



WHITE PAPER

The Four Types of Learning Cultures

The challenges of different learning styles in the workplace and how building a targeted micro-based learning culture helps.



Learning Cultures – Challenges and Solutions

Just as people have different learning styles, organizations have different learning cultures. We can divide these learning cultures into **four main types**, based on **who is driving the learning experience** and the **scope and depth of the content**.

No one type of learning culture is better or worse than the others. Rather, organizations see the **best results when they achieve a good fit** among their learning culture, employee expectations, training programs, technologies, and developmental opportunities.

Different learning cultures will lean on different learning technologies. If you **know your organization's culture**, you can know which technologies to prioritize.

Researchers have known for decades that different people have different learning styles: Distinct ways in which a learner absorbs, processes, and retains information. For example, it is widely recognized that some people are more visual learners, while others are more auditory or kinesthetic experiential learners.



Organizations have preferred ways that they learn, too. This is reflected in their learning culture. And just as there are different ways in which individual learners learn, there is variation in the policies and attitudes that organizations take toward learning. In short, different organizations can have different kinds of learning cultures as part of their overall learning ecosystem.

This has huge ramifications for employee development because it means that successful development can't look solely at the individual's preferred modes of learning. It must also take into account the context in which learning occurs.

Why “Learning Cultures” Should Be Plural

Take a look at articles written about learning culture and it will be obvious that most organizations talk about “learning culture” as if it were a single, unvarying thing. If there is any variation at all, it is due to a difference between “strong” learning cultures and “weak” ones. The assumption is that all strong learning cultures are built the same way.

This is not the case. There are, in fact, at least four different kinds of learning cultures. Just as there are many ways to weaken or destroy a healthy learning culture, there are also multiple kinds of good or strong learning cultures. In fact, distinct types of learning cultures can be successful in achieving their aims, despite looking very different from each other.

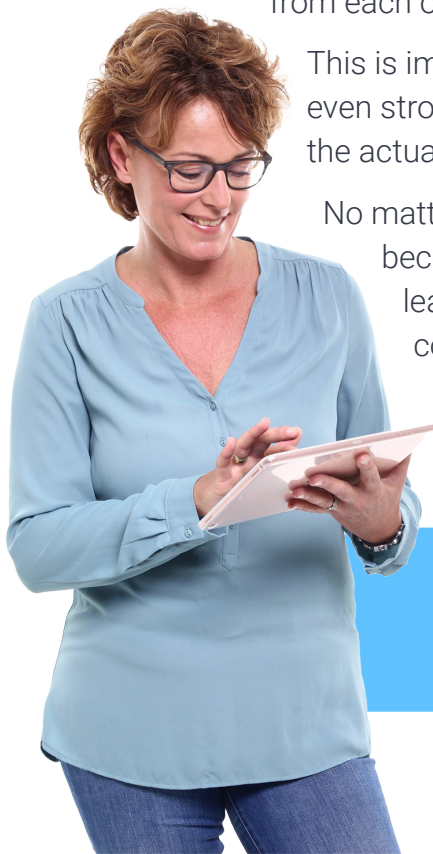
This is important to recognize because strong learning cultures are made even stronger when there is a good fit between employee expectations and the actual learning culture.

No matter what personal learning “style” an individual has, they will become accustomed to certain social expectations when it comes to learning. This is especially true of adults in the workforce, as they are commonly put in group learning situations and have already internalized many such expectations. **When an organization's broader learning culture matches personal expectations, training happens more seamlessly, and in turn, creates a good fit.**

Strong learning cultures are made even stronger when there is a good fit between employee expectations and the actual learning culture.



Just as there are different ways in which individual learners learn, **there is a variation in the policies and attitudes** organizations take toward learning.



Why Recognizing the Variety of Learning Cultures is Important

That companies differ is a given, and it should be no surprise that they vary when it comes to training and expectations around learning. Still, most companies are either unaware of this variation or else attribute it to better or worse implementation of best practices.



Organizations that are aware of the different types of learning cultures tend to make better policy decisions and experience less frustration around training and development. They understand how to leverage the specific strengths of the culture, and either fix or work around the weaknesses. Most importantly, they know how to look for the best “fit” between learners and learning culture. When fit is not present, problems emerge.

