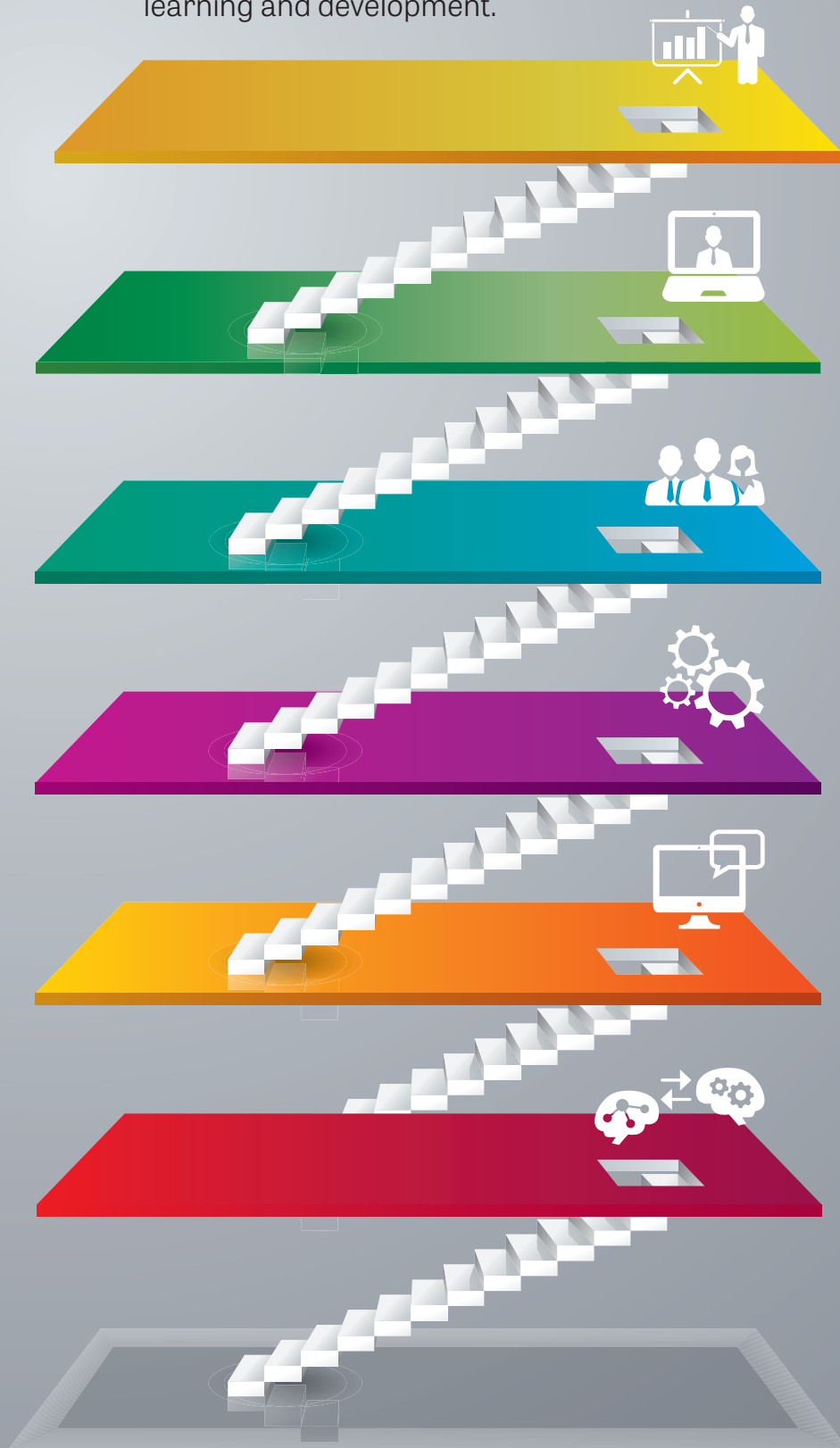Apply a layered approach to employee learning and development.

# LEARNING IN
# Layers

BY JD DILLON

The speed and complexity of the modern workplace has put a strain on learning and development's ability to provide meaningful, timely support. L&D is always in "chase mode," given the need to support a variety of functions without complete influence on the direction of the business. As a result, L&D's value is being challenged by employees and senior stakeholders alike. L&D must shift its mindset and take a holistic perspective on employee development to meet the needs of the modern organization.

L&D's role within the modern workplace is in question. This isn't about the value of learning. According to Deloitte's 2016 *Global Human Capital Trends Report*, 84 percent of executives still believe learning is essential to their future strategy. This is specifically about the work L&D does to support that strategy. The 2016 Degreed report *How the Workforce Learns in 2016* states that employees now give L&D an average Net Promoter Score of -31. This disconnect has never been about creating better content or introducing new technology; it's about the role we play in employees' day-to-day performance.

