

# Three Key Steps Towards a Transformational Culture of Learning

Shifting From Investment to Scalability


The edX for Business Team & Daniel Mark Adsit



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**About edX For Business** Accelerate workforce skills development with the online learning platform built to maximize learner engagement and long-term learning benefits. edX For Business empowers organizations to effortlessly upskill and reskill their workforce and continuously develop in-demand business skills with the highest-quality courses taught by experts from the world's leading institutions and organizations. Founded in 2012 by Harvard and MIT with the mission to make high-quality content accessible to everyone, edX supports 156 content partners, over 33M learners worldwide, in over 196 countries.

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**Despite the flood of eLearning initiatives in corporate learning and development (L&D), leaders still cite a failure to build a culture of learning as a top organizational challenge.**

In my experience, many organizations stifle potential by treating learning as an incidental chore about tasks and procedures rather than a fully integrated workforce development vehicle. This approach will never foster a culture of learning. The shift from spending to scalability in L&D programs remains elusive.

Organizations of all shapes and sizes deploy learning and training programs as workforces of the future demand more sophisticated skills across increasingly distributed and remote teams. Most recently, immersive eLearning experiences have arisen that connect thousands of learners across the globe using online courses in almost every imaginable subject, from hard sciences to emerging technologies to cognitive skills and decision making. These opportunities complement the emergence of more remote work and work from home as teams adapt to changing business circumstances.

Investment is an important step but does not guarantee success. Training pilots and kick-offs are only half the battle. Scalability demands solutions that deeply instill the culture of learning and dynamic capabilities within the organization. This is where eLearning holds unique potential.

While eLearning supports scalability when deployed effectively, this requires intentional effort, focus, and continuous investment.

Leaders that implement eLearning for scalability are taking **three key approaches:**

**1**

**Orient transformation around the future of work**

Use eLearning to develop capabilities that position the organization and its people for the future.

**2**

**Leverage connections with others**

Take advantage of embedded interactions to make eLearning thrive within the organization.

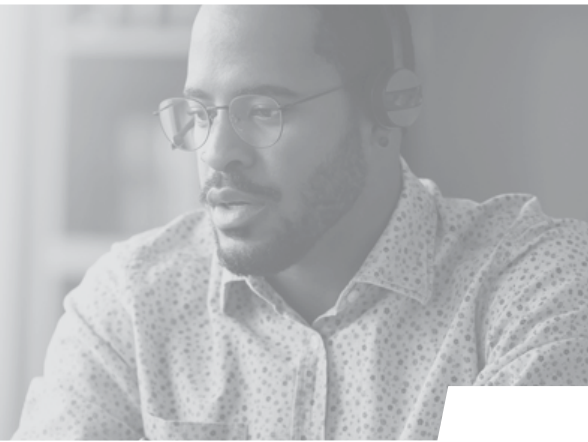
**3**

**Integrate learning into workflows**

Use alignment between eLearning and work to fully realize organizational and human potential.

# 1

## Orient Transformation Around the Future of Work



How do you and your L&D leaders view eLearning within the spectrum of other training methods and tools? Is it a cost savings, a competitive advantage, or something else?

Technologies that reduce training costs, such as video and the internet, are well established. However, eLearning is much more than cheaper learning. Any view that relegates eLearning as an interchangeable cog in the HR or L&D toolbox will never foster scalability.

Transformation around the future of work is a unique scalable benefit of eLearning. This transformation takes place in the skills of tomorrow, across entire workforces, and in organizational flexibility.

### Transformation in **Skills of Tomorrow**

**Unlock the skills and technologies of tomorrow, today.**

New skills and technologies that are the foundation of future work, such as automation and data analytics, change the nature of how business is conducted. They require a lifelong learning approach because of continued evolution in both the underlying content and workplaces, especially as teams become more remotely connected through technology.

While skills and technologies of tomorrow are a learning opportunity, organizations remain relatively unsophisticated in using them effectively. Research about eLearning courses exposes this capability gap, even in top organizations. For example, a [report I co-authored](#) for the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) revealed that organizations are much less sophisticated than expected in the emerging subject of model-based systems engineering (MBSE). This study analyzed data from thousands of working professionals enrolled in MIT eLearning courses. The results demonstrated that while many professionals perceive their organizations as sophisticated in MBSE, actual behaviors reflect the exact opposite — organizational practices overwhelmingly revolve around basic word processing documents instead of MBSE core principles.

In an environment where organizations overestimate their skills and technologies, eLearning democratizes access to them through a wide variety of content from respected experts. While it is important to carefully assess the quality of eLearning content from unvetted sources, it is no longer necessary to develop it from scratch.

