are adept at using the technology to its full potential.

D2L's research shows that 75% of L&D leadership express a strong sense of urgency in preparing their organizations for the effects of AI and automation on their work.

Moreover, both employees and L&D leadership rank AI and machine learning as among the top three skills that are the most important to develop in the next three years, along with human skills and leadership and management skills.

In another survey D2L conducted in January 2024, more than half (52%) of Generation Z workers and 45% of millennials surveyed expressed concern about being replaced within the next year by people with better AI skills compared to about a third (33%) of Generation X workers.[xii] Almost 40% of respondents felt their employers were not prioritizing AI professional development opportunities.

A proactive approach to the L&D of these skill sets ensures that companies can harness the full potential of new technologies, driving productivity and fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Employees want to see a path to advancement

KEY FINDINGS:

- 83% of employees recognize that ongoing skills development is important to their overall job performance.

- The primary motivators for employees pursuing additional education or training are increased earning potential—64%—and career advancement opportunities—44%.

In today's competitive job market, career advancement opportunities are more critical than ever for employee retention and satisfaction. Employees need to see clear pathways for growth within their organizations. In D2L's survey, **83% of employees recognize that ongoing skills development is important to their overall job performance.**

Recent research underscores a persistent demand for development opportunities and how perception of paths to advancement impact employee commitment and retention. A 2023 MIT Sloan Management Review study revealed that 67% of the individual contributors surveyed said they want to advance their career, yet nearly half (49%) feel a lack of good career advice has hurt their job trajectory. This aligns with findings from a 2022 McKinsey study, which identified a lack of career development and advancement as the most common reason given for quitting a job.
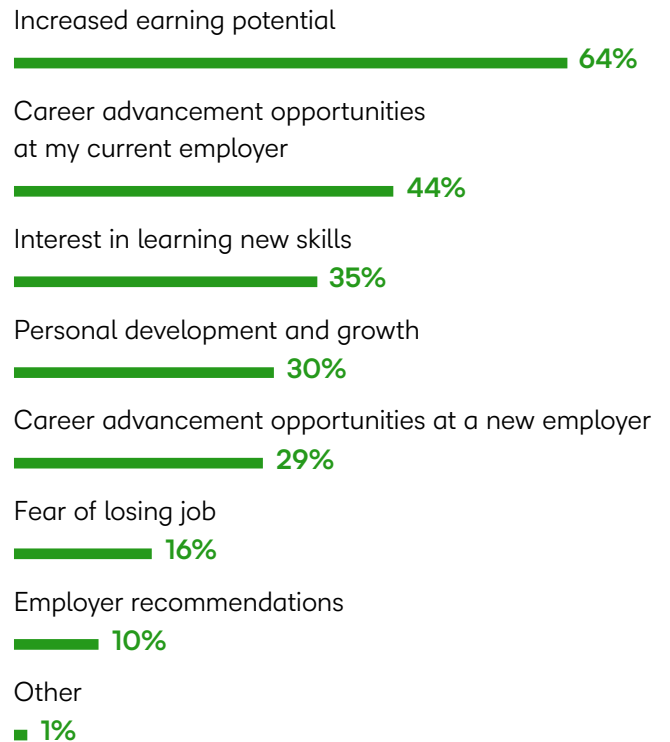
D2L's research shows that the primary motivators for employees to pursue additional skills training are:

1. increased earning potential (64%)
2. career advancement opportunities at their current employer (44%)

This reflects a strong desire for growth and development in their current roles, suggesting a workforce that is keenly aware of the benefits of upskilling.

The data paints a clear picture: Employees are eager to grow and advance, but they would benefit from better support and more structured opportunities from their employers to do so. For employers, this is a call to action. Investing in robust career development programs and clear advancement pathways can not only support employees' career aspirations but also drive higher retention and engagement, ultimately leading to organizational success.

WHAT FACTORS WOULD MOTIVATE YOU TO PURSUE ADDITIONAL SKILLS TRAINING ON YOUR OWN? SELECT UP TO THREE.

