Building Your Learning & Development Strategy In 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online learning continues to become the preferred option for learning and development professionals worldwide due to the multiple advantages it carries over traditional 'class-based' learning. However, the freedom and flexibility provided leaves many people without a done-for-you learning strategy that tells them exactly what concepts need to be mastered and the order in which this must be done. Based on extensive research and hands-on experience with multiple companies, professional education providers and government organizations, Webanywhere proposes a framework that professionals can apply to their development and learning strategy. This framework will allow one to consistently learn new information while staying up to date with the latest trends and innovations within their industry.

BACKGROUND

In the 21st century, there has been an exponential rise in the development and use of online learning courses by professionals seeking to gain a competitive edge. According to the Online Learning Consortium, **nearly 6 million people are enrolled in online courses delivered by universities.**[1] This number does not factor in programs which are informally offered and taught by entities outside of academia. For example, Khan Academy is a non-profit educational organization which provides high-quality educational learning to learners in the form of personalised videos and exercises used to apply the lessons being taught. Udemy is another prominent global leader in the online learning industry, allowing accomplished professionals to create self-paced courses that teach users new skills at a low cost[2].

There are many different ways in which online courses are defined and discussed, such as the term "Massive Open Online Course" (MOOC). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology popularized this term – and the rise of online learning in colleges and universities – when they provided courses in the early 2010s which were freely available through YouTube videos or as downloaded content on iTunes[3]. Due to the popularity generated by this decision, demand for online learning became extremely high and lead to the creation of several innovative startups, such as Skillshare and Udacity. The rise in demand can be explained by several factors.

Firstly, there are significant savings in costs for both learners and trainers. Recent research from the University of the Potomac reveals that the total average cost of an online degree is $30,000, compared to $85,000 for a traditional 4-year degree[4]. It's worth noting that the latter does not factor in additional fees such as residence living, purchase of additional supplies, food, transportation, and many other costs which a learner must typically cover.

1 https://www.imodeducation.com/popularity-online-courses-e-learning-2016-based-trends-statistics/
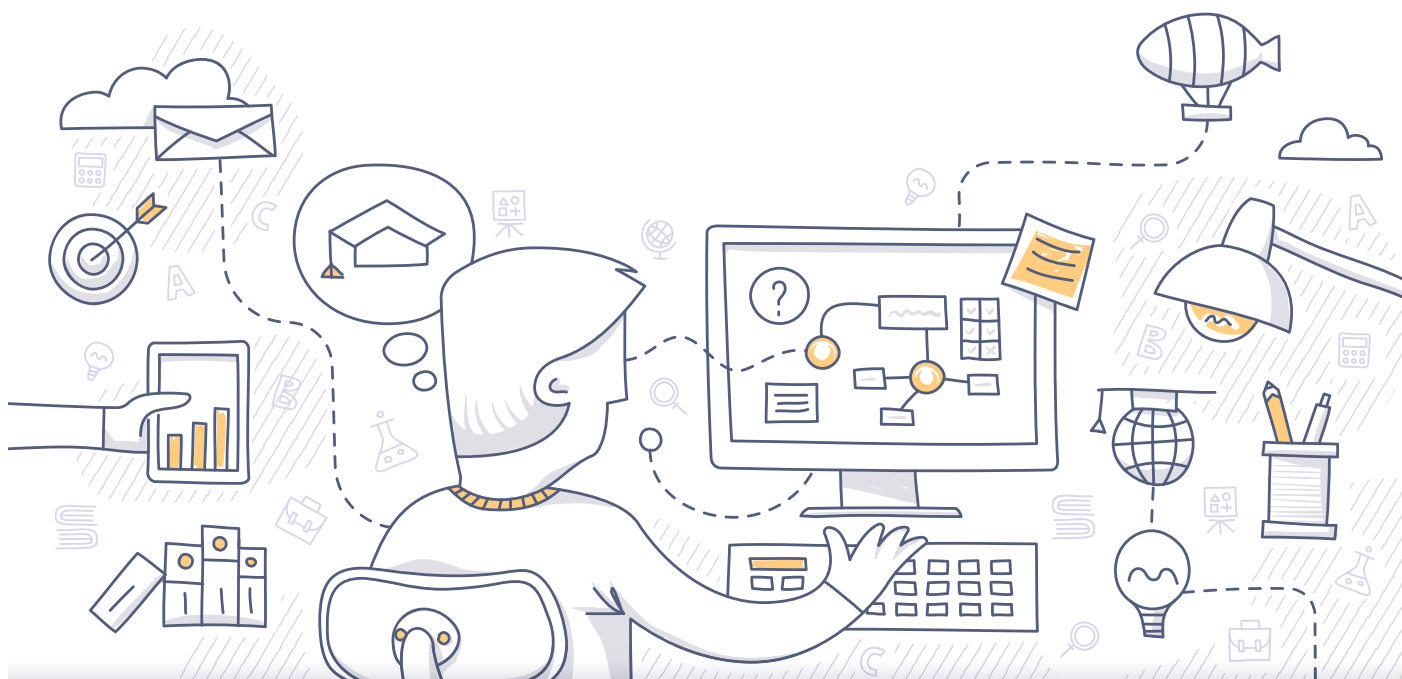**2** https://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2483851,00.asp
3 https://www.webanywhere.co.uk/sites/webanywhere.co.uk/files/resources/newyearnewlearning.pdf
4 https://potomac.edu/learning/online-learning-vs-traditional-learning/