Learning Culture Missteps

Onboarding Problems: If the majority of your employees expect a learning culture different from the one in place, you might find those employees feeling lost or unprepared for their roles. They might even complain about poor training or the lack of training.

Development Problems: If you have employees, interns, or freelancers coming from a type of learning culture different from that in place at your organization, they might find it difficult to adapt and succeed. People who look good “on paper” might struggle to learn their new roles.

Management and Engagement Problems: If you adopt a new training program geared toward a learning culture other than the one in place, learners might see it as a waste of time – or worse. If existing training materials do not fit your learning culture, they are doomed to be ineffective too.

On the other hand, **when fit is present, employees understand what is expected of them** and are more likely to take advantage of all the learning tools available. New employees will fit in better with your organization and learn more, and training programs will yield a much higher return on investment (ROI).

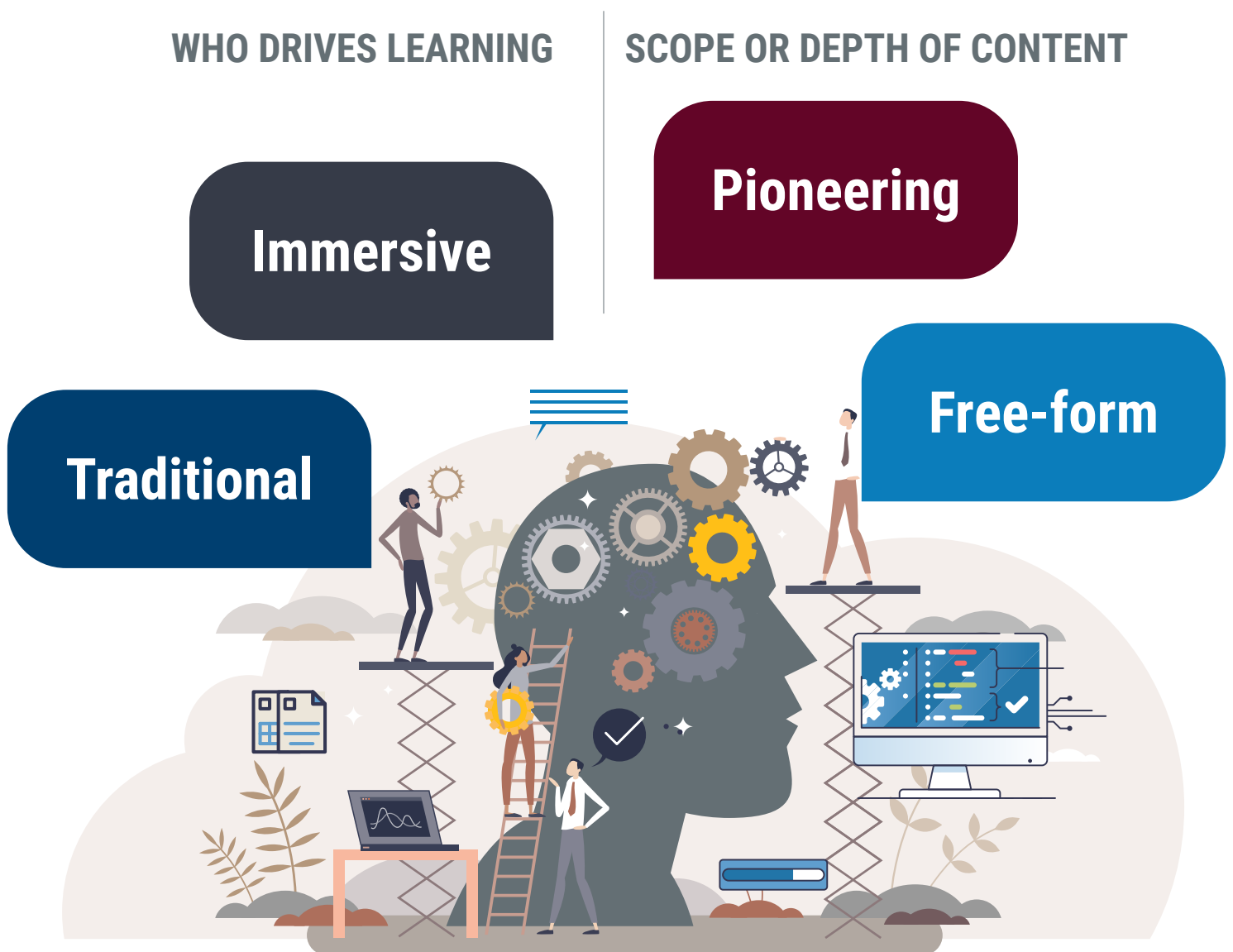
This is not to say that every single detail and variation in learning cultures is critical. There are only a few key factors that truly influence fit. By looking for similarities and differences in these factors across companies, we can begin to group or “type” learning cultures in a useful way.

