The Modern Learning Ecosystem

A NEW L&D MINDSET FOR THE EVER-CHANGING WORKPLACE

JD Dillon
To the frontline—for doing the heavy lifting that keeps us all moving forward.

To Margaret, Joey, Nicole, and Carol—for giving me a shot.

To Stephanie—for always being there.

Thank you.
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This book is a little different . . . because it’s my story.

Before we get into it, I want to thank you for buying my book. Or, if you borrowed it from a peer, thanks for trusting them to make a super smart recommendation to aid your professional development. Or, if you won this book as a prize at a conference when you were really aiming for the latest version of the Apple Watch, my condolences. If it makes you feel any better, this book can also tell the time.

Unfortunately, it’s only accurate twice a day.

See what I mean? This is going to be different.

There are so many great L&D books out there. I’m sure I’ll reference Make It Stick by Peter Brown, Henry Roediger III, and Mark McDaniel several times before you hit the back cover. It’s the first book every L&D professional should read. Then there’s Design for How People Learn by Julie Dirksen, the most dog-eared book in the biz. Reuben Tozman’s Learning On Demand totally changed the way I think about learning in the workplace.

I want this reading experience to stand out. I want it to feel like we’re having a conversation, so I wrote just like I talk in real life. I also hope this book lives beyond your first (hopefully complete) read as an ongoing reference guide. My goal is to help you and your peers think
differently about the role of learning in the workplace and how you apply proven practices to help people do their jobs better every day. But mostly, I want to geek out with you about cool L&D ideas. I hope that’s OK with you!

This is my first real book. By that, I mean it’s the first time I’ve ever written this many words in one place. I’ve published hundreds of magazine articles, online columns, and blog posts. I’ve dropped dozens of podcasts, livestreams, and videos. I’ve delivered somewhere around 1,000 presentations during my 20+ years in corporate learning and operations. I’m always grateful to have the opportunity to share my ideas and perspective with professional peers like you.

If you’ve heard me speak or read something I’ve written before, you may have seen me explore a variety of L&D topics: Microlearning. Adaptive learning. Artificial intelligence. Gamification. Data. Curation. Technology ecosystems. I touch upon several of these topics in this book too. But no matter the topic, my content always has one thing in common: stories. Stories make me more than just a guy with an idea and a publisher. They make me part of the L&D community. They show that I’ve done the work, that I’ve failed more than I’ve succeeded, and that I’ve learned along the way. This book includes lots of personal stories and reflections.

Several chapters open with a story about a time I faced a particularly daunting learning and performance challenge. I explain the steps I took to overcome these disruptions and what I figured out about modern workplace learning practices along the way. I’ve managed to duct-tape together an L&D methodology through years of experimentation and doing the best with what I had available. This book explains how I did that.

There’s one more thing I want to mention before we dive into the good stuff. You don’t have to read the entire book front to back to get value from it. If you’re new to the profession or trying to figure out how to reshape your organization’s approach to learning and performance, I suggest starting at the beginning and consuming the story in sequence. The concepts build upon one another—moving from philosophy to
framework to application. On the other hand, if you’re an experienced professional trying to overcome a specific disruption or fix a specific problem within your learning ecosystem, jump to the chapters that are most relevant to you. The main concepts stand on their own and each chapter offers plenty of practical suggestions to enhance your problem-solving efforts. I also added Spoiler Alerts at the start of each chapter so you’ll know what’s going to be covered.

So thanks again for buying/borrowing/-winning my first book! I hope it helps you provide even more value to your organization and the people you support. And I hope you chuckle a few times along the way, even if it’s sometimes at my expense.

Now, let’s commence with the AHAs and HAHAs with my first story.
I spent the first eight years of my career as an operations manager in movie theaters and theme parks. When you were out having fun with your friends and family, my frontline teams and I were serving you popcorn and loading you onto your favorite rides.