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Learners can receive a high-quality education from the convenience of their computers, so long as they have a stable and reliable Internet connection. From the perspective of a trainer, many of the materials used for online courses (worksheets, videos, quizzes, etc.) can be continually repurposed for different learning contexts. This saves a significant amount of time and effort required to create online courses, and update them whenever new knowledge arises in one's respective field.

Secondly, online learning allows for a more informal and interactive type of learning that allows for superior performance in comparison to those receiving traditional face-to-face instruction[5]. This phenomenon can be explained by the classic "70:20:10 learning model", which is defined as follows: 70% of learning is experience-based (i.e. on the job), 20% of learning is social-based and comes from peer-to-peer interactions, and the remaining 10% comes from formal "classroom" learning[6]. Not only does online learning blend all three learning methods together, but it also places a far heavier emphasis on experienced-based and social-based learning. Online learning allows self-motivated professionals to directly apply their newfound and improve skills at a faster pace, as they have the freedom to choose how to do so. Additionally, online learning provides a convenient opportunity for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing. Information can be easily shared, and there are millions of people who have had to previously acquire the knowledge and develop the skills which one seeks. A learning professional can simply search for the information they seek, read through it and take immediate action on it.

5 https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/08/19/study-finds-that-online-education-beats-the-classroom/
6 https://www.webanywhere.co.uk/sites/webanywhere.co.uk/files/resources/8_elearning_concepts_explained.pdf

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Another benefit of online learning lies in the freedom and flexibility it provides to learners. Learners are able to access the course materials at any time and any place from multiple devices. Not only does this reduce the costs needed to travel or purchase new equipment, but it allows individuals to pick the medium that allows for maximum engagement and retention of the learning material. It also boosts worker productivity due to the fact that learning can be planned around a work schedule, instead of the other way around. This means less time spent away from productive work, giving employers the security knowing that employees can enjoy self-paced learning at their own convenience without falling behind on important work tasks[7].

Last but certainly not least, online learning is welcoming towards learners of different types and speeds. An individual may find that they need more personalized instruction, frequent interaction with other learners and more time to learn key concepts. This allows professionals to learn in a way that utilizes their specific strengths and their personal preferences. This adds greater motivation and positivity to the learning experience, thereby ensuring a consistent learning pace and successful application of the learning material into the real world. Thanks to the availability of videos, audio files and interactive transcripts, a learning & development professional can understand content quickly and easily using their preferred learning style.

HOW TO BUILD AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING STRATEGY

Despite the many benefits offered to professionals by online learning, it does not change the age-old problem of learner failure. When learners are directly asked about their reasons for failing courses and dropping courses, the top 3 reasons are as follows: Motivation, study habits and academic preparedness[8]. From extensive experience involving direct work with several learning organizations across multiple industries, an effective learning and development strategy is the single-best tool for addressing all three reasons.

