

Performance Adjacent Learning: The Next Big Shift



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Why we need performance adjacent learning tools

The pace of change in business and technology—and the corresponding speed in which business knowledge can become obsolete—has dramatically altered how quickly employees must upskill and reskill. Emerging technologies like AI, mobile, and voice assistants have changed the way your workforce interacts with technology and created an expectation of immediate access to information. And today's employees (especially millennials) are motivated more by the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge than by perks, informal work environments, and even money.

This confluence of trends has made learning more important than ever for both individual and organizational success. Learning on the job is an efficient and effective method to address these business imperatives. Of course, on-the-job learning is hardly a new concept. Since the late 1990s, the 70-20-10 model of learning has advocated for 70% of learning to be accomplished through the job, followed by 20% accomplished through developmental relationships (social learning), and 10% through more formal coursework. (See Figure 1.)

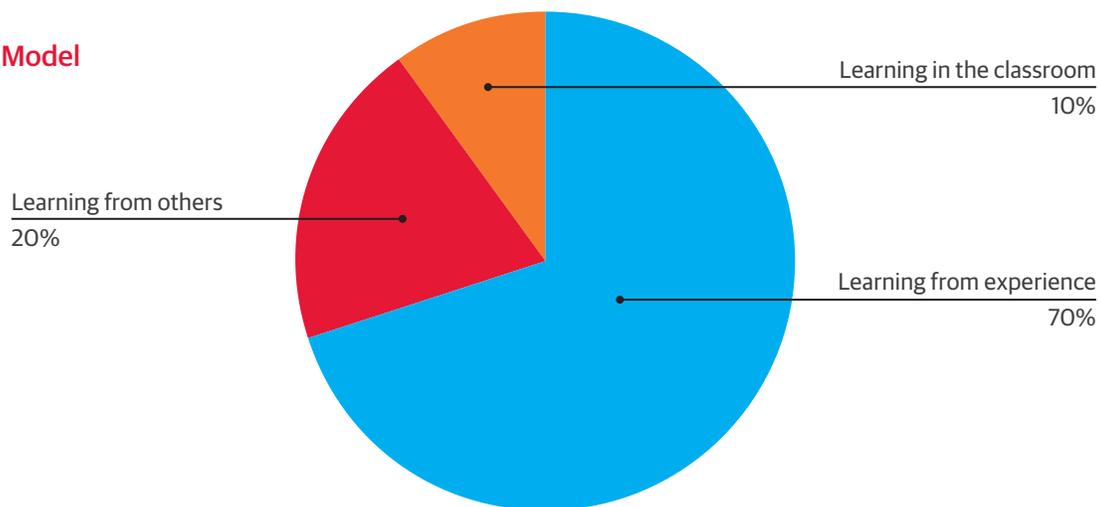
Although the distinctions between informal, social, and formal learning depicted in the 70-20-10 model have become increasingly murky, the idea that the majority of learning should happen in the process of work is more relevant today than ever before. I call this type of learning behavior “performance adjacent learning,” and I consider it a variant of performance support.

The gold standard in performance support is to provide tools embedded directly into the workflow. For example, a call center employee has a computer program that runs him through the introductory speech provided to each incoming caller. Depending on the customer response, this highly customized tool provides a series of options through pop-up menus to enable the employee to solve issues without having to memorize dozens, or even hundreds, of protocols.

This type of learning can be highly effective. The information is at the fingertips of the employee at the point of need. Its very relevance can also aid in retention if it is used often enough, but the design minimizes the need for retention and perfect recall. It can support efficiency, consistency, and, in this example, both employee and customer satisfaction. One challenge with performance support tools that are embedded into workflows is that they are inherently custom. Each workflow requires its own unique set of prompts.

Figure 1

70-20-10 Model



The case for performance adjacent learning

A great option—and one that doesn't require the creation of so many individual and highly customized tools—is “performance adjacent tools.” These sit just to the proverbial (or actual) right or left of the workflow. What these tools lack in precise input (i.e., there are no pop-ups that provide the next step), they make up in usefulness across multiple workflows.