My first L&D role was as a project consultant and classroom facilitator at the Walt Disney World Resort. I had always loved Disney growing up, and all my childhood vacations took place in Orlando, Florida. It made total sense that, when it was time to leave Philadelphia for college and explore a bit more of the world, I chose the school closest to Disney. I attended the University of Central Florida, graduating with a degree in communications and marketing. A few years later, I picked up a second job working part-time on my weekends at Disney. My 10-year career with the company began at Star Tours, where I shuttled guests off to the Forest Moon of Endor.

I worked side by side with the Muppets and Indiana Jones. I dressed up like a cowboy and screamed things like “yeehaw” and “saddle up and ride” in front of complete strangers at the Great Movie Ride—my favorite attraction as a kid. I rapidly cross-trained my way into management roles in custodial and operations before landing my first L&D gig as part of the largest training initiative in company history. For three years, I ran around a campus the size of San Francisco designing and delivering instructor-led
courses and interactive experiences focused on guest service. It was the most fun I’ve ever had (and will probably ever have) at work.

Then I got my first real taste of workplace disruption thanks to developments captured in the book and film titled *The Big Short*. In 2009, support functions were cut as a result of an economic recession. I was lucky enough to keep my job, but I was sent back into operations where I managed the two busiest and most popular attractions in the world’s busiest theme park (Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and Splash Mountain in the Magic Kingdom Park). I hung around for a few more years, eventually exiting after spending time as a seasonal skipper at the world-famous Jungle Cruise. It was a tough decision, but it was the right thing to do for my career.

I got a new role supporting instructional design and technology for a US-based network of contact centers. It wasn’t exactly the most magical place on Earth, but it was a chance to fully pursue an L&D career. While I had a few years of L&D experience, I still hadn’t done much beyond instructor-led and on-the-job training. This was my opportunity to try my hand at digital learning within a large, distributed organization. I moved across town. I got engaged. Everything in my life changed over the course of six months.

*Knock knock!*

*Who’s there?*

*Unexpected workplace disruption.*

*Unexpected workplace disruption who?*

I was just getting the hang of contact center operations when the company decided to “right size.” Half of the people working in my building were laid off that day. Thankfully, I made it through again, but the restructure dramatically changed my responsibilities. I was hired to support one department with 2,000 employees. Now I had to figure out how to support 10,000 people across the entire country. More responsibility, fewer resources. Sound familiar?
Disruption is a recurring theme in my L&D career and throughout this book. You can see some disruptions coming from a mile away—like the impact streaming entertainment is having on movie theaters and cable companies. Other disruptions are sudden and unexpected—like when you have to move your entire company to working remotely because a global pandemic shut down day-to-day life. Did I mention I started writing this book six weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic first put the US into lockdown?

In every case, disruption forces us to think differently about how we do the things we do, whether that’s designing learning programs or shopping for groceries. This book is a summary of everything I’ve learned while continuously reimagining the way I do my work over the past 15 years. From my first big workplace disruption at Disney to my current work with frontline employers around the world as Axonify’s chief learning architect, I’ve been forced to reflect on my perspective time and time again. Does the way I do things make sense? Do my principles and tactics apply in this world? Am I still relevant to the people I’m trying to help?

Nothing in my career compares to this latest disruption, and I had a hard time answering these questions in the middle of 2020. That’s part of the reason it took me so long to write this book. I didn’t want to assume it was worthwhile in a world of work that was in the middle of this much change. So I reached out to the global L&D community. I spoke with retailers in New Zealand, grocers in Canada, and financial services teams in South Africa. We talked about how their organizations were managing to keep pace and work their way through this kind of disruption.

Some were faring better than others, and I noticed that the ones who were succeeding all had something in common. It wasn’t a specific training program or technology. Each of these companies had faced significant disruption in the few years leading up to the pandemic. They had expanded their perspectives, gone beyond traditional courses, and adopted an ecosystem mindset as the core of their learning strategies. Now these systems and practices were standing up against the biggest wave of economic, social, and political change in modern history. They
didn't mean to do it, but they were applying the same tactics I had adopted 12 years earlier to battle my own workplace disruption.