An effective learning strategy addresses the problem of motivation because it provides a specific and tangible target to strive for and hopefully achieve. It defines the type of information that must be gathered, how a certain type of learning will advance an individual's goals while aligning with their needs (or those of the organization they belong to), and the timeline by which one will consistently engage with the learning material. This strategy is critical to develop before any kind of learning, as it will avoid wasting time and money.

7 https://www.webanywhere.co.uk/sites/webanywhere.co.uk/files/resources/virtual_classrom.pdf
8 http://cop.hlcommission.org/Learning-Environments/cherif.html

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Study habits are a major problem for learners because they are built and developed through consistency. A well-designed and executing learning strategy breaks down the learning process into smaller, manageable chunks. In doing so, learners will feel less overwhelmed by the learning process and find it easier to consistently do a set amount of work each day.

Finally, an effective learning strategy encourages academic preparedness by forcing professionals to gain control of their own education. One will come to the realization that the success they achieve in their industry is entirely up to them and no else. As such, they are responsible for the outcomes they set out to achieve, and the only way to maximize their chances of success is to always be prepared.

While everyone will develop and act upon their own individualized learning strategy that works best for them, it has been observed that there are some best practices commonly seen in effective learning strategies used by a variety of professionals. Webanywhere has compiled and presented these practices in this white paper, with the hopes that the reader will be able to craft a learning strategy which is specific to their industry, their learning preferences and their goals.

Best Practice #1: Setting Clearly Defined Learning Goals

One of the best pieces of advice used by highly effective talent managers is to 'start with the end in mind', also stated as 'starting from the outside in'[9]. We have personally found that this same advice is relevant to learning professionals when they start crafting their learning strategies. It involves looking at the specific outcomes you would like to have achieved in the near future, and working backwards to figure out how you can get to that future from where you are right now.

9 https://www.webanywhere.co.uk/sites/webanywhere.co.uk/files/resources/sixhabitshighlyeffectivetalentmanagersvertical.pdf

Here are some questions to ask when brainstorming your goals:

- What exactly do you (or your organization) want to achieve? This can include greater revenue, reduced waste of costs and time spent on certain activities, more resources allocated to marketing and sales, better hiring practices, and so on.
- What is the timeframe in which you want to achieve these goals? Make the date as specific as possible (ex. "I will improve my salesmanship skills and help double my company's revenue in six months' time from now, which will be December 21, 2017).
- Why do you want to achieve the goal(s)? Specifically, how is it relevant to you (and/or your organization)?

If you find yourself stuck, a good goal-setting model to follow is the SMART framework, defined as follows:

- *Specific* – What EXACTLY do you want? Be as specific and detailed as possible. Use the 5 W's to help guide your answer (Who/What/When/Where/Why).
- *Measurable* – What metrics will you use to measure and track your progress?
- *Achievable* – Is your goal realistic and possible for you to achieve? There's a difference between being ambitious and aiming for the impossible.
- *Relevant* – Is your goal actually relevant to your needs? Will it help you achieve what you want, or what somebody else thinks you want?
- *Timely* – Do you have deadlines and milestones set in place that can be reasonably met? Your goal is only a dream until it is written on paper and committed to.

Avoid spending an excessive amount of time documenting the strategy. You should spend no more than a few hours putting this strategy together, as it will change over time with new information you acquire and a shift in perspective you could not have anticipated earlier. The most important part is to start with a rough plan, act upon it, see what needs to be adjusted after some time, and change your course. An effective learning strategy recognizes that there is a constant cycle of action, learning, and improvement that repeats itself many times.

Best Practice #2: Finding The Appropriate Resources

With learning goals properly set in place, it will become far easier and quicker for one to seek out the educational resources they need. One of the most common problems experienced by self-motivated learners is information overload[10]. Although there is an overwhelming abundance of information

---
10 https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/information-overload-why-it-matters-and-how-to-combat-it

published every day on the Internet, much of it often contradicts one another or ends up being outdated. Therefore, one most exercise selective attention on resources that are credible and relevant to their specific learning goals.

