

# Adopting Lifelong Learning in your workplace

# Introduction

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Lifelong learning is a state of mind. It's something that individuals do purposefully and consciously and because it's fundamentally about growth, it's something that organisations should encourage.

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# All About Lifelong Learning

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## What is lifelong learning?

Lifelong learning is a voluntary and self-motivated conscious pursuit of knowledge, of skills and of better ways to do things. It's not confined to the classroom but encompasses daily interactions with others and every aspect of society – including the workplace.

You may have thought of lifelong learning as linked with continual professional development. It is, but it's so much more than that. Lifelong learning can be characterised by a willingness to learn from experience as well as to tackle academic qualifications or upgrade technical skills. And with the transformational power and potential of technology that has turned the workplace on its head, lifelong learning is vital to respond to this challenge.

*“Lifelong learning implies investing in people and knowledge; promoting the acquisition of basic skills, including digital literacy and broadening opportunities for innovative, more flexible forms of learning. The aim is to provide people of all ages with equal and open access to high-quality learning opportunities.”*

Eurostat 2016

## What are lifelong learners like?

You'll know when you have a lifelong learner working for you. They'll be always searching for improvements, for opportunities to stretch themselves and they'll be open to feedback. They'll think through what's happening. They'll take the initiative. They'll have a growth mindset and they'll most probably have excellent relations with everyone they work with. They'll be a positive force for good. Can you imagine the impact if every person in your workforce was a lifelong learner?

## Fluid development methodologies

Learning at work is changing. There's still room for classroom training, of course, but the prediction is that learning will be more fluid, more adaptive, and this suits a lifelong learning culture.

Almost 50% of L&D respondents of the 2017 L&D Global Sentiment predict that personalised, collaborative and micro learning will be the key learning methodologies this year (Table 1). This means that there are even more opportunities to learn.

Table 1

Key learning methodologies for 2017, ranked in order of total votes cast:

1.	Personalisation/adaptive delivery	12.4%
2.	Collaborative/social learning	11.6%
3.	Micro learning	10.5%
4.	Virtual and augmented reality	8.2%
5.	Consulting more deeply with the business	7.2%
6.	Showing value	6.7%
7.	Mobile delivery	6.5%
8.	Artificial intelligence	6.1%
9.	Curation	5.7%
10.	Games/gamification	5.5%
11.	Neuroscience/cognitive science	4.3%
12.	Video	4.1%
13.	Developing the L&D function	3.8%
14.	Personal knowledge mastery (PKM)	3.2%
15.	MOOCs	1.9%
16.	Other	2.5%

# Benefits to business

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*“Learning is not compulsory . . .  
neither is survival”*

W. Edwards Deming

Lifelong learning is an open approach to learning. People with this approach take responsibility for their own development and constantly seek ways to grow. A lifelong learner doesn't learn in silos; every aspect of life is a learning opportunity and what they learn from outside the workplace they can bring into the workplace. If such a positive attitude to learning is matched by encouragement and opportunities from line managers and L&D specialists in the workplace, the mix has the potential to supercharge organisational development. Here are only some of the ways that a lifelong learning culture can benefit your organisation:

## Future proofing

A workforce that learns quickly is more agile and can adapt more easily to changes, whether to internal like new technology and processes, or external like a new market sector. Lifelong learning is built-in resilience.

## More innovative

Employees that are open, curious and feel an innate permission to explore and push boundaries are more likely to create an innovative culture. Famously, some Silicon Valley companies encouraged staff to work on side projects in company time. Google, for instance, has at times an understanding that employees can work on side projects – that are aligned to Google goals – which has led to innovations like Gmail.

*“Lifelong learning is an open approach to learning”*

## Growth mindset

A growth mindset in an organisation is characterised by openness to risk and a view of failure as an opportunity for learning and a source of valuable information. Employees of an organisation with a growth mindset are not afraid of trying and failing and it's usually risk-taking organisations that are the most innovative.

