



Digital Article / Business Management

Connect Your Learning Programs to Your Company's Strategy

How to upskill employees to align with future needs. by *Anand Chopra-McGowan*

Published on HBR.org / January 10, 2025 / Reprint [H08JKA](#)



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These days businesses are facing more change than ever. And the strongest predictor of whether a company can transform in the face of change is its ability to hire, develop, and retain the necessary talent, according to research from Bain & Company.

In theory, this should be *the* moment for the chief learning officer to have a prominent seat at the table to help the executive team shape

organizational strategy and upskill employees to align with future needs.

But a series of recent interviews I conducted with 25 chief learning officers (CLOs) suggests a disconnect: Almost half of them said they felt only “somewhat connected” to their CEO’s top priorities. This aligns with a recent report from LinkedIn that [found](#) that only 58% of learning and development professionals feel as though they have a “seat at the executive table.”

What can these CLOs learn from their colleagues who feel more closely connected to their company’s strategy? My interviews identified five distinct practices they can adopt.

Apply an agile approach to developing learning programs.

Most companies take far too long to develop large workplace learning programs. LinkedIn’s recent [report](#) found that between 2022 and 2024, fewer than 5% had made it to their final phase. These delays are likely to increase the gap between workplace learning and strategic priorities — and increase frustration among business stakeholders.

To speed up, some companies are adopting a more agile approach to L&D programs, in which cross-functional teams of designers, content developers, and business stakeholders collaborate on learning experiences that are continuously improved with feedback and testing.

Standard Chartered is one company that’s adopted this approach. Its L&D team went from having dedicated account managers serving each line of business to having multidisciplinary teams who are more able to “grasp all the creative possibilities” for a given learning need, according to Dr. Amelie Villeneuve, the bank’s global head of learning. As a result, the relationship between business stakeholders and the

learning function has improved. According to Villeneuve, her business stakeholders now participate in a “diagnostic conversation with our team” instead of simply ordering learning programs from a menu. “This enables us to have much more strategic conversations.”

When PwC wanted to encourage its employees' adoption of AI, an agile approach helped CLO Leah Houde respond to the business priority much faster. “In the first six months we operated in sprints,” she explains. “We didn't know what would be coming and didn't want to have to re-do a year-long strategy.”

Even if adopted partially, an agile approach can help speed up production. “We've got small and agile teams within the business who can turn things around on a dime,” says Mike Kosiarek, vice president of learning and development at Navy Federal Credit Union. “Now, we partner with those teams to increase capacity when we need to take something to enterprise scale.”

Design workplace learning around strategic priorities instead of roles.

Most workplace learning focuses on training people for individual roles and functions. *Training Magazine's* [annual survey](#) found that only 28% of training went to categories deemed as “function-agnostic,” such as management, executive, and communication training.

Some CLOs I spoke to say their companies are benefiting from rethinking the focus on roles, particularly when the company needs to move quickly in a new direction.

At Novo Nordisk, Head of Global Learning & Development Sanne Manton Macaire's team focuses on “the most important enterprise skills and mindsets.” For example, one program, focused on

digitalization, is made available to all employees. While a more traditional approach would have built individual training programs for each function, the current digitalization program covers a range of topics, including digital enablers, patient profiles, digital marketing, automation in production, and more. According to Manton Macaire, this approach is delivering far greater impact: “We see a 46% improvement in participants’ ability within our bespoke ‘digital acumen’ skill set,” she says. “Even more impressively, the number of digital experiments is up 85%, which we take as a direct proxy for business impact.”

L’Oréal has practiced a cross-functional approach to learning for nearly a decade. In 2015, then-CEO Jean-Paul Agon committed the company to shift e-commerce revenue from single-digit percentages to 20% of total sales. This required a massive shift in the mindset and skills of leaders.

To achieve this, L’Oréal launched a leadership simulation called the “wine game,” in which leaders from general management, marketing, sales, supply chain, finance, and legal come together for two days to learn how to sell wine online. The game takes place on real platforms, teaching leaders about digital ads, web analytics, customer experience, and brand positioning. CLO Nicolas Pauthier credits this program with playing a significant role in achieving L’Oréal’s ambitious e-commerce goals. In 2023, L’Oréal’s revenue from e-commerce was 27% of total sales.

Design learning experiences that encourage application.

However well their workplace learning programs are conceived or designed, CLOs will only be able to have a meaningful impact on strategic priorities when participants actually apply new skills and behaviors.

