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Turn your biggest cynics into your best supporters

How to get your managers to champion learning

With 58% of organisations facing reluctance from their line managers regarding new ways of learning [1], companies are looking at **different ways to engage managers** to support new learning initiatives to filter the organisation's enthusiasm through to employees.

Unfortunately, a common attitude amongst managers regarding e-learning is that online courses are simply video footage of classroom lectures [3] – managers see online courses as simply a tick-box exercise to supplement traditional learning. **L&D teams therefore need to change the perspectives of managers** to bring them in line with the latest technology – when implemented correctly.

L&D teams are therefore increasingly raising awareness amongst managers of the benefits of bringing learning online as its own entity. With greater awareness and a better understanding of the benefits e-learning can deliver, it is hoped that **managers will embrace e-learning** and will champion its use amongst their teams.
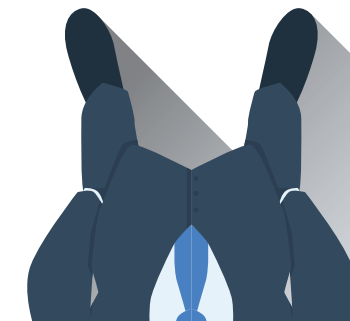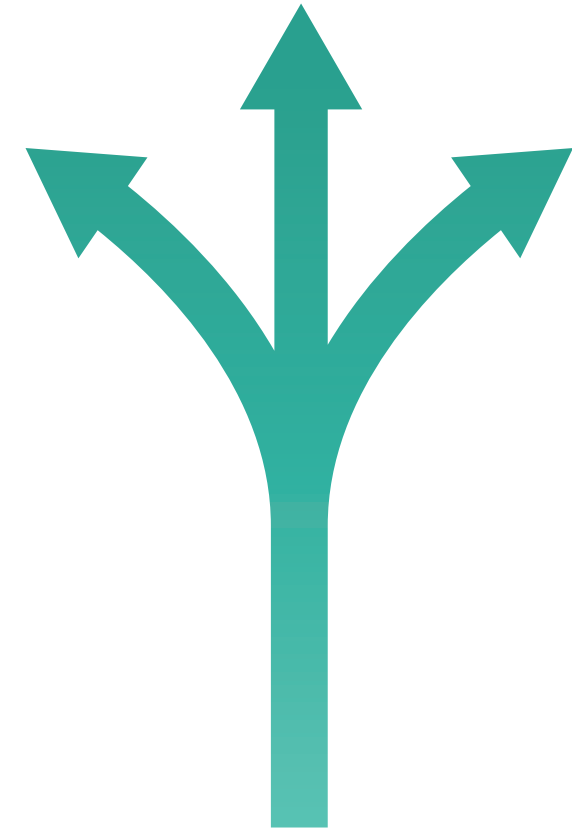
Ever the cynic

Research is proving that managers are increasingly losing faith in learning technologies; in 2014, 32% of managers agreed that they saw the additional business benefits delivered by these technologies. However, in 2017 this fell to just 26% [1].

This decline in trust stems from the sceptical attitudes towards e-learning. When first introduced into organisations, e-learning was seen as the ultimate fix but 'once launched, the technology has proved unsuitable for its desired need despite the hype surrounding it' [2]. Managers were promised that they would notice differences in their team's performance as a result of the training, but in many cases this did not transpire.

This scepticism has been further compounded in recent years due to the 'terrible mobile apps out there' [2], as Owen Ferguson, MD at GoodPractice, puts it – initially, organisations were deploying e-learning due to the popularity and hype surrounding it regardless of its suitability, the quality of the learning courses or the value of users' experience.

Many organisations have implemented e-learning that wasn't designed with its users in mind, making the learning cumbersome and ultimately unfit for purpose. Subsequently, many organisations have not seen the expected results from e-learning, and managers have become increasingly frustrated by their team spending time away from their roles and responsibilities with little perceived business benefit.

