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ARTICLE **DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES**

Making Learning a Part of Everyday Work

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whereas recruitment is [an expensive, zero-sum game](#) (if company A gets the star, company B does not), learning is a rising tide that lifts all boats.

Yet the urgency of work invariably trumps the luxury of learning. A study we recently ran with LinkedIn found that employees waste one third of their day on emails that have little or nothing to do with their jobs. The traditional corporate learning portal (the learning management system) is rarely used (other than for mandatory compliance training) and it often takes many clicks to find what you need. Learning therefore ends up being relegated — consciously and subconsciously — to the important-but-not-urgent quadrant of [Eisenhower's 2x2 matrix](#). On average, knowledge workers carve out just [five minutes](#) for formal learning each day. We're all just too caught up in the inexorable flow of work.

So, the question becomes: How can we make learning part of the powerful current of the daily workflow? We believe there is a way, a new paradigm, which Josh coined “learning in the flow of work”.

What exactly is the flow of work?

Everyone's experience at work differs of course, but there are some broad commonalities among knowledge workers: There are [780 million](#) of them, and they sit in front of a computer for [6.5 hours every day](#). [In particular, they spend](#) 28% of their time on email, 19% of their time gathering information (searching for data), and 14% of their time communicating internally (in formal and informal meetings). Those three activities combined constitute 61% of the total time at work for this vast population.

It makes sense that knowledge workers should spend so much time absorbing and disseminating information. Finding data, facts, information, and insights, and then sharing it with others, is a daily activity for most of us. In fact, [38%](#) of content that's shared online is either educational or informational.

Learning in the flow of work is a new idea: it recognizes that for learning to really happen, it must fit around and align itself to working days and working lives. Rather than think of corporate learning as a destination, it's now becoming something that comes to us. Through good [design thinking](#) and cutting-edge technology, we can build solutions and experiences that make learning almost invisible in our jobs. One could argue that Google and YouTube are two of the earliest “learning in the flow” platforms, which we now [take for granted](#).

So, how can we use the flow of work to drive learning? We'll first look at this from the perspective of the individual (bottom-up) and then from the perspective of the corporate (top-down).

Bottom-Up Learning

What might you as an *individual* with an appetite for learning do to learn in the flow of work? Here are some practical measures you could implement today:

Practice metacognition and mindfulness. Be aware and be present as you go about your daily job. There are many benefits to this, one of which is an [increased ability to learn and develop](#). For example, don't just sit in on that negotiation with a procurement expert; notice and learn her tactics and techniques as you engage with her. Ask product managers about product features; ask sales people about industry trends; ask peers for feedback on your presentation skills. These kinds of inquiries are learning experiences and most peers love to tell you what they know.

Maintain a to-learn list. You experience many learning opportunities every day, and with a degree of metacognition, you'll notice more of them. You often have to let them pass at the moment because you're busy doing something else. But that doesn't mean you should waste the opportunity. Write down a list of concepts, thoughts, practices, and vocabulary you want to explore, book mark them in your browser, and add them to your list. You can later explore them when you have a few moments to reflect. In my case (Josh), I'm constantly bookmarking things I want to learn, and as soon as I find a spare moment (often late in the day when I'm tired), I read the article, explore the demo, or just poke around and play with something I've always wanted to do better. It's a personal and rewarding experience, and we all have times (including commutes) when it just feels like the right thing to do.

Use tech-enabled tips as you work. Technical tips from the likes of Google's [Explore](#) within Google Docs can help with context-relevant research or suggestions for formatting or analysis. This type of inline advice has improved significantly since the first days of the infamous Microsoft Office assistant, the animated paper clip, "[Clippy](#)". But you need to be open to such recommendations to learn anything from them. There are many more coming, as tools like Microsoft Teams and Slack become more common at work.

Calendarize dedicated learning time into your work schedule. Let colleagues know how important learning is to you. Agree on a sensible proportion of your work week that can be devoted to learning (an hour, say) with your manager. Then [timebox](#) it and stick to it.

Subscribe to a small number of high-quality, hyper-relevant newsletters. Choose them with care, to suit your role, industry, and personality. There won't be many, in the end, that are both excellent and relevant. Unsubscribe from the rest.

Contribute actively, expertly, and kindly to a learning channel where work actually happens. Work happens in different places for different companies, but the examples we hear most are from people using SharePoint, Slack, and Teams. If your company doesn't have a learning channel, create one. When you share something new and interesting with colleagues on these platforms, don't just paste a url. Help people understand why you're sharing it, unpacking the *what-it's-about* and *why-it-matters* aspects of a content piece. The *who-it's-for* is even more important: tag those and only those who will really derive benefit from your share. This not only helps others, and benefits your company, it will also accelerate your own learning.

