

The Future of Learning and Development

The Strategic Enabler in a Skills-Based Organisation



Introduction

This paper explores the question of what it means to lead Learning and Development (L&D) in an era when skills, not roles, define success and proposes ideas to how the function must transform to meet this challenge.

QA believe that the L&D function stands at a critical inflection point. As organisations transition from rigid, role-based structures to dynamic, skills-based ecosystems, L&D must evolve from a traditional training provider to a strategic business enabler.

This skills-based transformation represents both an imperative and an opportunity, to reshape how organisations build capability, drive performance, and adapt to exponential technological change and global uncertainty¹.

We examine the forces driving this transformation, the new operating models and capabilities required, and the strategic opportunities for organisations and consultancies alike.

We conclude that L&D's future lies not in delivering more training, but in orchestrating intelligent, personalised, and strategically aligned learning ecosystems that transform human potential into competitive advantage.

“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn”.²

1 Spencer N. & Newton S. (2018). Designing your firm of the future - Strategic Learning and Development in Professional Services, Said Business School, University of Oxford.

2 Alvin Toffler (1970). Future Shock, Random House.

The Epochal Shift: From Industrial Learning to Human-Centred Transformation

We are witnessing more than incremental change in how organisations approach learning and development – QA are tracking wider business transformation in what and how people learn.

Historical analysis reveals that education and learning paradigms evolve in rhythm with broader societal and economic transformation. Just as the industrial revolution gave birth to mass education systems, and the knowledge economy created corporate universities, today's convergence of artificial intelligence, demographic shifts, and economic volatility is catalysing a new epoch in organisational learning³.

QA believes this emerging epoch is characterised by several defining features. Learning is increasingly personalised, leveraging AI and data analytics to tailor experiences to individual needs and contexts. The traditional boundaries between formal (curriculum based), non-formal (coaching) and informal (podcasts, MOOCs⁴, YouTube) learning have dissolved, with knowledge acquisition embedded seamlessly into the flow of work.

However, this transformation raises important practical considerations. The widespread use of Generative AI applications introduces the 'AI-Bloom's Paradox' where; to successfully utilise Large Language Model (LLM) output, you need higher-order intellectual skills (analysis, evaluation & critical judgement); but the widespread use of Generative AI in education will negatively impact the acquisition of these critical thinking skills creating a circular problem. If education systems do not address this growing issue, the risk of this skills gap will be passed on to employers.

For organisationally based L&D functions there is a growing shift in emphasis, captured in The Five Moments of Need⁵, with the focus moving from the area of New and More, towards that of Apply and Solve. Significantly, the focus has shifted from knowledge transfer to human transformation, developing not just what people know, but how they think, adapt, and grow in an uncertain world.

We believe that organisations that have recognised and embraced this paradigm shift will gain significant competitive advantage. Those that cling to outdated models risk obsolescence in an environment where the half-life of skills continues to shrink and the pace of change accelerates.

3 Govender CM., & Adegbite WM. (2022). Evolving role of learning and development specialists in the 21st century fourth industrial revolution workplace. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship*, 26(S1), 1-16.

4 Massive Open Online Courses.

5 Gottfredson, C. & Mosher, B. (2011). *Innovative performance support – strategies and practices for learning in the workflow*. McGraw-Hill.

The AI Revolution: Transforming Learning at Every Level

Artificial intelligence represents the most significant technological force reshaping L&D. As the internet transformed people's relationship with information, and mobile phones transformed human communication, AI will fundamentally shift our relationship with concepts of intelligence and how we learn.