The keys to successful performance adjacent tools are frictionless access, finely tuned search functionality, and the ability to return a variety of content types so the user can quickly and easily get an answer, solve a problem, or build on an idea—and then immediately return to the workflow.

Performance adjacent learning behavior aligns with the popular notion of ubiquitous learning. And therein lies a challenge for learning professionals. Learning that occurs all the time and at any time requires that we think differently about what “counts.”

For example, a software developer in your firm is working on a particularly challenging piece of code for a new product feature. She finds herself stuck and unable to proceed. She asks a few members of her team but gets no satisfactory resolution. So she enters your learning ecosystem, searches for a term that describes her problem, and is directed to the precise section of a course, book, or video that addresses the issue. She finds an answer and returns to work within 10 minutes of her first entrance into your digital ecosystem. The problem is solved. By her own estimates that 10-minute investment saved her at least an hour of additional work. Pretty good return on investment, right?

Sure, it's a great ROI. But it's a bit of a reporting nightmare. She was only in the system for 10 minutes. When your reporting is pulled at month's end it will look as if her engagement was minimal—and perhaps insignificant—if you are looking only at duration of use.

Performance adjacent learning behavior is nonlinear. It doesn't progress from point A to point B. It may appear in usage reports as sporadic consumption of small portions of content.

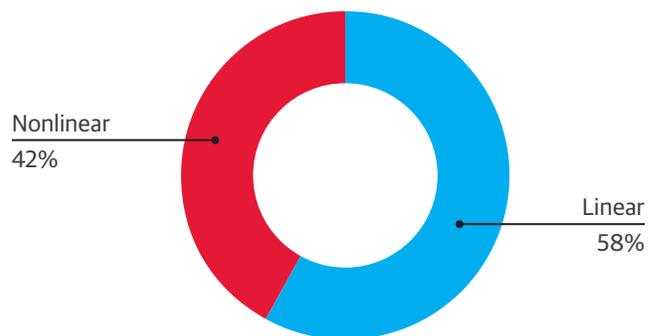
Rather than discount this type of learning behavior, we should be embracing it. It means our employees are learning in the moment of need. But it does require a mindset—and possibly reporting—shift on the part of L&D professionals.

Structural literacy and performance adjacency

At O'Reilly, we explored the learning behavior on our online learning platform during Q3 of 2017. By examining approximately 195,000 unique learning activities by learners across a range of industries, we found that fully 42% were nonlinear. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

O'Reilly linear v. nonlinear learning behavior



In Q3 2018 we surveyed just under 7,000 (6,852 to be exact) of our learners and found that 44.2% self-report that they use the learning platform in a performance adjacent manner, confirming our nonlinear finding from 2017.

With additional research, O'Reilly found that learners who are more advanced in their level of proficiency in a particular topic are more likely to behave in a nonlinear manner.

Learners new to a topic were more likely to stay longer with one narrow body of content and prefer a more structured learning path. But once learners passed the point of structural literacy (in other words, they had built some proficiency with a topic), they were more comfortable with jumping around more quickly in wider bodies of content. They no longer want or need to be as structured in their consumption, and they want to direct their own learning toward their own unique set of application-oriented needs. Figure 3, the Professional Skills Development Framework, depicts this behavior.

This has significant implications for learning professionals because it suggests that optimizing for nonlinear learning is among the best ways to continue to support the growth of more proficient learners. If you have ever felt that your company does a decent job meeting the needs of beginner learners but not so well meeting those of more intermediate and advanced learners, this is likely a large part of the reason why.

Why performance adjacent learning is important

There are many reasons that this type of learning behavior needs to be promoted and rewarded in organizations, but I will focus on two reasons in this report:

- 1) the rate of technological and business change and
- 2) a recent shift in employee needs and wants.

