



TD MAGAZINE

Future-Ready Your L&D Function for the Fourth Industrial Age



By [Wendy Tan](#)

[Member-Only Content](#)

L&D practitioners must always be learning.

Disruptions that are changing business models, competition from start-ups, changing customer expectations, machines doing routine work, and new job roles being created—these are exciting, albeit challenging, times for L&D.

The World Economic Forum estimates that one-third of the skill sets that will be required to perform the jobs in 2020 aren't considered important today. Developing new skills and knowing how to learn have become pivotal to success for everyone. The *Future of Skills: Employment in 2030* report listed learning strategies as a top skill in the United States and the fourth top skill in the United Kingdom for 2030, based on Pearson's prediction for future in-demand jobs. For working adults, much of the learning happens in the workplace.

How is the L&D function reinventing itself to ensure that organizations have the capabilities to succeed? What does L&D need to do differently, and what new skills

do L&D professionals need? To probe those questions, I interviewed 10 L&D leaders from different industries, ranging from mature organizations to start-ups.

What's different?

Before delving into where L&D professionals need to go, let's consider what's different in the L&D space now relative to five or 10 years ago.

Proliferation of content. From massive open online courses or MOOCs to content platforms such as Udemy, LinkedIn Learning, MasterClass, Gnowbe, SlideShare, and YouTube to even just googling, which pulls out useful learning resources, content is now commoditized in a way it's never been before.

Speed of learning needed. An organization can only change as quickly as its capability to execute on new strategies. Employees need to learn fast to be part of that execution. Learning becomes a critical differentiator for success.

Lack of clarity on future skills employees need. The necessary future skills, as think tanks like the World Economic Forum and Pearson articulate, are often generic and at the macro level. The specific skills an organization needs depend on its strategy. But Ronnie Tan, an HR leader at a start-up, explains, "We cannot completely project all the competencies needed for the future, because strategy changes so quickly."

Overwhelmed and distracted employees. According to the American Institute of Stress, 80 percent of workers feel stress in their jobs. At the same time, many are constantly distracted by electronic gadgets to the point that the term *gadget detox* has surfaced in everyday conversation. Because of the distractions, sustained learning engagement is more difficult than in the past.

Use of technology in learning. The medium for learning has vastly expanded. L&D professionals now need to weave together a learning solution across different media.

Today, there is mobile learning with content on mobile phones; virtual and augmented reality; technology-enabled, game-based learning; gamification; and social learning in virtual communities.

However, L&D professionals can't let these changes sweep them away. Some L&D truths remain as solid as ever. Ultimately, an L&D professional's work is to enable a sustained behavioral change leading to step change in performance and business results. Budgets for learning continue to be constrained in challenging business environments. Learning both technical know-how and human skills to influence values, culture, and relationships remain important.

How to change

In this Fourth Industrial Age, how does L&D need to change? Let's compare L&D of the past and consider what is needed now.

L&D strategy. In the past, L&D conducted annual learning needs analyses by asking leaders and employees; L&D practitioners then identified suppliers, developed programs, assembled a training calendar for the year, implemented the courses, and collected feedback. Still in the past, L&D took people to classrooms for learning. Programs were the main vehicles for L&D implementation.

To accelerate learning in the digital age, L&D needs to create learning beyond programs. That means using the work environment as a learning stimulus and enabling anytime, anywhere learning. For example, a start-up implements a new strategy, learns from customers quickly, pulls learning from the team through 30-minute stand-up meetings, and records learning and action ideas on a wiki. Employees then can search for relevant learning on the wiki or access additional learning resources on the Internet and other content platforms. The same can happen for hackathons and action learning projects.

Mentoring, workplace coaching, and on-the-job training are vehicles for learning through exposure. L&D professionals also can strengthen ownership of learning by enabling employees to assess their skills and capabilities and by teaching them how to activate their development planning. Through this process, they help employees identify and leverage transferable skills for more varied career options. The new strategy for L&D is the processes and systems to enable learning, rather than a training course that individuals go to.

In the past, the key relationships that L&D had were with HR, business leaders, and training providers. Now this widens to content curators, platform suppliers, and technology partners. In the past, the performance indicators for L&D were the number of workshops conducted, people trained, or training days. Now, it will be the speed of new skill acquisition, project success with new skills applied, and availability of required skills from an internal talent pool.

Skills for L&D professionals. As L&D professionals redefine L&D strategy and its learning solutions, consider the skills L&D professionals need. In the past, the necessary key skills were an understanding of adult learning principles, consulting skills to build partnership with stakeholders, collaboration skills, and training delivery skills.

