

Todd Tauber and Dani Johnson  
analyse the latest *Bersin by  
Deloitte* research for learning  
at work.

# MARKETING LESSONS FOR L&D

**A**s formal workplace training gives way to more continuous, self-directed approaches (what many people call the shift from 'push' to 'pull'), many learning and development (L&D) departments are finding themselves competing for employees' attention – and often, they're losing.

L&D used to be the only game in town for building new work skills. Now, with online search, videos, social networks, massive open online courses (MOOCs), industry gurus, and colleagues all easily accessible on-demand, employees and managers are empowered to take control of their own development. It has therefore become essential not only to attract people but also to earn and keep their attention.

Many L&D teams are trying to do that by compressing programmes into bite-sized pieces and enabling people to 'pull' learning resources anytime, anywhere<sup>1</sup>.

However, too many employees are still reluctant to engage with company-provided training, especially when it isn't mandatory<sup>2</sup>. And, too many executives and managers still see L&D as more of a distraction than a driver of business performance<sup>3</sup>.

L&D leaders should ask themselves (or better yet, their customers), "Why?" In the meantime, we polled 100-plus learning professionals and asked them. As Figure 1 (overleaf) shows, the main reasons are that employees and their managers just don't have – or don't make – the time. Or, if they

do, they can't find the content they want fast or easily enough.

These challenges have their roots in some pretty common marketing problems: Weak brands, disruptive competition, and unsatisfied customers. So to overcome them, L&D professionals should consider borrowing some time-tested lessons from the marketing toolkit. We recommend three, in particular.

**Lesson 1:  
BUILD A BRAND FOR LEARNING**

Brands are important because they can inspire, influence, and compel people (for example, workers and managers who won't carve out room for training) to give up their time and attention and to make particular choices. Brands are more than just names, logos, and tag-lines. They're how customers think of you, your products, and your services – what they expect, what they experience, and what they remember.

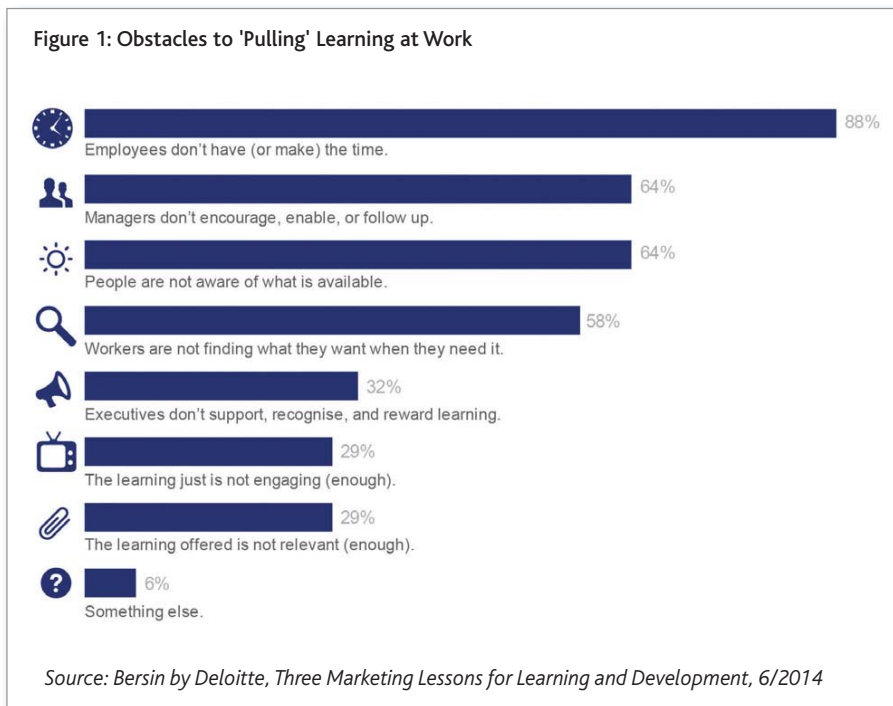
That's exactly why brands should matter in corporate learning. Employees and managers do remember their experiences with L&D staff, processes, and practices. Yet, only 14% of line managers are likely to recommend working with their training department; more than half say they would not<sup>4</sup>. Most learning 'brands,' it seems, are not well managed (if they're managed at all).