The Four Types of Learning Cultures

All learning cultures differ in small ways from all others, just as all organizations are different from each other. In creating a typology of learning cultures, we have worked to minimize smaller, inconsequential differences—“noise” if you will—while focusing on more global differences that truly affect learning outcomes.

The pattern we found time and again is that organizations tend to vary along two axes: one that measures who within the organization drives learning, and the other that examines the scope or depth of available content.

These two axes create the four types of learning cultures:



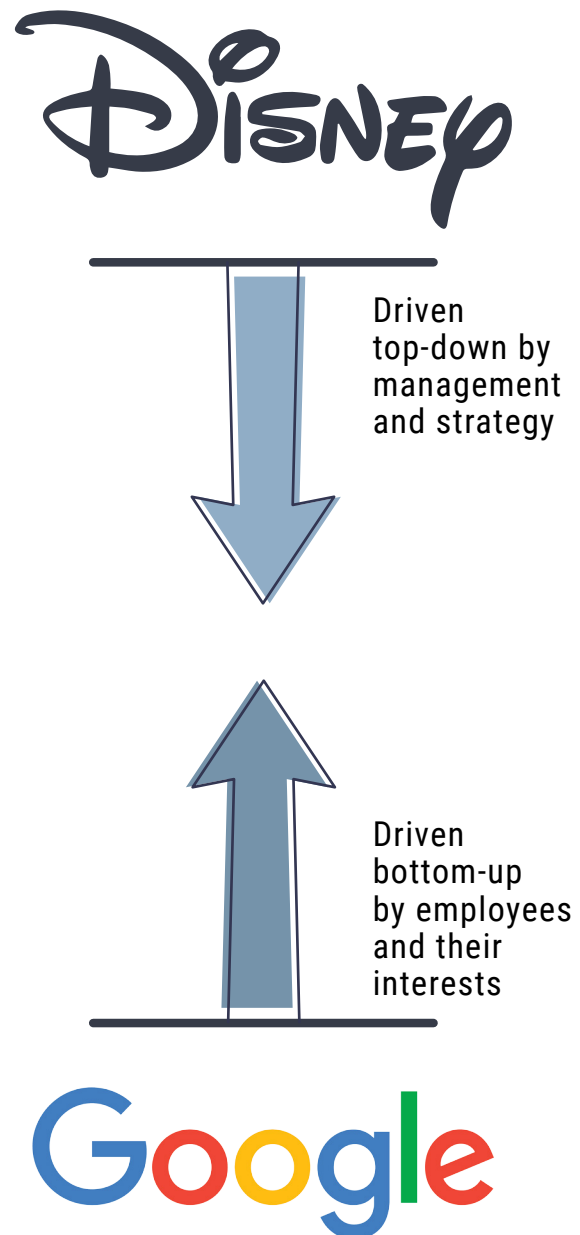
Who Drives Learning in Your Learning Culture?

First, organizations vary according to how much their learning is driven “top down” by management, versus “bottom up” by employees. In **top-down**, management-driven organizations, training is something that is **crafted by a management** team or teams and **presented to employees**. **Management controls the learning experience** in these organizations...in some cases, from the employee’s very first day.