#### THE TAKEAWAY

**Transform around the future of work by using eLearning to unlock the skills of tomorrow.**

## Transformation Across Workforces

The future of work depends on the effective deployment of skills and technologies to everyone.

Successful deployment is essential, but traditional methods fail. A [Wall Street Journal investigative report concludes](#) that innovations such as automation disproportionately benefit dominant organizations while “diffusion” of best practices throughout all organizations overall has floundered. In other words, top organizations deploy new knowledge and innovation effectively, while everyone else never catches up. This dissonance will become more pronounced in a future that increasingly demands cutting edge skills and knowledge.

Hiring top talent in key areas is an incomplete solution. An [article from the MIT Sloan School of Management](#) characterizes a “battle for talent” that is only getting worse. Meanwhile, [analysis of research data from Burning Glass Technologies](#) suggests that it is more cost effective to reskill established workers. Furthermore, access to learning opportunities is critical for retention in an environment where organizations differentiate by employee perks. A [Forbes article](#) even makes the case that stipends for learning are one of the most potent employee benefits. Hiring is not a sure win, especially when more hiring in the future will be done remotely, and the data points increasingly towards the importance of learning as both a retention tool and internal development of critical skill sets.



“Companies across all industries should consider a triple investment today—reskilling at-risk workers, upskilling their broader workforce, and building structures for a learning organization—to prepare for both the short-term and long-term future of work.”

- Burning Glass Technologies

It is possible to infuse critical knowledge throughout existing workforces through eLearning. It’s a simple mathematical fact — the nature of eLearning spreads information across more people. While in the past a select few employees enrolled in long and expensive degrees, eLearning delivers digestible, relevant, high-value content to everyone. For example, as [reported in a case study by MIT](#), the Ford Motor Company has enrolled over 400 employees in MIT systems engineering eLearning courses on the edX platform as part of a “global effort to reinvent” the entire company. It is common for L&D organizations to enroll cross-functional and general staff in eLearning courses to blanket an entire organization with new ways of doing business. The need for distributed knowledge is even greater as teams become less co-located.

Additionally, eLearning enables workers to immediately apply their learning to real-world context, while connections they build through social learning strengthens peer working groups and amplifies the overall training value.

### THE TAKEAWAY

**Transform around the future of work by using eLearning to reach the entire organization.**

## Transformation in **Organizational Flexibility**

An agile workforce, featuring mutually-supporting skill sets, helps an organization pivot.

The future of work demands that organizations become more flexible in order to better adapt to change. The urgency is perhaps no more evident than through the global workplace disruptions during COVID-19.

Flexibility is essential but not simple. In a presentation at the MIT Systems Thinking Conference in 2015, [Michael A M Davies proposed that](#) organizations and teams across all industries “who learn the quickest, win” in innovation. This refers to how quickly organizations pivot and apply new approaches, such as 3D printing, rather than the speed that learners consume content. However, this flexibility can be enormously difficult, especially for established organizations and mature industries, because bureaucracy and dogma prevent an institution from getting out of its own way.



“The flexibility of the format and delivery allows for Ford’s organization to deploy it at scale.”

– From Modules to Models: How Ford Motor Company is Shifting its Systems Engineering Strategy Technologies

While not a complete remedy, eLearning supports quicker pivots and change within an organization. Through eLearning, it’s possible to invest in many different skills and technologies of tomorrow. This flexibility is a critical success factor, especially during growing times of uncertainty. It’s about constantly reassessing where everything is moving. A knowledge portfolio from eLearning lowers risk by providing a set of real-options that can be deployed efficiently and acquired and applied quickly for the benefit of the organization. In other words, it’s a toolbox of possibilities for the future.

Flexibility presents itself through eLearning in different ways. Some organizations, such as global automakers, have developed new cross-functional roles around subjects that started with employees enrolled in eLearning courses. Others strategically deploy eLearning to rally the team around a specific goal. For example, according to an [MIT case study](#), the U.S. Naval Air Systems Command (NAVAIR) is enrolling its third group of learners since 2017 into an MIT eLearning program on the edX platform that is an integral component in an organization-wide model based systems engineering (MBSE) transformation. Enrolling groups in stages also helps to build a base to mentor new learners.

**THE TAKEAWAY** Transform around the future of work by using eLearning to create flexibility.

## 2

## Leverage Connections With Others

Traditional learning has a scalability problem. Connections revolve around physical and on-campus presence. This format is expensive, lacks measurable insight into knowledge retention, and requires costly side effects such as downtime. It is also increasingly unrealistic in a world where fewer people are in the office.

In contrast to traditional learning, eLearning connections scale naturally with the same rigor — if not more — than physical and on-campus presence. These connections are useful when getting started, growing content offerings, and building communities of learners.