## A challenging landscape

Industry thought leaders continue to explore the limitations of modern workplace learning, and plenty of great ideas have emerged. In a 2012 *Learning Solutions Magazine* article, Bob Mosher and Conrad Gottfredson offer their "Five Moments of Learning Need" to help L&D consider the entire learning journey. Jos Arets, Charles Jennings, and Vivian Heijnen, in their book 70:20:10 *Towards 100% Performance*, continue to elaborate on the 70-20-10 framework. And the Serious eLearning Manifesto provides a set of guiding principles for modern learning experience design.

These forward-thinking ideas continue to influence our profession. However, during my years in corporate learning, I often had a hard time applying these ideas when faced with many familiar L&D challenges. My audience ballooned in size and geography. Roles became increasingly complex and difficult to support.

Public scrutiny was a constant concern. I was working with fewer and fewer resources. Put this all together and I experienced that same "We just can't do this anymore" feeling so many L&D pros get nowadays.

To get past this, I needed a practical framework that could help me bring those evolutionary concepts to life while addressing the day-to-day realities of employee development. So I decided to create what I call a layered approach to learning.

A layered approach to learning addresses the needs of a modern learning ecosystem while providing a scalable, repeatable framework through which L&D can support vital employee performance challenges. Each layer builds on the next to strengthen the overall approach while providing options for the individual employee to best address a specific problem.

This concept shifts the focus to day-to-day learning while better positioning the value of formal training when needed. Although tactics will vary by organization, this framework is proving successful across a variety of industries and use cases today.
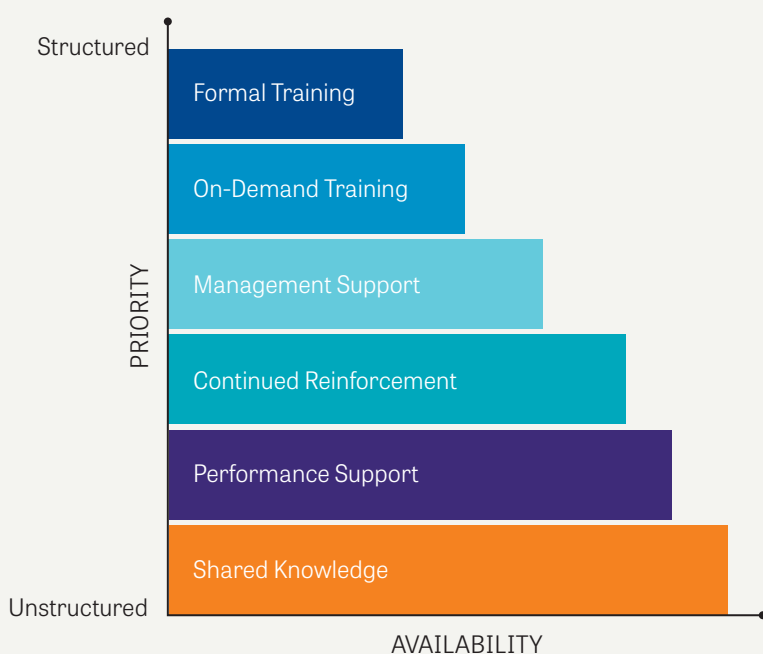
## Layer 1: Shared knowledge

Shared knowledge is the starting point for learning in a connected world. How do you typically solve everyday problems? You Google them. Unfortunately, most organizations have failed to leverage this reality at work. In fact, knowledge workers waste as much as 2.5 hours per day looking for information, according to the 2001 IDC whitepaper *The High Cost of Not Finding Information.*

To enable this layer and thereby reduce the need for formal training, we must make information easy to find. This means using right-fit technology that activates familiar search behaviors to help employees get past the clutter to find the information they need.

For example, Southeastern Grocers recently introduced a cloud-based searchable knowledge platform to replace three-ring binders for essential department job aids for its 70,000 employees. To quote one of its veteran team members, "For the first time, I love that every

## Layered Approach to Learning Framework

Structured

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Formal Training | | |
| On-Demand Training | | |
| Management Support | | |
| Continued Reinforcement | | |
| Performance Support | | |
| Shared Knowledge | | |

Unstructured

PRIORITY

AVAILABILITY

training job aid is easy for every associate to access. For once, we don't have to jump through hoops or look for a book that no one can find. It's all just a click away."

## Layer 2: Performance support

Providing access to shared knowledge is a great foundation, but it isn't enough. After all, employees might be unable to find what they need or might not quite understand how to apply the information on the job. This is where the next layer, performance support, becomes essential.