Disney is a good example of a management-driven learning culture. At Disney, employees start their training on Day 1, following a very set and rigorous curriculum. Employees are immersed in Disney’s traditions, given park tours, and thoroughly assessed at the end of their training.

In contrast, **bottom-up organizations put learning more squarely in the hands of their learners**. Employees are encouraged to pursue learning opportunities through **self-directed learning**, but what they learn, when they learn it, and how they learn it is left open. (Self-directed learning is any process or system that allows individual learners to direct their own learning, depending on their individual needs and interests.) Employees may even be empowered to teach each other through employee-led classes, social media, and more.

Google is an example of a learning culture that is highly employee-driven. Employees are encouraged to take and even create their own classes, and learning is largely decentralized.

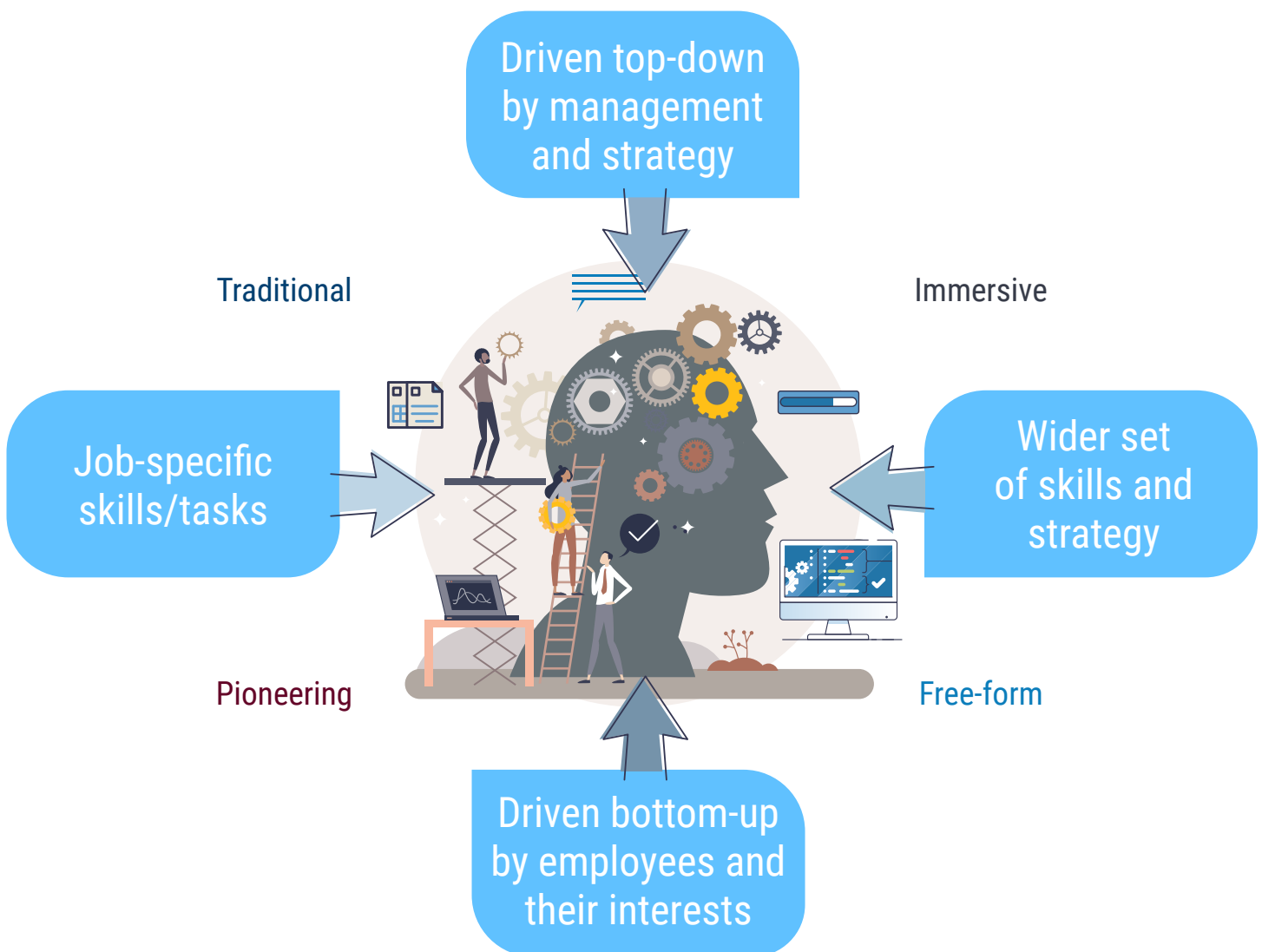


What is the Scope or Depth of the Content?