### Connections When **Getting Started**

**You will never scale without getting started. Jumpstart eLearning through connections.**

In the beginning, it is difficult to move beyond the status quo with eLearning. Paradox of choice is real. There are a myriad of eLearning resources. A [Wall Street Journal article](#) characterizes the struggle that even enormous employers, such as Home Depot and Lockheed, face when wading through competing learning credential programs. While it's easier than ever to access more training content, it's also increasingly complicated to determine how to package this content to deliver on your L&D strategy and company goals. Jumping in too quickly risks the unknown, while the opposite prevents the organization from ever reaching a critical mass.

It's essential to start somewhere. Any L&D organization without a strategy to navigate these options will be severely disadvantaged in the long run. Getting started means harnessing the chaos through an experimental approach. Methods and options for eLearning are always changing. The initial objective should be to learn about learning. Test courses, evaluate providers, and assemble the right combination of content to make an informed decision. Experimentation is often discouraged but is necessary in this circumstance. Do this by building connections across eLearning resources.

An experimental approach involves action that does not scale in a pilot stage in order to enable scalability in the future. For example, many organizations start by enrolling a small group of select users in an eLearning course to evaluate the suitability. Later, they enroll larger groups. Assume that some courses will not work as expected and prepare multiple options in advance. It's possible to grow the right approach over time.

**THE TAKEAWAY**

**Leverage connections to get started with eLearning.**

## Connections to **Content Providers**

**Fresh and relevant content is the lifeblood of eLearning. Use connections to facilitate it.**

Fresh and relevant content is a delicate balance to strike. Content about the future quickly goes stale because these subjects are still developing. It is by definition a moving target. On the other hand, learning is situational. The impact of new skills and technologies on unique competitive advantage can never be fully appreciated by outsiders. Internal fluency is essential in any organization.

The nature of eLearning provides an ideal platform to incorporate content from both external and internal partners. External partner sources bring emerging content that complements internal expertise from HR, L&D, and functional domains. For example, a global consumer goods manufacturer incorporates MIT eLearning courses built on the edX platform into development plans for specific engineering roles.

Even though it's simpler to work with fewer partners, remember that it's possible to mix and match [modular content](#) from different sources. Scalability emerges when fresh external content combines with internal best practices.

### THE TAKEAWAY

**Leverage connections to grow eLearning content.**



To build connections, it's essential to leverage infrastructure for interaction with other learners in different roles, companies, and industries.

## Connections With **Communities of Learners**

**Complementary skill-sets and insightful experience emerge in an organic, yet virtual, environment.**

Interactions across multitudes of learners drives scalability in eLearning. Tap into these virtual interactions through communities of learners.

eLearning enables hundreds or thousands of learners to interact with each other simultaneously. They consume information collaboratively because the subjects themselves are works in progress. The content is a living organism. Pioneers discover different approaches. Interactive content includes stories, case studies, lessons from the front lines, or collaborative course assignments. Everyone has a unique experience. It's like reading a chapter while the book is still being written. Through eLearning, practice sharing interactions come to life.

To build connections, it's essential to leverage infrastructure for interaction with other learners in different roles, companies, and industries. Interaction often happens in discussion forums that serve as a conversation hub around course content. While some discussion is facilitated, much is unscripted. Sharing might feel awkward in organizations with reserved cultures but opens the door wide to opportunities around skills of tomorrow. This parallels our recommendations for scalable remote workflows that depend less on presence in the physical office. Effective interactions in eLearning and remote working depend on complementary capabilities.

### THE TAKEAWAY

**Leverage connections with communities of learners through eLearning.**

## 3

## Integrate Learning Into Workflows



Learning and work are disconnected and unsynchronized. Students pursue education, such as college or trade school, before starting work (often in an unrelated subject). Even “continuous” learning, “lifelong” learning, and training are supplementary to actual work in most organizations.

The natural, self-reinforcing effects between eLearning and working bridges this gap. The most effective areas to integrate learning and working are your company’s mindset about learning, application in context, and measures of success.

### Integrate Learning Through Mindset

**Embracing a mindset that encourages continual learning adds up to a thriving organization.**

Learning in the workplace is historically established. Traditionally, skilled workers developed through apprenticeships. This evolved into training in modern L&D organizations.

While learning exists in the modern workplace, it is clear from common behaviors that they are not in harmony. [Workers fear to ask for support](#). Managers decline to fund learning without guaranteed returns. Or worse, environments incentivise employees to upskill into another more prestigious role outside the company. These scarcity mindsets, similar to the way that many traditional employers underestimated working from home, discount the importance of new skills.

Skills of tomorrow delivered through eLearning facilitate a learning-while-working mindset that is an antidote to stagnant culture. This fundamentally changes the relationship between learning and the workplace. Traditional training often focuses on task instruction, while eLearning focuses on work that equips people and organizations to thrive. Furthermore, practical logistics make eLearning compatible with schedules and integratable into organizations.