Here are some questions worth considering as you gather the appropriate resources:

- What skills do I need to develop in order to meet my goals?
- What new knowledge is required to achieve my goals?
- Which sources will I extract knowledge from? How will I ensure that I am only looking at up-to-date and accurate information?
- Who are the experts, mentors and coaches I should be speaking to?
- Exactly how much will it cost to acquire all the resources I need? Can I realistically afford this cost?
- How much time will it take to acquire the resources? Is this amount of time reasonable, or is too little (or too much) to get everything I need to start learning?

Some learning and development professionals may have the added convenience of working under employers who will gladly fund their self-education initiatives. However, being able to put together a well-written proposal that answers all of the above questions – while showing the return on investment that will result from additional learning - increases the likelihood that one will get the financial and moral support required.

Best Practice #3: Using An Organized System To Store Learning Materials & Notes

The U.S Army is a prime example of how one should go about organizing, managing and sharing any new knowledge acquired: "After every important activity or event, Army teams review assignments, identify successes and failures, and seek ways to perform better the next time[11]".

Being able to have a reliable process for the capture, storage and sharing of new knowledge acquired will be a helpful asset for learning professionals. More importantly, it will allow them to collaborate with other professionals and create an interactive learning experience.

To start, one needs to have a single location where notes can be reliably held. Whether this is in a program

11 https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisaquast/2012/08/20/why-knowledge-management-is-important-to-the-success-of-your-company/#7a53915b3681

webanywhere
stretch beyond

like Evernote which allows the user to create and store notes as they wish, or organizing them into a single well-labelled folder, it needs to be consistently used for all note-taking endeavors. Pointlessly searching for lost notes will only lead to wasted time and delayed progress.

Additionally, one should make backups of their notes on a frequent basis. Survey data from BackBlaze reveals that 1 in every 4 computer owners will lose all of their data if their computer crashes, or if it is lost or stolen from them[12]. At least once a week, copies and/or backups of notes should be performed, and backups should be stored in a reliable place that can be easily accessed for instant retrieval in the case of an unfortunate accident.

Please note that this should not be a lengthy or complicated process. Spend just a few minutes deciding where you will keep your notes and how you will organize them, and then stick to it. Having a note-organization strategy that you can use and maintain with minimal effort and thought is an integral part of an effective learning strategy.

Best Practice #4: Plan A Daily Studying Schedule

Due to the self-paced nature of online learning, it is easy for one to fall victim to distractions and procrastination behaviours. According to various statistics on worker productivity, employees spend an average of 96 minutes a day being distracted and require 15 minutes to regain full focus after becoming distracted[13]. Often times, this happens when a clearly defined learning schedule is not prepared in advance. An effective, tried-and-true strategy used by successful learners in online learning courses is to consistently study for a set amount of time each day. For example, one might decide that 7:00am-8:30am will be the daily time period that is reserved for nothing else but learning. All distractions (email, phone, social media, etc.) are turned off and a specific outcome is defined for that daily time period.

You may need to allocate more time, and spread out your studying over the course of the entire day. The amount of time available to you will be dependent upon your current (and future) commitments, and the timeline by which you must finish an online learning course.

By setting up a daily studying schedule which you consistently stick to, you will develop the unbreakable habit of learning. It will not be a productive use of your time and effort, short-term or long-term, to have periods of exceptional productivity followed by periods of exceptional inactivity.

---

12 https://www.backblaze.com/blog/backup-awareness-month-2015/
13 https://profound-impact.com/time-management/ten-hard-to-believe-but-true-productivity-statistics

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Best Practices #5: Maintain Good Health

A study published in the Journal of Nutrition & Food Sciences in 2015 regarding college students and healthy lifestyles revealed that a little under 50% of students sleep 7-9 hours a day, eat a healthy diet and exercise frequently.[14] Maintaining good mental and physical health will be a key component of your success, as it will affect your ability to stay focused, comprehend difficult information and retain it in your memory.