New formats for workplace learning can make it easier for this application to happen. For example, as part of a program to increase the adoption of AI tools, PwC launched a hybrid learning initiative called “prompting parties.” These facilitated virtual events were designed to help partners and employees experiment in a guided, hands-on environment. Super users of ChatPwC, the firm’s internal AI tool, led these sessions, in which participants tested various AI prompts and learned how to apply AI as an integral part of their everyday roles. “In the first six months, we focused on building a base of knowledge and interest and comfort”, said Houde. Within the first month of the AI enablement program, the firm received more than 400 requests for additional prompting parties, underscoring the demand for interactive, practice-based learning.

Standard Chartered used “brain training games” to get employees to practice new behaviors and integrate what they learned into their daily work. These are two-minute tasks designed to build habit and reduce reaction time. They can be used to enhance product knowledge, explain acronyms, or build functional skills. For example, a brain training game on data analysis rapidly shows random examples of clean and “dirty” data sets, prompting the user to spot errors or make choices that help them more quickly evaluate the quality of the data they work with. According to Villeneuve, “We’ve delivered over 86 internally built brain training games and we’ve been able to prove that many of these new methods improve productivity, product knowledge and speed to desk radically.”

Move from participation-based KPIs to outcome-based KPIs.

CLOs must be able to show that their efforts have a positive impact on the metrics that matter most to their companies. And yet, according to [LinkedIn](#), only 30% of L&D professionals measure this.

One more outcome-based approach is to focus on productivity metrics that quantify improvements in speed and effectiveness. For example, the CLO of a large luxury goods company described a learning initiative that was designed to boost sales from online channels. The program played out over eight months and included webinars, project work, and self-paced material, culminating in a two-day hackathon to identify solutions for a specific challenge the business was facing. One team focused on improving the search bounce rate, a crucial measure of the number of people who arrive on a product's website from a search engine and then leave quickly. The lower the bounce rate, the more likely the customer will buy something. Four months after the program, the company saw a significant improvement in the bounce rate, easily justifying the cost of the training program.

Another approach is to apply a longitudinal perspective. Nestlé assesses the impact of its long-running leadership development program on participants' long-term career progression. The company created a talent and performance dashboard that tracks performance, promotion rates, and turnover. Within two to three years, participants in the leadership development program have generally moved to a more complex role, and their direct reports have higher promotion rates, according to Andreina González, Nestlé's global learning partner.

The CLOs I spoke with also noted the importance of regularly reviewing learning KPIs with stakeholders. James Fulton, the head of Pine Street, Goldman Sachs' leadership development practice, says his team "has a clear set of 18 KPIs which we review every two months with the president of the firm."

Create new work routines and structures.

All the CLOs I interviewed agreed that it was "very important" to be connected to their CEOs' top initiatives. Some are doing so with the help

of fresh work patterns that require regular interaction between the L&D function and business stakeholders.

At Novo Nordisk, Manton Macaire's team has established a steering committee for each strategic capability development initiative. "We take a global approach," she describes. "For example, in the digitization initiative, we not only partnered closely with our chief information officer, we made sure to get the key business unit heads on board. The steering committee ensures that what we develop is relevant for all key stakeholders."

At METRO, a leading wholesale operator headquartered in Germany, Sangeeta Pandey, SVP of global talent & organizational development, makes it a priority to visit the company's stores worldwide. Her goal is to build strong relationships with key executives and gain firsthand insight into business needs. "During country visits, I rarely spend more than half a day in the office," she explains. "Instead, I focus on connecting with employees at all levels, engaging with customers, and visiting stores, depots, warehouses and platforms." This hands-on approach has enabled her to build the relational capital necessary to bring leaders together for candid discussions about development needs.

Goldman Sachs has made a more formal tie between learning and strategic priorities. Its Pine Street practice supports its senior-level employees and undertakes senior succession planning. Fulton, its head, reports directly to the president of Goldman Sachs, reflecting the strategic importance of developing the firm's leaders.

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Technology, geopolitics, and consumer habits are driving an unprecedented rate of change at a time when organizations are already in flux with the rise of generative AI, remote work, and an aging

workforce. Against this backdrop, employee learning and development is more critical than ever. CLOs who adopt these practices will be able to help their organizations adapt successfully by being more tied to strategic priorities.

This article was originally published online on January 10, 2025.



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