## Improved employee engagement

How employees feel about and engage with their place of work will influence how much they contribute (or not!) to business success. There are degrees of employee engagement but also types. One definition of employee engagement identifies three types :

- Intellectual engagement – thinking hard about the job and how to do it better.
- Affective engagement – feeling positively about doing a good job.
- Social engagement – actively taking opportunities to discuss work-related improvements with others at work.

Employees who feel that their organisation is investing in their learning and development feel valued and trusted, leading to improved levels of all three types of employee engagement and wellbeing.

# Special ingredients

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But before you adopt the practices that will help you develop a rich lifelong learning culture, there are some overarching principles to adopt:

## Value learning

To be effective, any initiative has to be authentically supported by those at the top. If you're developing a lifelong learning culture, it needs to be valued, championed and modelled by all tiers of management.

## Involve everyone

Lifelong learning is inclusive. Excluding people from opportunities to learn destroys the soul of it.

## Encourage reflective practice

A mindset is a system of beliefs and attitudes held by individuals or organisations. Research by Carol Dweck, Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, proposes two types of mindset; the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. A person or organisation with a fixed mindset believes that they only have a certain level of intelligence and ability and that this can't be changed. A growth mindset is open to risk, focuses on learning and development and is more resilient. To encourage a growth mindset:

- Lose the blame culture
- Reward effort not talent
- Encourage risk

*"A growth  
mindset is open  
to risk"*

## Encourage application of learning

There's little point in adopting a lifelong learning approach to organisational development if what's learned is never applied. Learning transfer –the ability of a person to use what they have learned to improve performance – is a key part of a lifelong learning approach and switched-on organisations build learning transfer initiatives into their learning programmes.

## Use technology

The digital revolution has expanded opportunities for lifelong learning. The introduction of free Massive Open Online Courses, access to digitised libraries and other information repositories, and the array of online collaborative tools are just some of the ways that digitalisation has opened the doors to many self-directed learners. Algorithms and artificial intelligence are encouraging more personalised and adaptive delivery of training. Use similar tools inside your own workplace. And as technology develops further, an attitude of lifelong learning will help a workforce adapt to it.

# Six ways to adopt a lifelong learning approach

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Lifelong learning itself can take many forms: formal or informal learning, self-directed learning and learning from daily experiences. Organisations can approach it from different angles and, indeed, a blend of lifelong learning practices will suit all learning styles and take advantage of everyday work activities as learning opportunities. You can't force it but you can facilitate it. The key is to put things into place to help your employees continue their lifelong learning in the workplace, and both of you will benefit. Here are six interventions that can help encourage a lifelong learning culture:

## 1. A coaching culture

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A coaching culture is an effective and flexible way of developing staff and can be low-cost when embedded into organisational activities. Coaching techniques focus on one to one relationships between peers or between manager and staff, and generally have three uses:

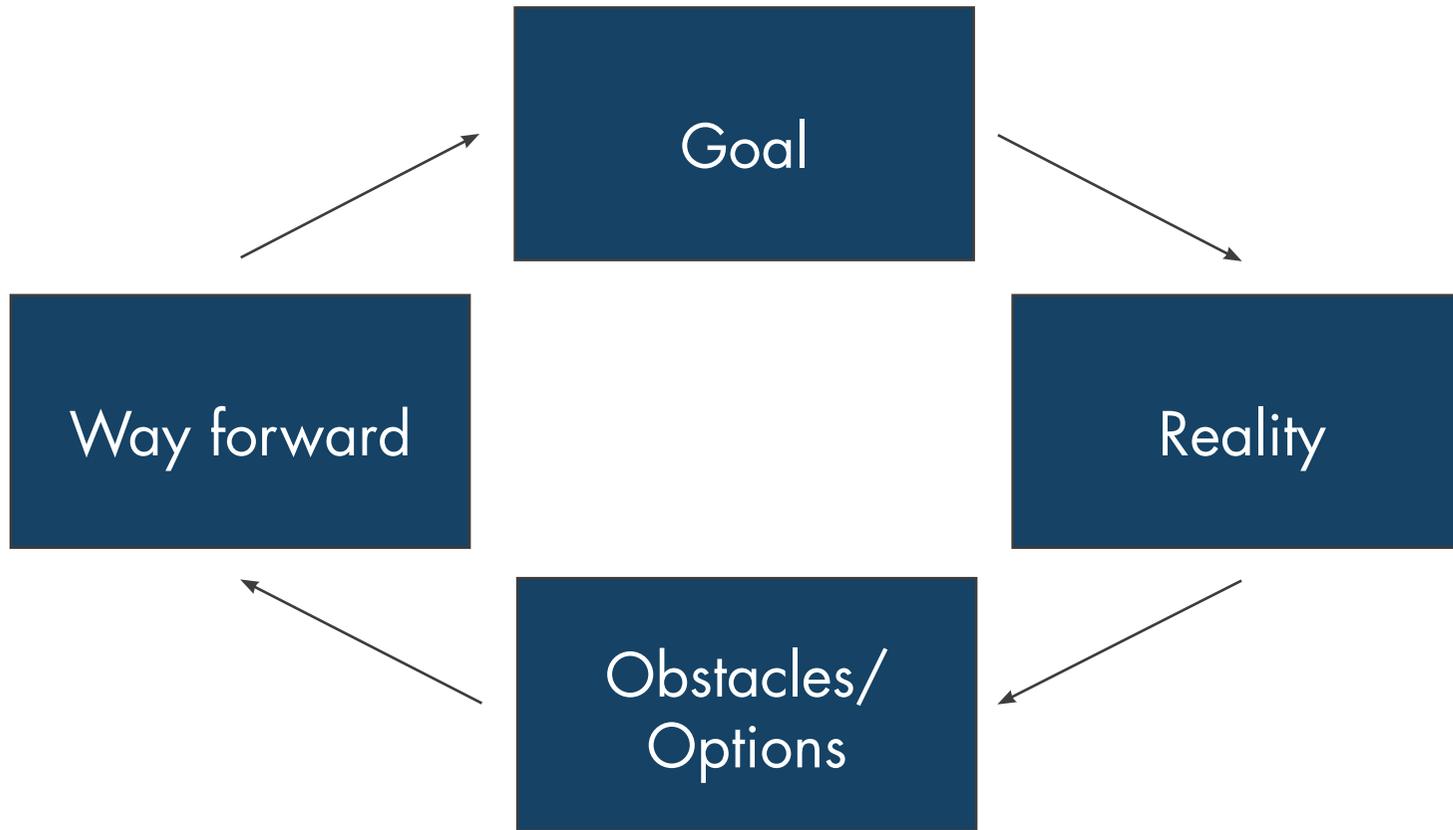
- As a tool for performance management
- To prepare staff for leadership roles
- As a tool for learning and development

HR and L&D have key roles in developing a coaching culture – for instance, in designing and managing coaching programmes or supporting the development of managers to take on a coaching role. A common coaching tool is the GROW model which focuses on goal setting and problem solving:

*“HR and L&D have key roles in developing a coaching culture”*

## GROW Coaching Model

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Within this model, the coach helps the person being coached to decide a work goal or identify a problem that needs to be solved, and is helped through the process of reflecting on what the situation is, what is getting in the way of success, what are the possible ways forward, and then deciding on a plan of action. Coaching can also cover personal soft skills, for instance, to improve work relationships. It's usual for coach and coachee to review progress regularly.

## 2. Sharing knowledge

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Organisations that encourage knowledge sharing are building a lifelong learning culture. Sharing knowledge enables staff to value and access each other's expertise, and for organisations to become less stuck in silos and more dynamic.

Janet Lim is a knowledge management professional and founder of Singapore-based organisational development consultant IOResources. She says, "Stagnant knowledge from the past is just baggage, not power. Knowledge management of the future focuses on curating and transferring useable and applicable know-how, not storing and hoarding it. The organisation that is able to collaborate with their employees and community to co-create and co-evolve will be the rising star of its industry."