While a discussion about healthy lifestyle habits is beyond the scope of this white paper, we highly recommend you find the habits that allow you to stay healthy. This can include drinking more water throughout the day to stay hydrated, eating healthy and nutritious foods at meals, and exercising for 30-60 minutes at least 3 times a week. Please consult your trusted physician and/or dietitian to see what options will work best for you.

Best Practice #6: Take Strategic Study Breaks

There are an increasing number of studies showing that it is detrimental to study for several hours at a time without any intermittent breaks. More specifically, doing so reduces one's ability to concentrate or retain information they have read. A common strategy used by high-achieving learners is to take smaller breaks during a study session[15].

An example of this principle in action would be to study in a focused manner for 50 minutes, and then take a quick break for 10 minutes before studying for another 50 minutes. It will allow learners to be productive for the majority of the day, while taking opportune moments to refresh and recharge their energy levels. There are some variations on this rule, such as the Pomodoro Technique (work for 25 minutes, rest for 5 minutes). Find the optimal ratio of working to resting that works best for you and your workload.

Additionally, it is helpful to schedule larger blocks of free time in your week where you can socialize and engage in fun, relaxing activities. There is nothing inherently wrong with dedicating large amounts of time to studying, but one must also balance that out with periods of time for rejuvenation. It will reduce your stress levels and leave you feeling less anxious about the workload that lies ahead in the near future.

---

14 https://www.omicsonline.org/open-access/the-perception-of-college-students-about-a-healthy-lifestyle-and-its-effect-on-their-health-2155-9600-1000437.php?aid=63506

15 https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/09/science-tells-you-how-many-minutes-should-you-take-a-break-for-work-17/380369/

Best Practice #7: Set Aside Time To Implement What You Have Learned

In the corporate world, one of the major barriers to progress is the 'knowing-doing gap'. It prevents executives and other employees within a corporation from executing on strategic priorities and initiatives[16]. This same gap is present in learning and development professionals who struggle to achieve meaningful progress with their learning efforts.

Therefore, it is imperative that you think about how you are going to actually apply the information you are taking in. If you are going to spend a certain amount of studying, you need to spend at least an equal amount of time putting your studies into action. Albert Einstein was correct in saying that knowledge is power, but this is only true if that knowledge translates directly into action.

To avoid falling victim to the 'knowing-doing gap', pick a single idea from your studies that you are going to execute. Schedule a time to execute it, and make any observations about the outcome. You will then be able to learn what went right and what didn't, and determine what improvements need to be made going forward. You have to learn, take action, correct your actions through further education, and then act again.

Things may not go perfectly as planned and this is perfectly normal. There is no way to anticipate in advance if something will happen exactly the way you expected it to. Paralysis through over-analysis will lead to learning for the sake of learning, leaving you with more knowledge while coming up empty on tangible changes made to your life.

It may feel slow and uncomfortable to execute on only one idea at a time, but over time it will end up being the fastest learning approach you can take. An effective learning strategy is one that is constantly re-optimized over time through a continuous cycle of planning, action, review and improvement.

---

16 https://hbr.org/2017/10/closing-the-strategy-execution-gap-means-focusing-on-what-employees-think-not-what-they-do

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Best Practice #8: Track The Results Of Your Learning

Building upon the previous best practice, you want to have a verifiable way for measuring the results achieved directly by the action you've taken as a result of your learning. In an article published by Training Journal titled "Build a winning L&D strategy", one of the main factors discussed is impact. In other words, what is the exact impact you expect to see from the action you took? Are you expecting to see reduced costs, fewer errors made, reduced time to complete a task, increased revenues, or something else? In the same way you were specific in defining the outcome you wanted to achieve with your learning strategy, you must also be specific about the results you anticipate for the action you are taking[17].

Unless you are able to directly measure impact and provide real proof for it, you will find it very difficult to see meaningful results from your overall learning strategy. You may need to think carefully about the type of action you are taking and whether it can be measured in the first place. If you cannot measure the actions you execute on as a result of your learning, it might be a good idea to change the type of action you wish to take.