Employees must have reliable, scalable ways to ask for help in the moment of need. True performance support goes beyond the "ask your neighbor or manager" default approach and provides consistent, timely support to every employee through resources such as an electronic performance support system or a well-maintained list of subject matter experts with contact information.

For example, at Kaplan, we used social network capability to not only provide timely answers to frequently asked questions, but also enhance our shared knowledge base with the information exposed during these performance support moments. That way, our 10,000 employees don't waste time asking the same questions over and over again.

## Layer 3: Continued reinforcement

If you curate a huge repository of knowledge, how will employees know which information they should retain and which they should just look up when necessary? This is where reinforcement becomes critical to the overall framework.

L&D can introduce personalized and adaptive technology that also incorporates proven memory-building techniques, such as spaced repetition and retrieval practice, to help employees drive long-term retention of knowledge that's essential to their roles.

Because safety is crucial in a Walmart distribution center, the company uses continued reinforcement training to emphasize behaviors that are most likely to reduce injuries, such as safe lifting procedures. This approach—as

## Essential Considerations for Enabling a Modern Learning Ecosystem

L&D must keep the following considerations in mind when applying a layered approach to learning as part of a modern, employee-centered learning ecosystem.

### Content Strategy
An evolved content strategy must leverage each layer of the ecosystem rather than locking valuable knowledge within formal training materials. L&D must ensure all essential knowledge can be accessed easily at the true moment of need and curate content accordingly.

### Motivation
Many employees are used to an academic approach to learning, especially at work. This means they often identify "learning" as a specific event away from the workplace. New layers and tactics must be introduced alongside culture-appropriate motivators, such as game mechanics and recognition, to drive desired employee learning behaviors.

### Behaviors
A modern learning ecosystem is focused on enabling performance—not just knowledge growth. Therefore, L&D must leverage behavior observations to drive right-fit strategies and value-add learning experiences.

### Analytics
A modern approach to learning is data-driven. Each layer of the ecosystem must feed into an overarching measurement strategy that helps L&D understand which tactics foster real performance results. This will support the overall value proposition for L&D as an essential business partner.

detailed in the March 2015 Axonify Knowledge blog post "Walmart asks, 'Have You Axonified Today?'"—has resulted in substantial reductions in workplace safety incidents as well as a stronger overall safety culture.

### Layer 4: Manager support

The most important person in the employee development process is the frontline manager; many development strategies live or die based on manager support. Rather than just seek buy-in or deploy leaders-as-teachers activities, a modern learning framework enables managers to execute the requirements of

## THE LAYERS OF A MODERN LEARNING ECOSYSTEM REPRESENT BOTH NEW AND TRADITIONAL L&D IDEAS.

their role more effectively in support of employee performance.

L&D can provide day-to-day support to managers by helping them better coach in the moment of need. First, managers can take advantage of the other framework layers, such as shared knowledge resources, to help their employees improve. At the same time, L&D can provide the data necessary to help managers identify and target coaching opportunities based on proven knowledge and behavior gaps.

### Layer 5: On-demand training

The first four layers address the 70 and 20 within the 70-20-10 framework. While L&D should focus its effort on where the bulk of learning takes place, we also must be prepared to support employees who need more structure.

On-demand training takes advantage of our supporting framework layers while introducing a bit more instructional design to the experience. This can be especially important when employees want to stretch their capabilities in new, unique ways that go beyond the training required by the organization. Tactics may include online courses, video series, or instructor-led events.

### Layer 6: Formal training

The last layer of the framework is the most familiar. It's also the most difficult to provide to employees in a timely manner without interrupting workflow.

When a need is critical to organizational success, formal training can be pushed to the employees who need it. However, unlike a traditional approach in which the event is the only tactic used to address the need, formal training within a modern learning ecosystem leverages the supporting layers to reinforce the training and enable employees to access resources they might need in the future.