However, its impact extends beyond simple automation to fundamental transformation of how learning is designed, delivered, and measured⁶. If we consider this through the framework of the **5 Moments of Need**, at the activity level AI will:

- **New (when learning something new)** – provide adaptive learning platforms that will tailor content to individual needs, replacing classroom training, e-learning modules or traditional textbooks. AI tutors will offer real time explanations, with personalised learning pathways based on prior knowledge.
- **More (when wanting to deepen understanding)** – provide AI powered content recommendations, intelligent search tools that surface relevant resources and conversational AI that will deepen conceptual understanding through Q&A. These will replace current advance training sessions or specialist workshops.
- **Apply (when putting knowledge into action)** – provide AI driven support tools (context aware chatbots), augmented reality assistants, guiding in real time, or predictive prompts based on task or workflow. These will replace job aids or digital guides.
- **Solve (when problems arise)** – provides AI powered diagnostics and troubleshooting assistants, real time suggestions based on error patterns and AI driven behavioural analysis that can flag anomalies.
- **Change (when adapting to change)** – provide AI monitoring of behavioural data and nudge users during transition, could also push dynamic content updates to users automatically and provide simulations so that they can practice new systems or processes.

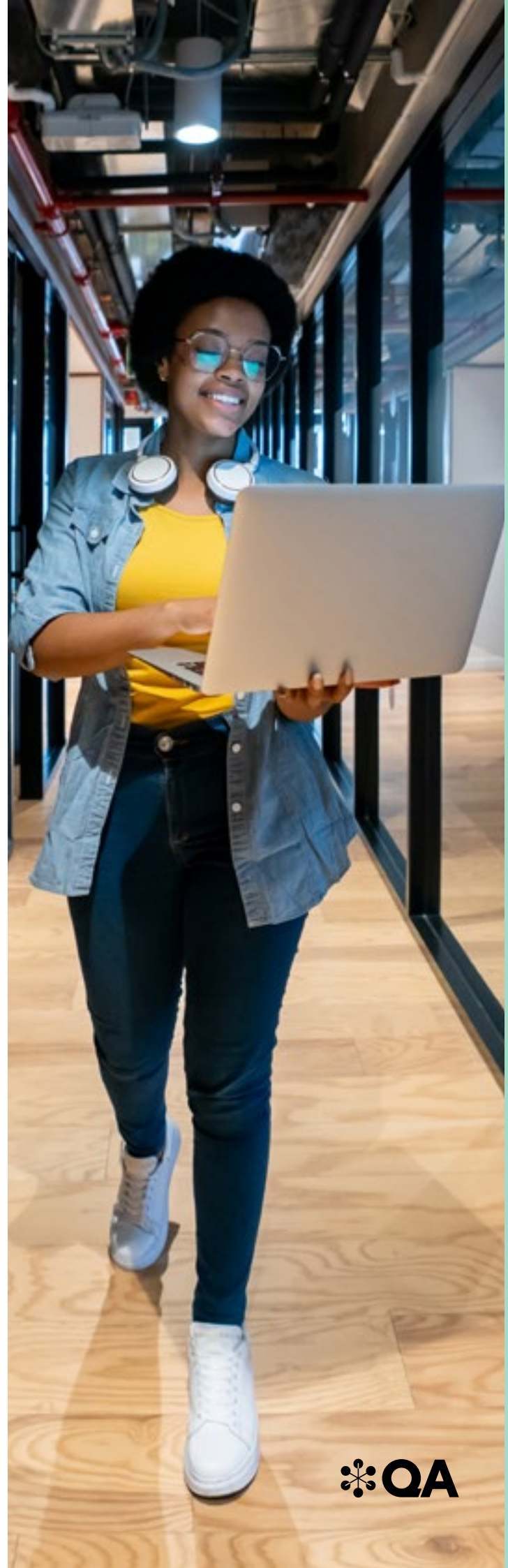
6 Bhatt, P. and Muduli, A. (2023), "Artificial intelligence in learning and development: a systematic literature review", European Journal of Training and Development, Vol. 47 No. 7/8, pp. 677-694.

QA believe that, at the functional level, AI will enable L&D professionals to shift from content creators to learning architects and performance analysts.

Rather than spending time managing the development of materials, they can focus on strategic design, stakeholder consultation, and performance analysis. AI becomes a powerful tool for scaling personalised learning experiences and generating insights that inform business decisions.