Best Practice #9: Stay Up To Date And Informed With Your Learning

Hermann Ebbinghaus was a German experimental psychologist who was able to successfully demonstrate the relationship between forgetting new information learned, and the passing of time. He found that this relationship can be expressed as a mathematical representation known as the 'forgetting curve':

SOURCE

---

17 https://www.trainingjournal.com/articles/feature/build-winning-ld-strategy
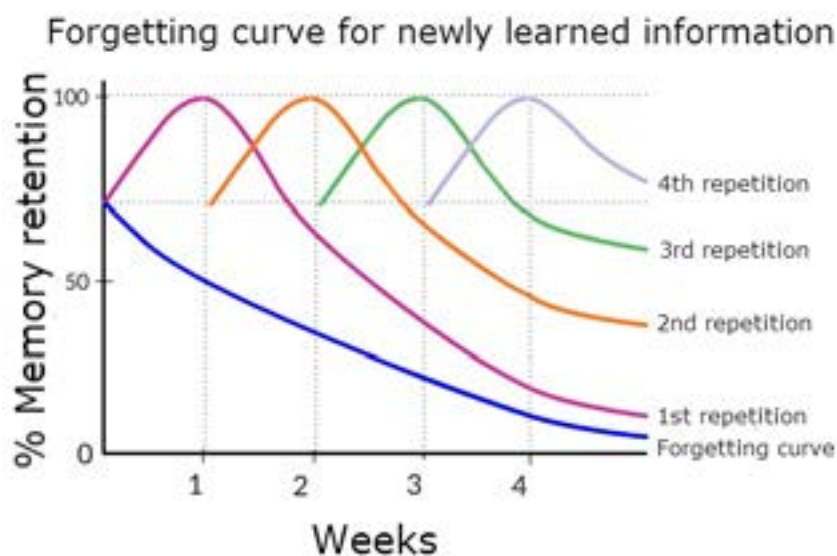
The graph reveals several takeaways that are important for understanding the importance of regularly reviewing new information[18]:

1. Learners find it easier to memorize materials that are meaningful or relevant to them than those that are meaningless or non-relevant.
2. The amount of time that learners take to learn dramatically increases with an increase in the amount of learning material.
3. Learners find it easier to relearn than to learn everything initially itself. Also, after each subsequent re-learning, learners take longer time to forget their learning.
4. Learners find learning more effective when it is spread out over time than when it is taken in a single marathon learning session.
5. Learners forget their learning most rapidly right after learning occurs. And, their forgetting slows down over time.

Based on this information, it is clear that an effective learning strategy must include scheduled time for regularly reviewing notes. Notes should be re-examined once a week under ideal conditions, and no less than once a month. A good time to do this would be at the end of the working week when one wraps up all work activities and makes plans for the upcoming week.

Additionally, a small block of time should be scheduled for educational reading. This means reading relevant publications, books and papers that provide up-to-date information on the developments in one's industry. Attending educational conferences and seminars is also a good idea for professionals seeking to make rapid strides in their careers.

CONCLUSION

The key to creating and maintaining an effective learning & development strategy in 2018 is to follow the best practices that have been time-tested and proven to work in the real world. At Webanywhere, we have personally seen these practices lead to real changes and improvements for professionals who have the drive and the will to carve their own path within their respective sectors. We hope that you will be able to use these practices effectively and wisely in the creation of your own unique learning strategy.

---

18 https://elearningindustry.com/beating-the-forgetting-curve-with-distributed-practice

webanywhere
stretch beyond

Webanywhere is an e-learning company based in the UK that was founded in 2003 to provide complete learning solutions to organizations worldwide. Since then, their operations have expanded to the US, UK and Europe. They presently employ over 150 people and have diversified to support over 3 million end-users around the world. Clientele include healthcare providers, businesses, not-for-profits and various government bodies. Learning Management Systems (LMS), Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), online learning platforms, and interactive apps for education and training are some of the services provided by Webanywhere.

To learn more about how Webanywhere can help you or your company take full advantage of learning technologies and e-learning solutions.

<div align="center">

info@webanywhere.co.uk

01535 604026

US residents call 866-713-0496

UK residents call 0800 862 0131

or visit our website at www.webanywhere.co.uk

</div>