Sceptical attitudes towards e-learning comes from a 'general conservativism about everything related to education, as well as the varying quality of online courses' [3].
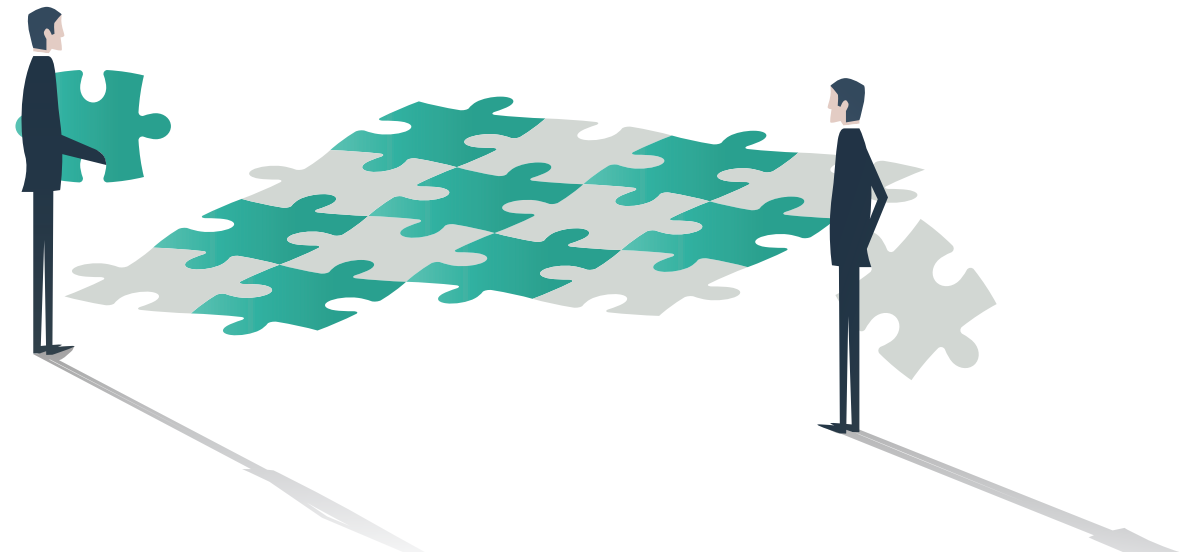
Make yourself accountable

L&D teams need to become more accountable for their e-learning strategies and the online system implemented. Often, L&D teams will implement new systems and then leave them, rather than nurturing and developing the system – and the overarching learning culture – within the organisation as needed [2].

As such, L&D teams need to take ownership for their new system and remove any barriers that may exist from users being able to utilise it [2].

To gain greater support of managers, L&D need to make thorough assessments of where and when learning will be used. If employees are predominantly office-based, a web-based site with a good user-experience will suffice.

However, if workforces are disparate or work remotely, mobile learning might be more appropriate.

This assessment is reliant on L&D teams during their vendor analysis. If they fail to analyse their workforce properly, engagement and adoption rates will be low, further fuelling the scepticism of managers.

This is particularly prevalent with mobile learning – often launched with much fanfare, it can fail to deliver. Whilst good technology is the key to the success and usage of learning technologies, mobile learning can be implemented badly. Mobile learning has long had an image problem [2] as it is considered to be the least useful of all learning methods

tested. However, as with all new technologies, part of the reasoning behind this is that mobile learning has not fully taken off as it takes time for newer technologies to be accepted.

L&D teams can work with managers to uncover whether mobile learning is appropriate for their teams; they can then work closely with the learning vendor to ensure that the learning content is mobile responsive to any device.

If successfully implemented and embedded into an organisation's culture, on-the-go training is well received – but L&D teams need to appreciate that this does not happen overnight [2].

L&D teams must ensure that they thoroughly analyse both their LMS, mobile site and e-learning content to ensure it is fit for purpose and works as intended across all devices. Get this right and learners will be providing great feedback on their learning – get it wrong and they will be most likely complaining, fuelling the fire of scepticism!