Increased earning potential
64%

Career advancement opportunities at my current employer
44%

Interest in learning new skills
35%

Personal development and growth
30%

Career advancement opportunities at a new employer
29%

Fear of losing job
16%

Employer recommendations
10%

Other
1%

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Employers are seen as the go-to source for job- or industry-specific training

KEY FINDINGS:

- 41% of employees view their current employer as the provider they would look to first to build job- or industry-specific skills.

- This is contrasted with only 17% who say they would look to a community college and only 14% who would seek out a university for the same training.

In an era defined by rapid technological advancements and the shrinking half-life of skills, both employers and employees alike recognize the critical importance of continuous L&D to remain competitive in this dynamic environment.

D2L's employee survey found that employee preference for employer-provided training is strong, with **41% of employees viewing their current employer as the provider they would look to first to build job- or industry-specific skills.** This is significantly higher than the 17% who would look to a community college or the 14% who would seek out a university for the same training. Organizations that invest in skills development have better business results by developing the workforces they have and promoting them internally to improve retention, productivity and performance.[xiii]

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Continuous upskilling is not yet the norm for employees
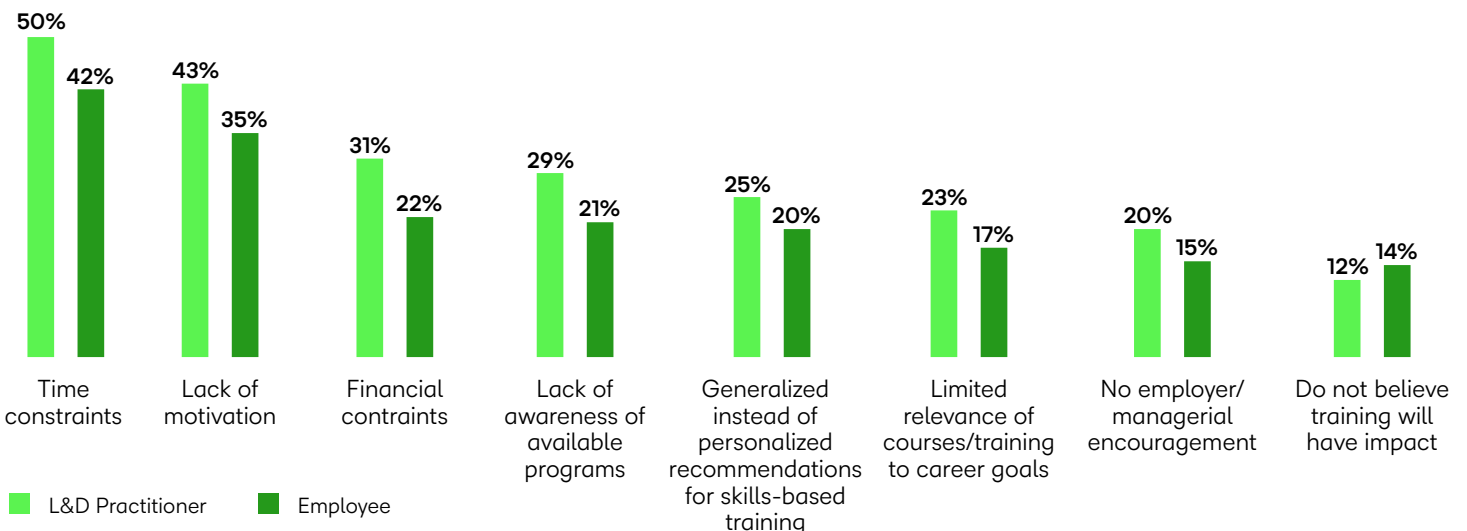
KEY FINDINGS:

- Only about half—51%—of employees have completed formal education or training outside work in the past five years.

- **Time, lack of motivation and financial constraints** rank among the top reasons employees do not take on additional education or training opportunities.

- 33% of employees report seeking out skills development or training opportunities only as needed.

In previous research papers, D2L has found that despite a strong interest in upskilling, few employees tend to follow through and complete additional education or training.[xiv] This year's survey shows that **only about half (51%) of employees have completed any formal education or training outside work in the past five years.**

Time and financial constraints remain among the top reasons employees do not take on additional education or training opportunities, consistent with D2L research from previous years. In addition, this year, both L&D leadership and employees report a lack of motivation is another top barrier. One in three employees (33%) reports seeking out skills development or training opportunities only as needed. For employees to be motivated to dedicate time—sometimes outside working hours—to additional training, they need to understand the value and direct relationship between what they are learning and why it is relevant to their job performance and future growth opportunities.