Knowledge sharing assumes that everyone in the workplace – at every level - has a bank of knowledge, information, skills or expertise that, if shared, could be useful to other employees. Knowledge is a valuable intangible asset for every organisation. The trick is to find ways to unlock that knowledge; in some work cultures, people hang on to their knowledge as a form of personal power, so there has to be high levels of trust and a culture of reward for knowledge-sharers.

*"Knowledge is a valuable intangible asset for every organisation"*

Ways to embed knowledge sharing include:

- Providing space and time to build networks of staff, where they can get to know each other and have unstructured discussions. Collaborative and social learning is becoming more common in switched-on workplaces.
- Regular knowledge-sharing events, like “lunch and learns”; in large organisations it’s very easy for departments to have no idea what other departments do, or what their challenges are. Have learning sessions or days where teams and departments present what they do, what works well and what doesn’t. Make it fairly informal, supply everyone with tea, coffee and biscuits and leave time for an ideas-sharing session at the end.
- Give staff access to online collaboration tools. Knowledge is often “stuck” because it has nowhere to go, especially when staff work remotely or are scattered around the globe. Investing in collaboration tools – where staff can communicate and discuss with each other in knowledge-based forums, and where information can be stored and viewed – is a solid way to encourage a community of practice and take advantage of collective intelligence. Online moderated forums, online project tools such as Basecamp or communication portals such as Slack are tried and tested tools.
- Online training is a flexible and cost effective option for adopting lifelong learning. A suite of online training modules linked to business objectives and personal development plans will encourage self-directed learning if staff are given the time and facilities to undertake the training. Online learning can include mobile and micro learning, too.

### 3. Action Learning Sets

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Action learning sets are a dynamic and action-oriented method of group learning; they focus on work-related problems, use reflection, help to use and share knowledge and skills and in the long term can create productive cross-departmental networks.

An action learning set is a group of people – usually at the same level but from different departments (although this doesn't have to be the case) – who get together on a regular basis to help solve each others' work problems. Sometimes there is a facilitator present. Action learning set members each bring a problem; as a group they reflect on the problem and use their knowledge and skills to help the problem "owner" choose a strategy to solve the problem. The next time the group meet, each "owner" will report back on their progress.

Action learning sets encourage reflection, which is a vital part of lifelong learning, and have a laser-sharp focus on the workplace. You're also getting network-building, knowledge exchange and independent learning at the same time!

## 4. Personal Development Plans

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Although personal development plans (PDP) are only as good as how they are used, a well-thought-through PDP with line manager and staff commitment is an excellent vehicle for encouraging lifelong learning. A PDP is a structured, written framework that sets out goals for what an employee needs to learn to enable them to achieve their objectives, and how they are going to learn it. In putting together a PDP, manager and staff will reflect on what existing skills the staff member has, identify what skills they need and what learning – whether through formal qualification, online training, secondment, experience etc – they need in a given period. A PDP is not an appraisal but is a basis of constant conversation between manager and staff.

## 5. Challenging work

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Challenging work is often a learning opportunity, as long as it's backed up by coach-style management support: don't leave your staff to flounder but use the GROW model to help staff reflect and create their action plan.

*“Challenging work is often a learning opportunity”*

## 6. Align private interests with work

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Do you have an employee that likes to write? How about asking them to write a post on your company blog? Using relevant skills that staff have developed outside the workplace encourages the lifelong learning culture because even “off site” learning is valued.

These are only some of the ways to encourage and adopt a lifelong learning culture in your workplace. The key is to expand L&D practice by developing an array of learning paths within your organisation, and keeping your culture learner-centred. Once you have a lifelong learning culture established, you may find that the learning processes of purposeful reflecting and adapting will bring your organisation not just skilled and happy employees but also the competitive advantage you’ll need within an ever-changing world.

# Resources

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Dweck, C. S. (1999). Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.

2017 Learning & Development Global Sentiment Survey led by Donald Taylor:  
<http://donaldhtaylor.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/GSS-2017-V6-print.pdf>

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