Issues of bias in AI algorithms, lack of accuracy due to hallucinations, and learner privacy must also be carefully addressed.

We believe that L&D professionals must develop a high standard of AI literacy, not just to leverage these tools effectively, but to ensure their reliable and ethical use.





The Imperative for Change: From Course Provider to Strategic Enabler

Through a historical lens, traditional L&D functions have operated as service providers, responding to training requests and delivering standardised programs aligned to job roles.

This traditional reactive model is fundamentally misaligned with the demands of the post-industrial paradigm, where competitive advantage comes from rapidly developing and deploying capabilities that transcend traditional role boundaries⁷.

The transformation requires L&D to assume four new strategic roles:

1. **Skills Intelligence Partners** - they must develop real-time understanding of organisational capability gaps and emerging skill requirements.
2. **Performance Architects** - they need to design learning interventions that directly impact business outcomes.
3. **Change Enablers** - they must support organisational transformation through strategic capacity building.
4. **Ecosystem Orchestrators** - they should curate and integrate diverse learning resources, technologies, and partnerships.

QA believes that success demands a fundamental mindset shift. Instead of asking “What training do you need?” L&D professionals must ask “What business challenge are you facing, and can learning help solve it?”

Performance consulting, approaches learning as one solution among many, ensuring interventions address root causes rather than symptoms. This consultative approach positions L&D as a strategic partner in driving organisational performance and transformation.

⁶ Brassey, Christensen & Van Dam (2019). McKinsey & Company - The essential components of a successful L&D strategy.

Emerging Operating Models and Capabilities

It is our view that the future L&D function will require new organisational structures and capabilities to fulfil its strategic mandate. Three primary operating models are emerging as viable frameworks for this transformation⁸.

- 1. Skills Cloud Operating Model** moves away from rigid, role-based training structures toward a fluid, skills-first architecture that is decentralised, intelligent, and dynamically aligned with evolving business needs. Using a centralised skills intelligence platform, the 'Skills Cloud', continuously maps, updates, and analyses the organisation's skills inventory in real time. The cloud acts as a 'living system', integrating data from performance systems, learning platforms, project outcomes, and employee profiles to create a dynamic view of current and emerging capabilities.
- 2. The Learning Ecosystem Model** reimagines L&D as a dynamic, interconnected network that seamlessly integrates internal expertise with external platforms, partners, and content providers. It shifts the focus from owning all learning assets to orchestrating access to the best available knowledge, wherever it resides. This model enables scalable, personalised, and just-in-time learning by leveraging AI, open APIs, and data interoperability across systems. As a result, organisations can foster a culture of continuous learning that is adaptive, inclusive, and aligned with both individual growth and strategic business goals.
- 3. Learning as a Product Model** transforms L&D into a strategic function that designs, delivers, and evolves learning experiences with the same discipline and agility as product development. Cross-functional product teams own specific learning journeys, such as leadership, onboarding, or digital fluency, and manage them through iterative roadmaps informed by user research, learner analytics, and business feedback. Using design thinking, agile sprints, and continuous experimentation, these teams rapidly prototype, test, and refine learning solutions to ensure they are impactful, relevant, and scalable. This model blends the responsiveness of agile squads with the long-term vision and user-centricity of product management, positioning L&D as a driver of measurable business value.

⁸ Gartner Research (2024). Key Actions to Design a Modern L&D Operating Model.



QA recognises that local situations may demand that transition to emerging L&D models may be staged by incorporating model elements in a phased approach.

Regardless of the chosen model, successful L&D functions will require several core capabilities .

- **Skills Intelligence** using analytics and AI to track skills gaps, predict future needs, measure learning impact and workforce readiness.
- **Learning Experience (LX)** Design goes beyond traditional instructional design, incorporating UX and behavioural science, to create personalised, adaptive, and engaging learning journeys that align with how people learn and work.
- **Change Enablement** requires understanding of organisational psychology and change management to ensure learning interventions drive lasting behavioural transformation.