With just 25% of L&D leaders agreeing that managers in their organisation recognise that technology-enabled learning delivers tangible business benefit[1], it is clear that there is change to be made with e-learning's image.

In more recent years, online learning has proven to be developing along two distinct paths: towards adaptability, and towards blended learning[3].

It is up to L&D teams to drive these distinctions clearly and cater them best towards their target audience – those that require on-the-go learning, and those that require online support with their classroom-based training.

TOP TIPS: Getting your managers to support e-learning

1. **Encourage managers** to share their concerns with each other so that they can support each other through the changes

2. **Share the implementation process** with managers so that they can plan how best to introduce it to their team

3. **Share a successful case study** of how the online system will improve performance within the team, and during team out of office – bonus points if you can find a case study of the same industry as yours!

4. **Demonstrate the manager-only features** of your LMS in a designated session so that they can understand how the system can support them, making their roles easier

5. **Encourage managers to start a healthy competition** amongst themselves and their teams – who can encourage their team to complete the most courses first?

Choosing the right direction for your learning strategy

When L&D teams are deciding if unlimited accessibility or blended learning is more suitable for their users, they must recognise the differences and tailor the solution to their users; it is fruitless to implement an online learning system without this distinction.

Online courses can be tailored so that they are broken down into bite-sized fragments allowing for training to take place in short sessions. Furthermore, these microlearning courses can allow for better variations, so that learners can 'jump' in and out of learning to suit their needs at the time.

Online courses have the further advantage of being designed to be more interactive and diverse – no more 'death by PowerPoint'! These courses can be aligned with learners' interests, preferences, tasks, priorities and desired depth of coverage for certain topics [3]. Of course, online learning allows users to access the content anywhere, anytime – this makes it adaptable for a number of roles, including for remote workers that may need technical reminders on-the-go.

However, a number of organisations opt to implement online training as an element of blended learning. This is the integration of online and offline education and allows the best parts of these tools to be used [3].

Blended learning has the advantage of giving teachers the time for interactive classroom-based activities, which could include team bonding, whilst allowing students to reinforce their understanding of their new-found knowledge when it's convenient, and as often as it needed [3].
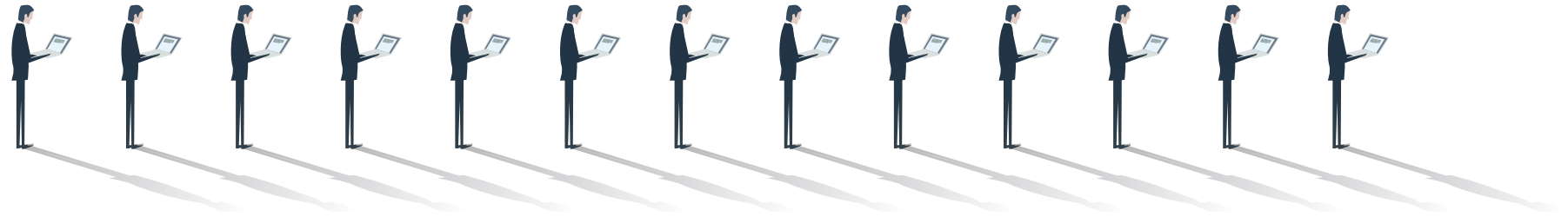
This may be favoured by more traditionally structured organisations where managers may struggle to see the business benefit from online training alone – by reinforcing training through online systems, 60% of managers noted that online learning had made a significant positive impact on performance [2].

In whichever way that organisations use e-learning, the benefits are endless if implemented correctly and nurtured with time. More than 50% of UK managers have reported good experiences with online training [2], and managers of every age agreed that online experiences were inspiring and engaging [2].

This is good news for L&D teams looking to engage with managers; there is no limit on the age or technical ability of manager able to relish the opportunities and business benefits that e-learning brings.