Addressing rapid business and technological change

Technological and business change is happening at a rate never before seen. This pace of change has profound implications for both organizations and individuals. The average shelf life of a skill is now less than five years¹, and some estimates suggest that as much as 50% of subject knowledge gained during year one of a four-year technical degree may be outdated by the time the student crosses the stage for graduation.²

Recruiting new employees to meet quickly and continuously changing skill needs—even if possible in a competitive talent landscape—is obviously not the solution. And with the cost to replace an employee estimated at between six and nine months of the position's salary, retaining good employees is a cost-efficient practice.³

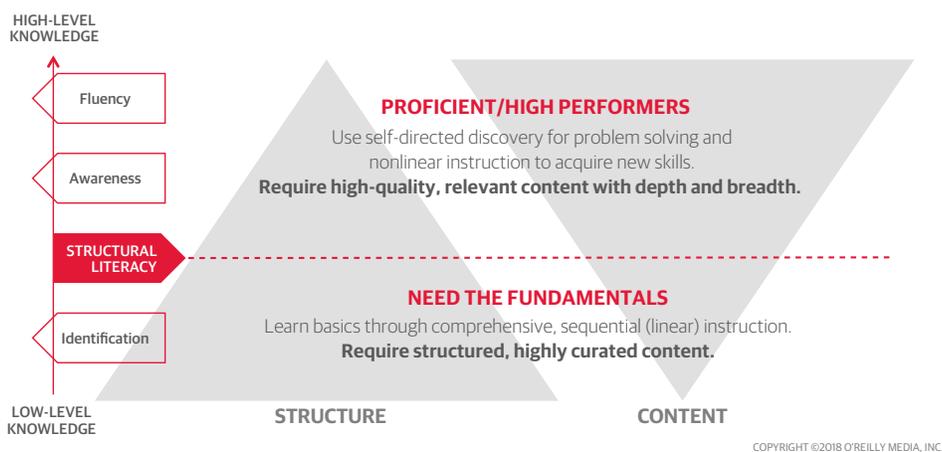
But if retention is paramount, so too is upskilling and reskilling.

To be successful, an organization must find the most efficient and effective manner of upskilling and reskilling its workforce. Performance adjacent learning has the power to provide both efficiency and efficacy.

Learning tools designed specifically for performance adjacent learning can increase efficiency. Performance adjacent tools optimize for frictionless entry, precision search, and a high degree of modularity. When an employee

Figure 3

Professional skills development framework



¹ <https://learning.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/learning/en-us/pdfs/lil-workplace-learning-report.pdf>

² <http://reports.weforum.org/future-of-jobs-2016/skills-stability/>

³ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/julie-kantor/high-turnover-costs-way-more-than-you-think_b_9197238.html

can easily access the learning tool, effortlessly identify specific content or information, and pinpoint what they need without wading through less relevant information, performance adjacent learning is at its best. In a January 2018 O'Reilly study, conducted with approximately 800 of our learners, 65% said that using the learning platform in a performance adjacent way saved them time. On average, they estimated they saved 1.2 hours a week.

Efficacy is also enhanced by performance adjacent learning. Knowledge that is "practiced closer" increases retention and recall.⁴ In other words, by applying what we learn close to a learning moment, we are reinforcing the learning itself.

And if relevant content, provided closer, helps us solve a problem or move forward a project we are currently engaged in, then we will be more likely to be motivated to continue to learn.⁵ This suggests that performance adjacent behavior might not just reinforce learning but also naturally self-reinforce the behavior and increase the chance of employees continuing to upskill and reskill as needed.

Addressing shifts in employee motivation

While performance adjacent learning addresses the challenges of keeping pace with technological and business change, it can also help organizations compete for (and retain) employees. Perks, informal work environments, and even money are no longer enough to attract and keep employees. Today, employees—particularly millennials—are motivated more by the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge. According to a recent Gallop study⁶, 87% of millennials say that professional development and career growth are significant to them. And a recent study by Udemy⁷ found that 46% of employees say that limited opportunities to learn new skills is the top reason why they are bored in their current roles; as a result, over half (61%) of those employees are likely to change jobs to pursue opportunities that are more rewarding.