That's who this book is for—L&D teams who are struggling to keep pace with change, who recognize the shortcomings of traditional training tactics, and who know they need to change but just don't know where to start.

This book will help shift your learning mindset and create a learning and performance ecosystem that's ready for anything.

First, we'll establish the purpose of L&D in the modern workplace and explore existing themes and concepts that are critical for adopting a modern learning mindset (chapters 1–2).

Next, we'll break down the Modern Learning Ecosystem (MLE) Framework. This framework presents a new way to align your L&D tactics so you can help employees solve today's biggest problems while building the knowledge and skills they'll need to be successful in the future (chapters 3–10).

Last, we'll cover considerations like measurement, technology, and influence that will prove critical in your ability to shift your organization's perspective on and approach to workplace learning (chapters 11–14).

Are you ready to get started? Feeling good? Need a restroom break? No? Alright, let's go!
Chapter 1

Time for a Remix

Take Inspiration From the Models That Came Before

We’re going to explore three workplace learning and performance models that heavily influenced my L&D practices and inspired my own framework. It’s time for a quick refresh on:

• The 70-20-10 Model
• The Continuous Learning Model
• The 5 Moments of Need

“There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages.”

—Mark Twain, Mark Twain’s Own Autobiography: The Chapters From the North American Review (2010)

At least one chapter in every business book must begin with a quote from a highly regarded intellectual. I figured I’d get mine out of the way early!

Of course, ole Sam Clemens is absolutely right. You rarely run into a genuinely new idea. Take movies for example. Nowadays, everything seems like a reboot (who’s playing Batman right now?) or a remake (but I’ve already seen The Lion King!). Even movies that aren’t officially reboots
or remakes rehash the same themes and story tropes over and over again. This is why my 10th grade class spent an entire month studying *Hamlet*. You can apply its themes to answer all possible literature questions on advanced placement (AP) tests because every story has already been done.

The same is true for the learning profession. The fundamentals of how people learn have not changed in a long, long time. What has evolved is the context in which people are required to learn and apply their skills. We weren't built to handle the pace of change work throws at us, so we have to find new ways to connect the old dots and overcome this challenge. This is what we're going to do for most of this book. We're not going to reboot or remake L&D. Instead, we're going to rethink how we apply proven practices to solve familiar problems. I'm going to share the best of what I've learned over the last 20 years to help you connect old dots in new ways. Together, we're going to remix L&D.

I'd love to tell you that everything in this book is the result of me being really strategic and forward-thinking; that this all came about when I went into my office one day, closed the door, thought really hard, covered a dry erase board in ideas, and emerged with a fully formed methodology. That's not what happened. I've always figured things out through experimentation, sharing, and conversation. My career is based on trying lots of stuff, keeping what works, and trying it again. I continue to pick up new ideas along the way and give them a spin to see how they mesh with my existing practices. Only in retrospect have I realized that I developed my own framework for addressing workplace learning and performance challenges. More on that later!

I've read a lot of articles, listened to a lot of podcasts, and attended a lot of education sessions. An untold number of people who are much smarter than me have influenced my work. For example, Reuben Tozman's *Learning On Demand* was the first L&D book I ever read. It completely reshaped the way I thought about my job.

I expect you'll have several “this sounds a lot like . . .” moments as you read this book. You may even identify sources of inspiration that I've never come across in my own work. That said, three particular concepts are clearly reflected in my approach to workplace learning. I didn't build
my framework to specifically align with these concepts. However, looking back, each model inspired the way I look at the role of L&D.

The 70-20-10 Model

70-20-10 Towards 100% Performance by Jos Arets, Charles Jennings, and Vivian Heijnen is the best coffee table book in our profession. The content is great. The design is awesome. And, much like Kramer’s coffee table book about coffee tables in Seinfeld, the hardback publication is also sturdy enough to act as furniture.

