



White Paper

A new generation of learners

How the new learners of today are changing the face of workplace learning

Executive summary

A new type of learner is entering the workplace, one that is transforming the way organizations approach learning in the future. They are impatient, energetic and have little regard for hierarchies. They are the millennials—those born toward the end of the last century who are now irrevocably influencing how we work in this century.

Initial attempts to structure learning for these learners have largely failed. Can organizations now adapt their learning for these learners more successfully? Done properly, such adaptation can benefit not just the millennials but also other learners, and the organization itself—but what will it take to change learning offerings to make them more effective for millennials?

This is not a matter of putting a gloss on existing systems. It is a matter of radical change. In order to retain staff and to ensure that their skills are fully honed for their work, organizations must transform to effectively deal with this changing learning audience—especially when it comes to mobile solutions and expectations.

This white paper describes the characteristics of the millennial generation, how they learn and what this means for how learning is organized in the workplace. Although millennials challenge the existing way we learn at work, this does not mean that it is necessary to start from scratch with workplace learning systems. Rather, they provide the impetus to change current systems, add to them and build a better approach to workplace learning for all.

Technology and the millennial generation

Who are the millennials? Commentators vary in their definitions of this cohort of the population, but the clue comes in the name. The millennials make up the generation that came to age around the millennium, and began entering the workforce shortly afterwards. A term coined in 1999, it identifies a large group with its own set of defining characteristics.



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What are the characteristics of the millennial learner? They are the first to have always used technology in their daily lives—at work and at play—and this has had a dramatic effect on them. It has made them information-hungry, impatient and unimpressed by hierarchies. Being used to the internet and social media, they expect to be able to access information almost instantly, in a way quite unlike the generations at work that preceded them: the baby boomers, Generation X and the traditionalists.

And for millennials using the internet to access information is not just a matter of finding out facts, but of reaching people. This could equally be for their social lives or for work; there is no real distinction between the two in their minds. This in turn leads to another characteristic: millennials are far less hierarchical in their outlook. For them, it is normal to reach the people they want to reach quickly. And in turn they are open to being contacted and to sharing what they know openly.

The millennial learner

These characteristics, combined with the natural energy of the young entering the workforce, means that the millennials have a refreshingly different approach to learning. The population they are joining is aging, and by 2015, millennials will make up the most significant part of the workforce, so if we are to keep our workforce informed, the millennials' approach to learning cannot be ignored. More importantly, though, it should not be ignored. It can be very effective and organizations will benefit by adapting their learning systems to it.

The millennial approach to learning has three key characteristics. It is naturally social; it is non-hierarchical and it is impatient.

The social aspect of this means that millennials are happy to learn from each other, and to share what they know. The non-hierarchical approach means that they are inclined to seek out advice from others anywhere in the organization, regardless of how high or low they might sit in the management structure. It also means that they are willing to share with those people. Crucially, it also means that they are willing to share with them both inside and outside the organization. With the borderless workplace identified by Bersin & Associates increasingly a part of our lives, extended learning and information sharing to the extended enterprise—especially to the supply chain and to partner sales operations—is crucial.

The impatience of millennials means that they are generally very clear about what they want to know, and very clear about how they want to learn it. They want to learn it immediately, and without any extraneous information. The result: millennials are unlikely to want to sit through a traditional course. They will instead seek it out, find it, reference it, probably share it, and then get back to work.

Most organizations' existing structures for learning—whether online or face-to-face—are not set up to cater to this way of learning. They will have to be adapted to meet these characteristics of urgency and non-hierarchical sociability.

Building better learning systems

The first attempts at adapting systems to cater to these characteristics were similar to the first automobiles, which were literally horseless carriages. Only in the second and later generations did these horseless carriages begin to adapt to the different needs of the internal combustion engine rather than the horse as a means of propulsion.

Similarly, we are currently at the beginning of understanding social learning at work. The very first attempts of most organizations in this field have typically been to provide functionality without understanding or engaging the learner. The result: first generational learning systems that focused on technology and not on how people use them. These systems have bulletin boards, social networking sites and wikis. Often they are beautifully designed. Typically, they are also empty. The design has left out the most important factor: the people.

We have now entered the second generation of understanding the millennial learner, where a series of things have altered. We have moved from a focus on features to focusing on the user and their needs and desires, allowing them to access the learning they require by focusing on what they need, rather than how the training department chooses to present it to them. In this way, learning becomes user-driven, immediately useful and meaningful to the user's work.

Most organizational learning does not currently adopt this approach, however.

For example, rather than forcing individuals to go to a specific site to find the information they want, or to attend a course (online or face-to-face), they should be presented with an interface that includes collaboration functionality, and which is designed around their existing daily work. Where possible, it should not demand a new form of interaction, either, but be based on ways of working that they are already familiar with from sites such as Amazon or Facebook.

Most systems at work have to expand beyond the first attempt at providing meaningful learning for the millennials. This first generation attempt simply took existing courses and make them available on demand, rather than part of a curriculum. This was an improvement over learners being forced to step through approval processes, but it was nowhere near close enough to satisfying the millennials' need for instant information gratification. The second generation of learning systems must provide information which people can share immediately, without the L&D department playing a centralized, controlling role.

Traditional learning	Generation 1 learning	Generation 2 learning
Company-specific learning	Company-specific learning	Extended enterprise learning
L&D department prepares classroom courses	L&D department prepares online courses	L&D department prepares online courses and individuals share useful information
Long-term, just-in-case learning	Long-term, just-in-case learning and short-term performance support	Long-term, just-in-case learning and short-term performance support and peer-to-peer sharing
Courses taken separately from work	Courses taken at work, but not a part of it	Courses and work-based assignments

Does this mean that everything that existed until now in corporate learning systems needs to be thrown out? Not at all. Collaboration and instant 'pull' information is only part of the solution. People do not know what they don't know, and this core learning will always need to be provided to them. There will always be a need for 'push' information in any organization—for onboarding, for compliance-based training, and to ensure employees simply know the minimum they need for their jobs. However, the way individuals access this information will change, and along with it, there will be a wide range of other learning experiences that they can have—social, informal and work-based.

The benefit to the organization

Millennial learners are leading us toward a more complex, fuller, richer approach to learning. It is up to those of us who provide learning systems to ensure that this approach is fully catered for.

This is necessary not just to accommodate the millennials, who will be a substantial part of the workforce by 2015, but because it will benefit all learners. In the mature economics of the developed world, things are moving fast. Increasingly not only manual labor but knowledge work is being outsourced to emergent economies. For organizations to remain competitive in this rapidly changing environment, employees must be enabled to learn in the most effective way possible. The millennials have shown a great way of doing this—we should embrace this new approach wholeheartedly for everyone's benefit.



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