Between the need for organizations to have employees willing to constantly upskill and reskill and the desire of the workforce to develop, performance adjacent learning is bound to surge in popularity. This phenomenon is summed up nicely by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic in a recent Harvard Business Review article, "Taking Control of Your Learning at Work":

"What you know is now less relevant than what you can learn, and employers are less interested in hiring people with particular expertise than with the general ability to develop the right expertise in the future, particularly if they can do it consistently and across a wide range of roles."⁸

⁴ www.cmu.edu/teaching/principles/learning.html

⁵ www.cmu.edu/teaching/principles/learning.html

⁶ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236438/millennials-jobs-development-opportunities.aspx>

⁷ <https://about.udemy.com/press-releases/udemy-study-discovers-that-lack-of-learning-opportunities-leaves-half-of-u-s-workers-bored-or-disengaged-on-the-job/>

⁸ <https://hbr.org/2018/07/take-control-of-your-learning-at-work>

Incorporating performance adjacent learning opportunities

If you're convinced performance adjacent learning belongs in your learning ecosystem, your next question might be, How do you accomplish it? Consider these tips for getting started:

Mindset shift

Learning is no longer confined by classroom walls, by working hours, by desktop computers, or even by more mobile delivery mechanisms such as books. Technology has made learning ubiquitous. It can and should happen all the time in the course of work.

In performance adjacent learning, however, a lot of valuable learning is done with minimal oversight and a limited ability to measure. This can be unsettling for L&D professionals: How will anyone know we have done our jobs well?

Creative use of single question surveys utilizing a sampling methodology can give you insight into whether the learning moment was helpful. We can, and should redefine, how we measure success. The Experience API (xAPI)⁹, for instance, allows for much of the learning that may occur in the moment to be captured and shared with a learning record store. And creative use of single question surveys utilizing a sampling methodology can give you insight into whether the learning moment was helpful.

Role-based competency analysis

In order to build or buy tools to support learning that will be used in a performance adjacent manner, you must understand what your employees need to learn to do their jobs.

Reviewing and categorizing job families and associated skill sets can be a comprehensive way to approach this analysis. If you are fortunate, this type of analysis may already exist in your organization through human resources. Competency models, jobs to be done analyses, and performance assessment processes may contain enough information to provide you with a clear understanding of what skills are needed. Your existing learning ecosystem can also be mined for data. What are the most popular

topics being consumed today? Which courses or learning paths have the highest attendance? What kind of training are you asked to provide most frequently?

Try not to get overwhelmed by the sheer number of necessary skills your organization may have. Pick a starting point and then determine what type of performance adjacent tools you wish to build or buy.

Correlate learner engagement with other key business metrics

With performance adjacent behavior, completion is irrelevant. The fact that a learner entered a tool and spent 10 minutes finding information in whatever form and then dropped out of the tool could indicate that they got what they needed and returned to their workflow. If this meant reading three pages of an ebook and not the entire book, the completion data will be fractional, but the impact could be significant.

This creates a challenge for typical L&D reporting. It requires a different approach to measurement. Once a performance adjacent tool is in place, look closely at adoption data or "learner engagement." Sampling learners with simple questions about the usefulness of their session is a better indicator of success. Look to correlate frequent engagement with learning tools with other established and valued metrics such as retention, employee engagement, promotions, performance, potential ratings, and bonus percentages. If your most active learners are your most engaged and successful employees, the investment will be justified.

The evolution of learning

Learning is not immune to the technological and business changes that have characterized all aspects of our lives. We need to meet learners where they are, when they want to learn, and with what they need. The adaptable, continuously learning employee is becoming increasingly valuable. As facilitators of learning, we can help create the environment that supports these individuals and enables them and their organization to achieve success.

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/XAPI>