WHAT ARE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS TO PURSUING ADDITIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT OR TRAINING?

	L&D Practitioner	Employee
Time constraints	50%	42%
Lack of motivation	43%	35%
Financial contraints	31%	22%
Lack of awareness of available programs	29%	21%
Generalized instead of personalized recommendations for skills-based training	25%	20%
Limited relevance of courses/training to career goals	23%	17%
No employer/managerial encouragement	20%	15%
Do not believe training will have impact	12%	14%

Employers and employees both want relevant, accessible and online training
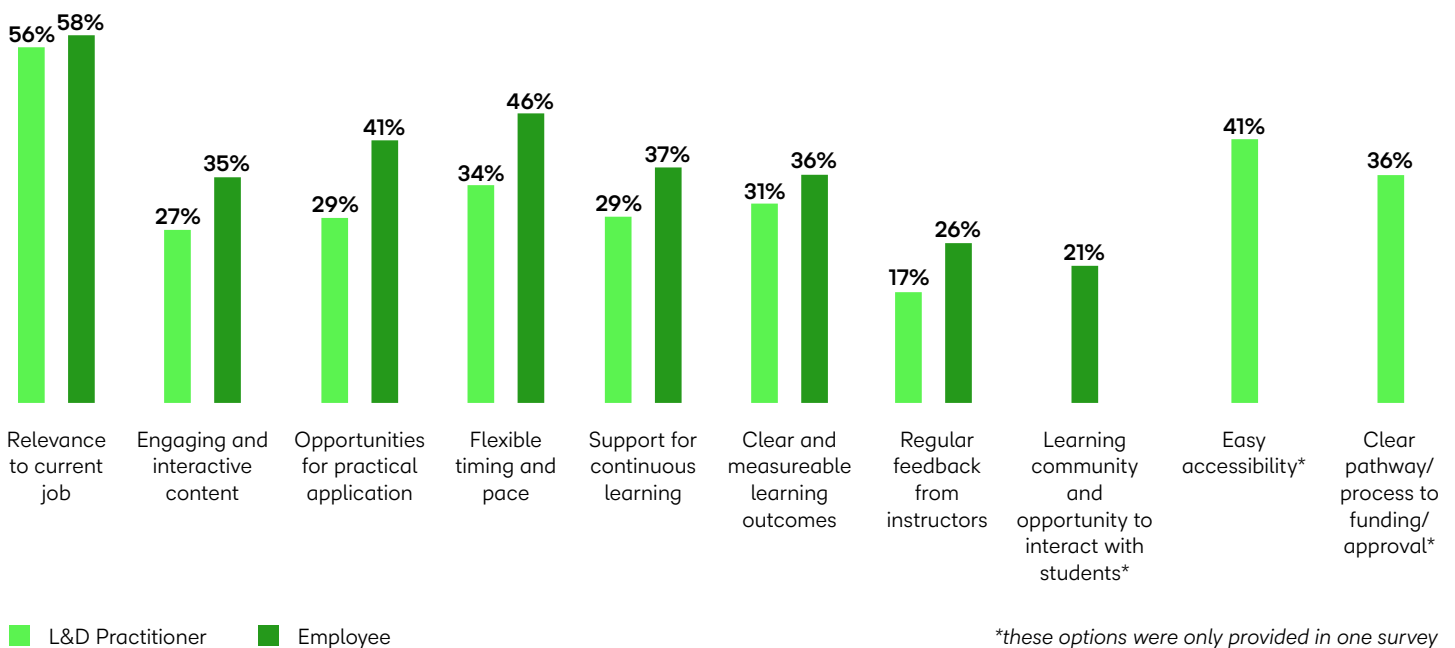
KEY FINDINGS:

- 56% of L&D leadership and 58% of employees feel that the most important aspect of an effective training program is relevance to an employee's job role.

- 41% of employees feel that opportunities for practical application make an effective training program.