TOP TIPS: to get your managers to champion e-learning

1. **Train managers sufficiently** to use the system so that they can support their team with any queries

2. **Encourage managers to create their own friendly competitions** and leagues amongst their team – teams will be more likely to engage if there is a prize at stakes!

3. **Promote an atmosphere of positive change** – with less out-of-office training days, managers will see less disruption amongst the team

4. **Have them demonstrate** how the learning content will directly and positively affect the team's roles

5. **Ensure that the user-experience is up to scratch** – it is difficult for managers to be influential if the product they are promoting looks dated or is difficult to use

Conclusions

Historically, online learning platforms have tried to replicate the classroom-based learning experience [3]. However, this has often failed – it should be merited for its adaptability, making it suitable for every user's situation, or used in conjunction with classroom training as part of the learning blend.

Online learning should ultimately go beyond the standard face-to-face learning, providing a learning experience that can be tailored to the needs and goals of each individual learner [3]. This can be through automated course recommendations, based on other courses the individual has completed, or through peer recommendation.

If L&D teams implement online learning management systems with the end goal outlined, managers can be more aware of the purpose of the online system, and how it will affect business goals positively whilst reducing training costs and time.

Line managers are crucial to L&D success. L&D teams need to communicate the value managers deliver; they need to highlight how important managers are in the learning journey process thanks to their encouragement to help their team to better work together towards a shared goal.

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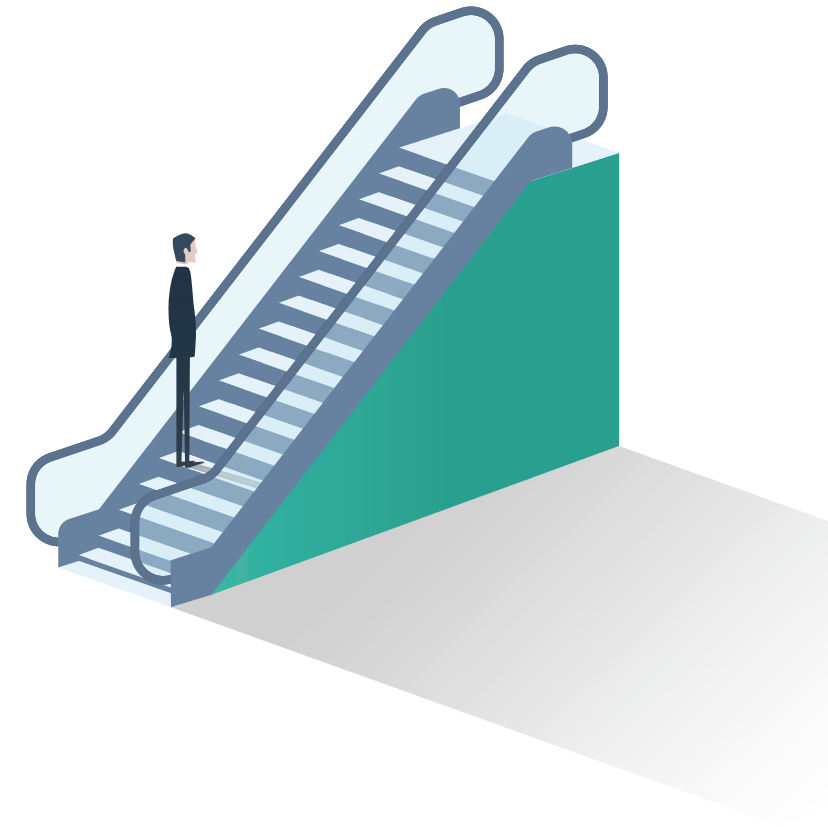
[1] Towards Maturity, 'Learning Benchmark Report', 2017-18

[2] Personnel Today, 'E-learning gains tractions but managers still rate face-to-face training best', 24 November 2017

[3] National Research University Higher School of Economics, 'The future of eLearning will be less an alternative to traditional universities and more an integrative way of managing learning', 10 October 2017

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