Top-Down Learning

When you ask HR leaders how they plan to build new skills for the future, almost [two-thirds say](#) they will go out and recruit for the new skills they need. This is costly: one of our clients found it is six times less expensive to build technical skills internally than it is to go hire them from the job market.

So how can corporations better make use of the flow of work to develop the skills of their workforce? Of course, many of the [characteristics of big companies](#) inhibit learning, but others can be used to catalyze it. This section is especially for business leaders who are willing to change systems, processes, and culture in order to lift the capability of their workforce.

Make sure corporate knowledge systems are accurate and easy to use. Your employees are constantly looking for information, and they'll most likely go to Google and YouTube looking for answers. Accept that this is reality, but also spend some time curating and fixing the internal systems you have to make them faster and more useful. If you have an old, cluttered website of poorly arranged information, it's simply costing your company money, and building a corporate portal is easier than ever. Search results must be useful — this is easily said but rarely done — which requires that your content be well tagged and maintained. Initiate a project with IT to clean it up and you'll be surprised how quickly it becomes useful again.

Share content internally. It's now possible to use technology to harness organic learning that's happening in one part of the company, and scale the benefits within the wider organization. For example, an article about negotiating complex commercial contracts that was shared between two account managers on one platform could be algorithmically spotted, tagged, and redistributed to a broader sales population.

Leverage APIs to bring content to the workplace. Integrating into the flow of work has never been easier, thanks to the advent of the [API economy](#). Most software is now built with interoperability in mind, which is often delivered through APIs. Slack, Teams, and Atlassian, to name just a few platforms, have open APIs. This means that relevant learning content can be seeded into employees' days by using integrative technologies such as [Zapier](#), [IFTTT](#) or [learning-oriented APIs](#).

Devote a channel in your corporate communications software to learning. Create a dedicated online space for learning and promote it with meaningful contributions from business leaders. Encourage naturally active sharers and influencers to post and promote new content. If those contributions come right from the top of your organization, the message that learning is [indispensable](#) will ring louder and clearer.

Consider a conversational or chat interface. Adding a chat layer on top of primary workflow software is a straightforward, effective way to pair learning with work. The more intelligent the chatbot — i.e. the more relevant it is to what's actually happening there and then in the workflow — the less intrusive it will feel, and the more useful it will be.

Place learning in the inbox. Email is still a major component of the knowledge worker’s day, and one of the only common currencies for external communications. So, although it’s an unglamorous solution, the sparing use of personalized emails may be the most efficient, effective way to sprinkle learning into your staff’s working days. [94% of business executives](#) get news via email – more than any other format. Why should learning be any different? As regulations around privacy tightens, such as the EU’s [General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#) – inboxes will become less cluttered, and individual e-mails will become proportionately more valuable.

What Corporate Learning Leaders Think

The concept of learning in the flow of work has resonated with chief learning officers around the world. The [\\$360 billion](#) corporate learning industry has typically walked in the shadows of other more “glamorous” aspects of doing business, largely because proving the impact of specific learning programs is difficult (although the benefits of training in general for individuals and society are [beyond doubt](#)). But that may be about to change as companies start to take [employee engagement](#) and well-being more seriously. Here are three views from learning leaders who are breaking the mold:

Ann Schulte, Chief Learning Officer at Procter & Gamble (P&G), explains why learning is more important in 2019 than ever, and how the firm’s strategy reflects this: “At P&G, we believe that the ‘fastest learner wins’ because we see in uncertain and changing markets that experimentation, rapid-cycle feedback, and the ability to adapt are competitive imperatives – and all require learning. To help our people learn faster, we are disrupting how we manage learning and development to focus more on the immediate business context and personalized needs by providing easy access to information, performance support aids, and carefully curated training that is relevant and can be directly applied to work.”

Helen Smyth, Group Digital Learning and Design Manager at Sainsbury’s, underlines the importance of design thinking in formulating the right corporate learning solution: “Too often, learning opportunities and technology deployments are developed based on what centralized groups think would be useful, or on what is possible, rather than on what would actually enable someone to do something better or differently at work. To overcome this, it’s important that we spend more of our time as learning professionals understanding the practical realities of daily work for people, and ensuring that our products and services are in tune with those realities.”

Elisabetta Galli, Global Head of Knowledge, Development & Talent Management at Banco Santander, suggests that corporations should look at consumer software for inspiration: “Employees use social media and search in their spare time to satisfy their curiosity, right when they need it. It should be exactly the same at work. We must create corporate learning experiences to match consumer-grade experiences. This is our vision: to create a learning-in-the-flow-of-work ecosystem and become a learning organization, whose workforce is upskilled in real time.”

Learning in the flow of work is one of the most powerful levers available to business leaders today. We believe every organization can benefit from this new paradigm. It's an exciting next wave of innovation, which has been [a long time coming](#). Make sure that you and your company are on the crest of it.

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