### Applying the ecosystem framework

The layers of a modern learning ecosystem represent both new and traditional L&D ideas. The primary evolution is in how we align and
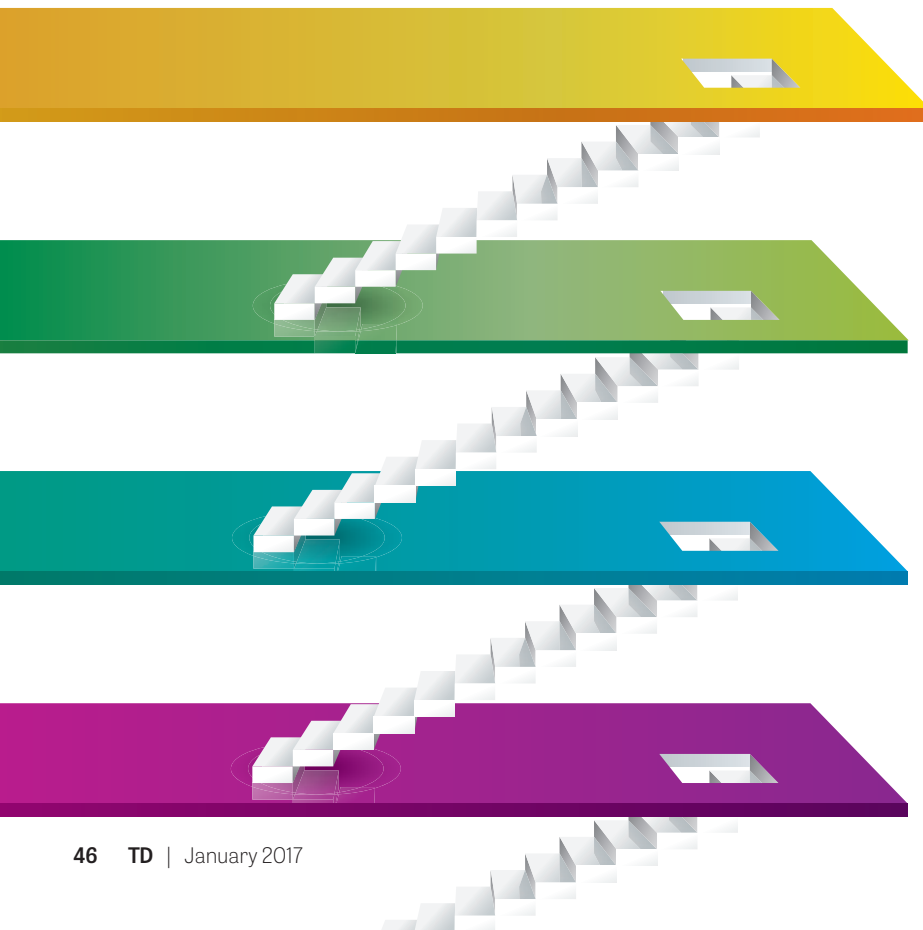
apply these tactics consistently. The key is to always start at the base of the framework and progress only to the layers needed to best support the employee.

Imagine if your organization was going to change an existing process. Typically, it would start by requesting training from L&D. However, using the new framework, instead of simply executing this request, L&D should start by assessing the available knowledge related to this process.

If updating related information and communicating the change would meet the need for educating employees around the new process, then L&D would only leverage the first layer. This would save time and provide a simpler employee learning experience.

Now consider a more complex scenario. Your organization is about to release a new product that will have wide-ranging impact. L&D should still begin with examining shared knowledge to determine what information should be updated. However, because this is a more critical topic, L&D should work up through each layer until confident the solution meets the audience's needs.

This could mean introducing performance support that would enable employees to ask questions about the product via a designated community in an enterprise social network. This also could involve targeting ongoing knowledge reinforcement for employees who are most affected by the new product, and providing knowledge growth and sales data to managers to support coaching efforts.

Don't just jump to the formal training tactics. Rather, take a holistic approach to the problem and use the layers necessary to support short- and long-term employee needs.

## Making the shift

Applying a layered approach to learning doesn't mean L&D has to start over. Rather, it requires a mindset shift to apply both new and familiar tactics in ways that better align to the reality of the modern workplace.

This isn't a change that can occur overnight. L&D professionals who are looking to evolve their strategies and prove true business impact should begin making the shift in small but meaningful ways. Here's how:

**Start talking ecosystems.** Typically, organizational partners are comfortable with a specific role for L&D, namely event-based training. To help begin the mindset shift, L&D pros should begin talking about learning and development holistically, including all the layers and tactics included in a modern ecosystem.

**Think person first, employee second.** A layered approach to learning focuses on individual employee needs. It's easy to forget the natural capabilities and limitations of our people because we focus on them only within the context of the workplace. The people we support are just like us. We all have unique backgrounds, experiences, strengths, opportunities, and needs.

**Diagnose your ecosystem.** A learning ecosystem isn't something that requires building; it already exists regardless of how you are currently supporting it. Take a look around and diagnose the health of your current ecosystem. Identify the layers and tactics that are already in play and begin adjusting to foster your overall vision.

**Start small, think big.** You don't have to march into the C-suite and announce a radical change in your organizational learning philosophy. Instead, establish this new mindset and begin to introduce new ideas alongside familiar tactics. For example, next time you implement a formal training event, layer in shared knowledge, performance support, and reinforcement to generate awareness and potential value for these elements.

A layered approach to learning represents a natural evolution of the modern learning ecosystem. It not only meets the needs of today's business environment, but also aligns to the way the majority of employees learn and solve problems in their everyday lives.

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