Organizations can facilitate this learning-while-working mindset through example. In one approach, higher level leaders demonstrate commitment to learning, support unified understanding of new subjects, and serve as role-models by enrolling in eLearning courses themselves. For example, as [reported in an MIT case study](#), Shell leverages MIT eLearning courses on the edX platform to build common vocabulary and understanding between technical experts and senior executives about bigger picture energy technologies of the future. This reflects the bigger-picture benefit of the learning-while-working mindset.

**THE TAKEAWAY**

**Integrate learning into workflows using eLearning through mindset.**

## Integrate Learning Through Application

Transforming theoretical information into relevant skill sets provides vivid evidence of benefits.

Even within a culture of learning, all organizations exist for a primary purpose. Usually that purpose is to serve products and services to customers. Learning about the skills of tomorrow still must contribute towards it.

At first glance, the tangible benefits of eLearning about skills and technologies of the future seem fuzzier when compared to traditional training. For example, the reason for training about company policies or “how to enter an order in the system” is clear. Automation? Data analytics? The payback may be less obvious, but it’s strategic and long-term. eLearning experiences actually provide benefits that support many modern workplace realities, such as remote and distributed teams and help companies develop business-enabling skills such as subject matter expertise, critical thinking, and decision making...skills that cannot be taught in a few days but which must be reinforced in the workplace, built upon, and further developed over time.



“Peer feedback and development plans are exciting ways to demonstrate the effectiveness of eLearning within an organization.”

– Daniel Adsit

Problem solving is a key benefit of eLearning. Professionals commonly struggle with critical thinking skills. Yet, problem solving skills from courses transfer back into every type of work. Additionally, learners often acquire new uses for tools. For example, many learners struggle with advanced Microsoft Excel functions that are mandatory for projects in MIT quantitative methods eLearning courses. After the courses, they possess an entirely new toolset to apply across a variety of problems in their roles.

It’s also possible to magnify the impact of learning by seeking parallel benefits with work, potentially even tying learning to work goals. For example, many learners in MIT courses deliberately complete assignments about subjects relevant to work. They may choose an appliance, automobile, or aircraft system from their company to analyze. This ensures relevance to actual work problems from the beginning, and encourages learners to frame knowledge in the context of their responsibilities.

### THE TAKEAWAY

**Integrate learning into workflows using eLearning through application.**

## Integrate Learning Through Measures of Success

Knowledge-based growth creates measures of success that are dynamic and evolving.

Pointing learning strategy in the right direction is difficult because L&D measures of success remain an open topic of discussion. While this struggle will not be immediately resolved, it is possible to consider eLearning influences on measures of success.

Learning in the workplace poses a clear challenge to traditional measures of success. Payback for eLearning courses are uncertain, benefits from knowledge arise unexpectedly, and skill outcomes remain difficult to quantify. However, peer feedback and development plans are exciting aspects of eLearning with tremendous impact on measures of success.

Peer feedback in eLearning contributes to measures of success through continuous improvement. In MIT courses, some of the most traceable achievements are accomplished when learners form teams with other people in their companies for collaboration (often in remote locations). Beyond thinking through problems and solutions together, peer feedback provides an invaluable mechanism for assessment. This is especially useful across roles and functional domains. Feedback is also an enormously valuable skill that later provides workgroups with a natural success measurement mechanism, especially in future environments where in-person feedback opportunities might be limited.

In addition to peer feedback, development plans contribute to measures of success by providing customized targets. Through eLearning, development plans equip individuals with unique paths for application. This is especially important as work performance is measured more by results and less by showing up at an office. Learners identify specific goals focused around their work area and connect activities to them. For example, learners in MIT eLearning courses deploy “Action Plans.” Action Plans are customized, living records that identify exactly what, when, and how a worker intends to use course material. This enables traceable and transparent accomplishments, and even incorporates mentoring. Development plans are absolutely an opportunity to measure eLearning impact and which benefit both the employee and the organization.

**THE TAKEAWAY** Integrate eLearning into workflows through measures of success such as peer feedback and development plans.

## CONCLUSION

### The Path Towards a Stronger Organization

Scalable learning is challenging but not insurmountable. When approached effectively, eLearning is an immensely powerful new mechanism to instill a sustainable culture of learning and develop the dynamic skills and capabilities that will drive workforces of the future.

Regardless of your organization’s current state, you have the opportunity to embrace eLearning and leverage it to your benefit by transforming around the future of work, connecting with others, and integrating learning into workflows.

### Learn How edX Can Help You Create a Sustainable and Scalable Learning Culture.

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