We believe these capabilities must be supported by new practices that embed learning into daily work. Learning in the flow of work eliminates the artificial separation between working and learning, making capability development a continuous process rather than discrete events.

9 Van Dam, N. (2018). McKinsey & Company - Elevating Learning & Development: Insights and Practical Guidance from the Field.



Organisational Structures for the Future

The structural evolution of L&D functions reflects broader organisational trends toward agility, collaboration, and networked operations.

We believe that the structure must mirror or compliment the operating model of the wider business to function correctly. The dichotomy of centralised financial control versus decentralised budgets can also frustrate the effective delivery of L&D, as they operate as extremes, and sometimes fail to deliver the required outcomes effectively. Three key structural designs are emerging as particularly effective.

- **Centres of Excellence** serve as innovation hubs, developing new methodologies, evaluating emerging technologies, and establishing standards and best practices. These centres provide the strategic oversight and thought leadership necessary to guide organisational learning transformation.
- **Embedded L&D Partners** work directly within business units, developing a deep understanding of specific challenges and opportunities. This embedded model ensures learning solutions are contextually relevant and strategically aligned with business objectives.
- **Learning Communities** harness the power of peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing. These self-organising networks enable rapid knowledge transfer and create sustainable learning cultures that extend beyond formal L&D interventions. Frontier companies adopt these because they amplify human performance. They can create a fly-wheel effect, where continuous learning fuels better performance, driving higher motivation to learn.

We hold that successful organisations often employ hybrid approaches, combining elements of all three structures to create comprehensive learning ecosystems that balance strategic oversight with operational flexibility and employee engagement¹⁰.

¹⁰ Brassey, Christensen & Van Dam (2019). McKinsey & Company - The essential components of a successful L&D strategy.

Transformation Pathways and Implementation Strategies

We maintain that organisations seeking to transform their L&D functions should consider several key pathways and strategies.

- **L&D Team Development** is perhaps the most critical success factor. Current L&D professionals must develop new capabilities in data analysis, design thinking, AI fluency, and strategic consulting. This often requires significant investment in upskilling and, in some cases, recruiting new talent with different backgrounds and perspectives.
 - **Capability Audits** provide alignment of human capability gaps against strategic objectives providing a prioritised risk baseline of current skills and future requirements. We believe that these assessments should extend beyond traditional competency frameworks to include emerging capabilities like digital literacy, systems thinking, and resilience/emotional intelligence.
 - **Technology Investment** in skills intelligence platforms, learning experience platforms, and AI-enabled tools provide the infrastructure necessary for advanced L&D operations. However, it is our view that, to be successful, these investments must be guided by clear strategic objectives and supported by appropriate change management.
 - **Pilot Programs** allow organisations to test new approaches in low-risk environments while building the evidence for broader transformation. Agile learning teams working on high impact, strategically aligned, business challenges can demonstrate the value of new operating models and generate organisational support for change.
-

Conclusion: Embracing the Future of Learning and Development

QA believe that the transformation of L&D from course provider to strategic partner represents more than an operational change, it reflects a fundamental reconceptualisation of how organisations build and deploy human capability.

This evolution is driven by powerful forces including artificial intelligence, economic uncertainty, changing workforce expectations, and the accelerating pace of organisational change.

We are convinced that organisations that successfully navigate this transition will develop sustainable competitive advantage through their ability to rapidly build new capabilities, adapt to changing conditions, and unlock human potential. Those that resist change, risk becoming increasingly irrelevant, in an environment where learning agility often determines organisational survival.

For L&D professionals, this moment represents an unprecedented opportunity to demonstrate strategic value and drive meaningful organisational impact. The future belongs to those who can help organisations transform not just what their people know, but how they learn, grow, and contribute to collective success.

QA's position is, that the question is not whether this transformation will occur, the forces driving this change are too powerful to resist. The question is whether organisations will shape this transformation consciously and strategically or simply react to changes imposed by external pressures. We assert that the choice they make will determine not just the future of their L&D functions, but the future of their organisations in an increasingly complex and dynamic world.