To better understand the priorities that both L&D leadership and employees have for getting value from training, D2L asked both groups to rank a list of options from most important to least important for an effective training program. Both L&D leadership and employees agree on the most important aspect: relevance to an employee's job role. More than half—56% of L&D leadership and 58% of employees—ranked this in their top three reasons. For employees, another important aspect is opportunities for practical application, with 41% of employees ranking this highly.

WHAT ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF AN EFFECTIVE TRAINING PROGRAM?

(% Rank 1-3)

Aspect	L&D Practitioner	Employee
Relevance to current job	56%	58%
Engaging and interactive content	27%	35%
Opportunities for practical application	29%	41%
Flexible timing and pace	34%	46%
Support for continuous learning	29%	37%
Clear and measureable learning outcomes	31%	36%
Regular feedback from instructors	17%	26%
Learning community and opportunity to interact with students*		21%
Easy accessibility*	41%	
Clear pathway/process to funding/approval*		36%

■ L&D Practitioner ■ Employee

*these options were only provided in one survey

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Employers see recruitment and retention as a top HR concern

KEY FINDINGS:

- 78% of organizations are using technology to facilitate skills development, but only 30% are using it to manage learning and only 29% to deliver learning.

- 42% of employees indicate a preference for online education or training over in-person-only offerings.

Importantly, it is not just the content of the learning that matters but also how it is delivered. The use of technology in HR for strategic workforce planning and L&D has significant potential. More than three in four organizations surveyed (78%) use technology to facilitate skills development. However, only about one in three uses technology to manage learning (30%) or deliver learning (29%), highlighting a clear opportunity to improve how learning is facilitated, organized and tracked.

Our survey also revealed that 42% of employees indicate a preference for online education or training over in-person-only offerings. By integrating technology into L&D strategies, organizations can create more effective and engaging training programs that meet the evolving needs of their workforce. The combination of relevant context, flexible delivery methods and data-driven insights ensures that both employers and employees can thrive in an ever-changing landscape.

Recommendations

In a time when competition for skilled talent is fierce, organizations of all sizes need to build a culture of continuous upskilling and design strategic learning opportunities to equip employees with the skills and knowledge they need to perform their current jobs and grow into new pathways in their organizations. In a tight labor market, L&D leaders are increasingly seen as strategic partners in business, contributing directly to broader organizational goals such as talent acquisition, retention and engagement. By addressing skills gaps within their organizations, L&D leaders are supporting efforts to build a more engaged, productive and innovative workforce that can support organizational competitiveness and preparation for future disruptions.

Recognize that your talent strategy is your business strategy

In today's rapidly evolving job market, continuous skills development is crucial not just for individual growth but also for organizational resilience and success. Despite 83% of employees recognizing the importance of ongoing skills development for their job performance, only 51% have completed any formal education or training outside work in the past five years. This gap highlights a critical opportunity for organizations to enhance their talent strategies by focusing on relevant and practical learning opportunities that meet employees' aspirations for career advancement and improved earnings.

Invest in employee development. Recognize that attracting and retaining employees with internal development opportunities not only helps build an employer brand that attracts skilled talent but also contributes to a workforce that can withstand disruption. Data from the Burning Glass Institute's American Opportunity Index reveals that companies that maximize talent are 1.6 times more likely to retain workers over a three-year period. By improving retention, they estimate companies could save between $101 million and $424 million in that time.[xv]
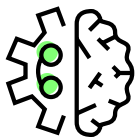
Foster a culture of continuous learning. Implement training programs as part of a continual professional development strategy, rather than a one-time event to provide clear career paths for employees. Encourage employees to document their personal goals for professional development and ongoing training, review with their managers and track their progress leveraging learning platforms. Recognize and reward employees who take the initiative to improve their skills, reinforcing the importance of ongoing professional development and enhancing long-term retention.

Align learning programs with business goals. This involves a deep understanding of the organization's strategic objectives and the role of each department and employee in achieving these objectives. L&D leadership can then design learning programs that are not only relevant and engaging but also directly aligned with business goals.

Prioritize strategic learning opportunities

Employees are increasingly looking to their current employers to provide the job- or industry-specific skills they need, with 41% viewing their employer as their primary source for such training. This is significantly higher than the 17% who would look to a community college or the 14% who would seek out a university for the same training. This underscores the critical role that organizations play in offering relevant and practical learning opportunities that can be directly applied to employees' work, ultimately enhancing their engagement and effectiveness.