Building and sustaining brands demands focused management. That starts with intentionally defining the expectations and memories you want workers and business leaders to have. It also includes clearly communicating why they should choose your programmes or resources over competing demands for their attention. Strive to captivate them, of course. But be careful to avoid wasting their time because it's hard to build brands, yet it's easy to damage them.

One manufacturer of outdoor apparel told us they found that talking directly about learning wasn't connecting with their workforce or leadership. So instead, their L&D team created a travel-themed storyline around learning that's tied to both their corporate brand and to concrete business goals that their leaders, managers, and employees do care about. And they're intentionally focusing on facilitating people's daily work – like sharing ideas, collaborating, and getting questions answered – not just training.

**Lesson 2:  
UNDERSTAND YOUR CUSTOMERS**

One reason building learning brands is so difficult is that many L&D teams don't know enough about their consumers (the learners) to engage them effectively. Two-



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thirds of L&D leaders we've surveyed admit they have little insight on employees beyond basic demographics. They don't have a good understanding of their priorities, skill sets, career goals, work environments, or habits<sup>5</sup>.

Without understanding those things, it's difficult to create useful, engaging, or targeted learning experiences. L&D teams should focus more of their own attention on getting to know their audiences. Yet while employees flock to informal resources – such as online search, videos, social networks, MOOCs, and their peers – they still focus mainly on creating and delivering courses<sup>6</sup>.

Learners aren't the only stakeholders, either. L&D teams should also appeal to executives and managers. Executives are important, of course, because they hold the purse strings. However, managers have the most direct influence over training and on-the-job application. In fact, 62% of L&D leaders we've surveyed say managers are the primary 'owner' of their organisation's learning culture and practices<sup>7</sup>.

Building a compelling learning brand demands a good understanding of all three of these audiences. Sadly, many L&D teams are no closer to business leaders than they are to learners. Only 31% of those we asked recently told us they consult with line managers on a weekly, monthly, or even yearly basis<sup>8</sup>.

That apparel maker we mentioned earlier gets this too. Its L&D team consciously put

themselves in their customers' shoes and started to rethink how they did things. Now their interactions with managers focus on what's in it for them and their teams, why the time is worthwhile, and how it's going to help the business achieve its goals. At the same time, they've redesigned learning programmes and their LMS to make learning faster, easier, and better aligned with workers' real priorities and problems.

**Lesson 3:  
THINK ABOUT THE ENTIRE LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

To understand learners and managers, you really should see how they experience L&D. The problem is, too many L&D teams only focus on the learning event. However, the journey starts long before someone shows up for a training class or launches a course in a LMS, before employees even decide to learn something new.

Turning that audience of potential learners into interested prospects and converting them into satisfied customers is hard. It takes consistent, integrated communications, coordinated across multiple touch points – often over an extended period of time. Effective promotion through executives, HR, emails and other communications channels are therefore critical. But they usually aren't enough on their own.

The organisations that really engage learners also pay uncompromising attention to improving the entire learning journey, not

just crafting catchy messages and satisfying learning events. Unfortunately, less than half of the learning organisations we've surveyed recognise that a good 'customer experience' is one of the most effective methods for getting the workforce to engage with learning opportunities<sup>9</sup>.

Our apparel manufacturer is one of the few. Their learning organisation goes out of its way to give customers what they want. For example, they space out longer programmes to make them more accessible and digestible, and organise informal learning activities at least as much as formal training. And even though they still lean heavily on emails to get the word out, they approach them differently now, aiming for emotional (not intellectual) appeal through more inspirational messaging and a more graphic style.

**Homework Assignment: RETHINK L&D**

It's increasingly difficult to get employees and their managers to give up their time and attention these days. So it pays to keep them happy by making learning fast, easy, relevant, and useful. To do that, learning professionals should start thinking differently about some fundamental aspects

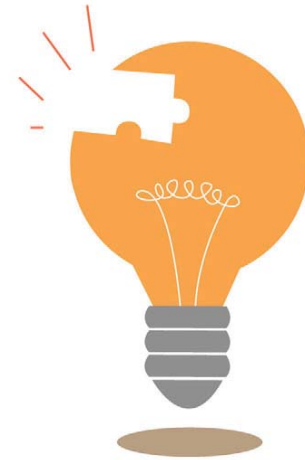
of L&D. That's what the CLO at that apparel maker is doing. "We just don't view our job as teaching people," she says. "We really view our job as inspiring people to learn. If we can get that right, the rest of it sort of comes."

**References**

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