Besides ADDIE (analyze, design, development, implement, evaluate) and the Kirkpatrick Model (four layers of measurement), I hear people reference 70-20-10 more than any other L&D concept. You probably already know it well. But, just in case you need it, here’s a quick summary (Figure 1-1):

- 70 percent of what we learn comes from experience.
- 20 percent of what we learn comes from interacting with others.
- 10 percent of what we learn comes from formal learning programs.

Figure 1-1. The 70-20-10 Model

People learn by doing a lot more than just courses, which make up a very small part of the workplace learning experience. That’s the gist of it, but you should still read 70-20-10 Towards 100% Performance. Over the years, I’ve heard plenty of people argue about the numbers, which were not meant to be scientifically accurate. I’ve also watched people attempt
to apply the model way too literally. For example, a peer once designed a training program using these exact ratios for certain kinds of activities, which is beside the point. The numbers are given more as estimates, and are meant to represent how people learn, not how programs should be designed. That’s why we need another model to refine these ideas a little bit—and that’s up next.

The Continuous Learning Model

Before I wrote this book, I honestly thought this one was called the 4 Es. Apparently, its real name is the Continuous Learning Model (Figure 1-2). This is probably the concept I see referenced the most without citation in the profession. You’ve probably seen the visual with the four concentric circles, but did you know the model first appeared in a research bulletin written in December 2014 by Dani Johnson, former research manager for Bersin by Deloitte and current co-founder of RedThread Research?

**Figure 1-2. Continuous Learning Model**

![Continuous Learning Model Diagram](image)

Adapted from Continuous Learning Model in Johnson (2014).

The Continuous Learning Model was created in response to L&D’s imprecise application of 70-20-10. It didn’t seek to contradict 70-20-10. Instead, it tried to further expand workplace learning beyond the boundaries of programmatic training. The model focuses on “structuring resources, expectations, and learning culture in such a way as
to encourage employees to learn continuously throughout their tenure with the organization.” The Es include:

- **Education:** The structured activities that often comprise the bulk of workplace learning strategy
- **Experience:** Practical, hands-on activities that occur within the workflow
- **Exposure:** Learning that occurs during interactions with peers, experts, and coaches
- **Environment:** Tools and systems that make up the infrastructure that enables organizational learning

We haven’t even started talking about my framework, and we’re already remixing some of the most popular concepts in the industry. Why stop now? Let’s add one more.

**The 5 Moments of Need**

File this one under “It’s so obvious that it’s brilliant.” Bob Mosher and Conrad Gottfredson built an entire practice around the 5 Moments of Need and their approach to performance support (Figure 1-3). The moments include:

- Learning to do something new for the first time
- Expanding the depth of one’s existing knowledge
- Recalling how to correctly apply knowledge in the moment of need
- Using knowledge to solve a timely problem
- Adapting one’s existing knowledge in the face of change

**Figure 1-3. The 5 Moments of Need**

![Image of the 5 Moments of Need diagram](image)

Adapted from Gottfredson and Mosher (2021).
Think about when you need help figuring something out at work. It probably aligns with one of those five moments, each of which carries its own set of considerations when designing right-fit support solutions.

**Finding the Red Thread**

Have you figured out what 70-20-10, the Continuous Learning Model, and the 5 Moments of Need have in common? Reality. They don’t overcomplicate the concept of learning. They don’t get deep in the weeds on how to design specific solutions. Instead, they reflect the fundamental realities of how learning works. They may seem like common sense, but they highlight what is often missing in organizational learning and development.

When it comes to remixes, Mark Twain said, “We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope.” Models and frameworks provide a lens through which we can reshape our view of how we live and work. Some models, such as ADDIE, shift our view toward the programmatic side of learning. Others, like the 5 Moments of Need, shift our view towards the everyday workflow. The Modern Learning Ecosystem framework presented in this book will provide another lens. It will help you see the role of organizational learning from a new angle—one that’s just as realistic, practical, and continuous as the models that inspired it. Plus, it’s grounded in the most consequential issue facing today’s workforce: disruption.
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