Invest in tailored learning experiences. In today's rapidly changing work environment, generalized training programs are often insufficient to meet the specific needs of different employee groups. Specialized learning cohorts allow organizations to create tailored learning experiences that address the unique requirements of those in various roles and career stages. This customization ensures that employees receive training that is directly applicable to their job functions, enhancing their engagement and effectiveness.
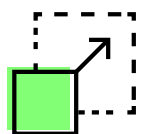
Design outcomes-focused learning experiences. Clearly articulate the specific skills and competencies employees will gain from each training program to enhance their buy-in and commitment. Highlight the practical applications and career benefits, showing how the training aligns with their professional goals. Use success stories to illustrate the real-world impact and value of the training. This approach ensures that employees see the training as a valuable investment in their development rather than just another mandatory task.

Tailor content to learning outcomes. There is a strong correlation between tailored learning programs and the effectiveness of training, as customized content significantly enhances engagement and knowledge retention. Discussions and knowledge testing can further support engagement and attainment of desired outcomes. This approach ensures that training content is not only relevant and impactful but also customized to foster a culture of continuous improvement and skill mastery within the organization.

Leverage industry examples. A prime example of this is Deloitte's Technology Academy, which is designed to support both employees and clients in accessing specialized, in-depth, industry-relevant training on future applications of technologies such as AI, the cloud, cyber, data analytics, 5G and quantum computing.[xvi] This academy-type concept was designed with data from extensive surveys and interviews, highlighting the importance of addressing specific skills needs and prioritizing learning cohorts.

Leverage metrics to track return on investment

In today's dynamic work environment, it is crucial for organizations to not only invest in training and development but also to systematically measure the impact of these investments. Establishing a robust framework for tracking and analyzing the outcomes of training programs can significantly enhance their effectiveness and alignment with business goals.

Establish clear key performance indicators (KPIs) for training programs. Define specific, measurable KPIs that align with your organization's strategic objectives. These might include metrics such as employee retention rates, productivity improvements, time to proficiency and overall employee engagement. By establishing clear KPIs, you can better evaluate the effectiveness of your training programs and their impact on the organization.

Utilize advanced analytics. Employ advanced analytics to gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of your training initiatives. Use data to track progress and outcomes, such as skills acquisition, performance improvements and career progression. Advanced analytics can help identify trends and patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of how training investments are translating into tangible business results.

Conduct regular evaluations. Implement a process for regular evaluation of training programs to ensure they continue to meet organizational needs and deliver value. This includes gathering feedback from participants, assessing their application of learned skills on the job and measuring the long-term impact on performance and business outcomes. Regular evaluations enable you to make data-driven adjustments to training programs, enhancing their relevance and effectiveness over time.

Integrate technology to enhance learning delivery and management

In an era when flexibility and accessibility are paramount, integrating technology into L&D programs has become essential. As organizations seek to meet the diverse needs of their workforce, leveraging technology can enhance both the delivery and management of training initiatives.

Leverage technology to manage learning. Consider the value of platform-based learning to simplify the management of learning activities and make it easier to create, administer and track training programs. Analytics built into the platform can provide insights into learner engagement and effectiveness, ensuring training programs can be assessed accurately for return on investment (ROI).
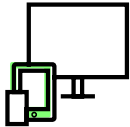
Enhance accessibility and flexibility with online delivery. Embrace the versatility of online platforms to tailor the approach, delivery and content of training for different audiences. By integrating online delivery methods, organizations ensure that training materials are readily accessible to all employees, regardless of their location or schedule. This approach fosters flexibility, empowering individuals to engage with learning resources at their own pace and convenience, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of training initiatives.

Conclusion

The key findings summarized here underscore the critical importance of strategic L&D in today's competitive landscape. By recognizing that your talent strategy is integral to your business strategy, prioritizing tailored learning opportunities, leveraging metrics for tracking ROI and integrating technology to enhance training delivery and management, your organization can effectively address skills gaps and foster a culture of continuous improvement. Implementing these recommendations will not only attract and retain top talent but also ensure your workforce is equipped to navigate the evolving demands of the modern workplace.

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