For the present and future, L&D professionals are going to need additional skills:

- **content curation** or the ability to weave together learning experiences across modalities for just-in-time learning—whether that’s virtual, face-to-face, on-the-job, or via coaching
- **technology tools** or being able to work with mobile platforms, virtual or augmented reality, location-based technology, webinars, polls, learning management systems, and content creation platforms

- **community management** or capability of building and nurturing networks virtually or physically so that people can learn from others
- **webinar facilitation** or competency in using virtual platforms to present, engage, and interact with learners
- **digital literacy and data analytics** or the ability to acquire, compute, analyze, draw insights from data, and present data-driven conclusions
- **workplace learning** or the ability to broaden the repertoire of formal and informal learning opportunities in the environment through, for example, job aids or QR codes
- **learning solutioning and prototyping** or the capability of using agile principles and creating minimum viable products for the needs of different employees—no more one-size-fits-all or lengthy ADDIE processes
- **learning as assessment** or the ability to use assessments and feedback as data for continuous learning rather than a one-off, high-stakes test
- **understanding human-machine interface** or the ability to help people feel comfortable working with machines and being able to leverage machines and data ethically themselves.

The range of skills for L&D professionals has broadened tremendously. For example, Charlene Ang, learning operations director at GlaxoSmithKline, questions how L&D meets business needs faster, given the intolerance for a long, drawn-out learning needs analysis and content development process. She notes that they do so through “performance consulting. We crystalize the business needs, so that learning can work at a pace that the business needs.” This is a much faster cadence of L&D value creation.

New L&D skills in practice. Much of the learning at IBM happens through its flagship Watson-enabled learning platform Your Learning. Pallavi Srivastava, APAC talent leader for IBM Global Technology Services, shares: “For real-time and self-

paced learning to upskill people quickly in future focused digital skills, L&D works with a cloud architect to create the learning ecosystem to access its content. IBM's Your Learning platform is [artificial-intelligence]-enabled with high-end recommendation engines curating content for individual learners. However, the L&D team is closely involved in developing and curating enterprise-wide strategic content to be offered.”

She adds: “L&D’s design thinking team helps to package the delivery from a user experience perspective to have enriched, bite-sized and relevant content that can be retained and applied. In addition, L&D uses digital marketing expertise to position the content for high visibility and easy access and for seeking feedback consistently for improvements and upgrades to content.”

Those are only the technical L&D skills. Joel Leong, talent management director at Jabil, explains that “An effective L&D professional now needs to be multifaceted and keep up with rapidly emerging knowledge and skills in a variety of arenas. For example, while he may not need to have extensive expertise in data science, he needs to know enough of such domain areas, and pull them into his recommendations when appropriate. Above all, he needs to exhibit a relentless learning spirit himself.”

Looking at the list of new L&D skills, how do you stack up?

A radical thought

Is there a role for L&D in helping machines learn? Consider this: L&D has operated in a paradigm where people are the ones learning and capability lies in people. So L&D’s focus is to help people learn. If machines can also learn and capability lies in both people and machines, does that mean L&D’s focus will include helping machines learn? It’s a fascinating idea.

Srivastava has done just that. As a talent subject matter expert, she helped to train IBM’s Watson-enabled career adviser chatbot, MyCa, to answer employees’ questions about their career development—for example: What are the career opportunities available for me today? What skills should I learn to get my next promotion? She further suggests, “In the coming future, machines and humans will work alongside one another, with human workers being held accountable for the objectivity and performance of these artificially intelligent ‘colleagues.’”

To play a role in developing capabilities in machines, ask yourself these questions: What areas of capabilities can machines learn in my industry? How do machines acquire these capabilities, and how can L&D support them? Who are the people teaching the machines, and how can L&D support them? These questions will give you some clues.

In these exciting times, L&D professionals can choose to be disrupted or choose to be the disruptors. They can be forced to change or lead the change. They can learn new skills or be stagnant. Which will you choose?

Related Tags:

- [MANAGING THE LEARNING FUNCTION](#)



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Wendy Tan](#)

A consultant, writer, and speaker, Wendy Tan integrates wholeness and wisdom at work. Her expertise is in four areas: career development, engagement and retention, consulting skills, and East-West partnerships. She works with organizations to build partnerships, develop their consulting capability, increase engagement, and retain their talents. Tan has

partnered clients in Asia to leverage their human capital as a competitive advantage by engaging and retaining staff sustainably. She also has helped clients develop their internal consulting capability, in particular, to transform from transactional to strategic business partner role. Being a Singaporean Chinese with a Western education, Tan acts to bring deeper understanding and collaboration across the East-West worlds. A professional speaker, she has conducted keynotes and has presented in regional conferences in Asia. Tan is the co-founder of Flame Centre, an organization development consulting and training practice based in Asia. She graduated with a master's degree in organization development from Pepperdine University and is a professional member of Asia Professional Speakers Singapore.