Second, organizations vary according to the scope and depth of their appetite for content. Some organizations have a narrow focus on just the skills needed so employees can fulfill their specific roles; others are more of a free-for-all, allowing employees to choose from a huge buffet of learning opportunities that address work and life issues more holistically.

Most startups, for example, have a more limited focus, prioritizing the training and productivity of their employees, as do large retailers like Walmart. Google, on the other hand, embraces a much broader approach, offering employees courses on everything from coding to yoga. Naturally, most organizations fall somewhere in between.

Adding the second axis, we now have a simple visual model for organizing learning cultures:



Answering These Questions Helps Define Your Learning Culture

As you can see, these two axes divide space into four quadrants. Each quadrant is a distinct type of learning culture.



Upper-left Quadrant – Traditional Learning Cultures

Tending toward the practical, these cultures seek to make employees productive in the quickest, most efficient way possible. Learning is largely driven by management and has a more narrow focus on the skills that employees need. Thus, learning tends to happen through more traditional training methods, such as classroom lectures and employee shadowing. Walmart is a good example of a traditional learning cultures, as is 1-800-GOT-JUNK.

Upper-right Quadrant – Immersive Learning Cultures

In these cultures, learning is largely driven by management but tends to give employees a “total experience” that focuses on much more than just job skills. For example, employees might be expected to learn information about a company’s history, environmental responsibility, basic finance, and more. Most learning is done through classroom experiences and similar tools. Disney, mentioned earlier, is a great example of an immersive learning culture, as is Bonobos. Engaging learning tools and methods are needed in this kind of culture to sustain learner interest.

Lower-left Quadrant – Pioneering Learning Cultures

In these cultures, learning is mostly driven by employees who want to get the skills they need to succeed. Learning tends to be independent and “on the fly.” This kind of learning culture is common in startups, many of which might not have a formal training program in place or might be experimenting with different tools. There, employees are expected to determine what they need to know to keep up with the fast pace of innovation and focus on the most valuable skills. That said, some well-known companies also have a pioneering learning culture—DigitalOcean, for instance, could be considered a prime example of this. Easily accessible content and eLearning can be critical assets in this kind of culture.

Lower-right Quadrant – Free-form Learning Cultures

In these cultures, learning is still driven by employees, but the expectation is that they will absorb any number of subjects—and perhaps even offer to teach some of them as well. In organizations with this culture, learning is seen as something expected of employees on a regular basis, and they are free to pursue it as they see fit. In fact, it is considered a part of the “work-life balance” of the organization. Google is a great example of a free-form learning culture. So are other fast-growing online businesses, like Etsy and Zulily. These organizations tend to be open to technologies that let employees share and teach each other.

Keep in mind that these are not hard-and-fast categories. There can be variation within each category, and most organizations fall at different points in the overall landscape.

Also, organizations can, over time, move from one quadrant to another as their policies, attitudes, and workforce change. Different divisions of a single organization might even be in different quadrants at the same time!

Knowing Your Culture: The Difference That “Fit” Makes

It is worth re-emphasizing: No one culture is “right” or “wrong,” “ideal” or “wanting.” They all have strengths and weaknesses. What is important is fit. How well do the organization’s resources serve its particular learning culture? And how well do learners (including management) fit that learning culture? By beginning to ask these types of questions, you can begin to bring learner expectations, training programs, and company culture into alignment.

Here are some specific examples where knowing your learning culture can make a huge difference to common organizational practices:

Onboarding

Here fit is key. For example, suppose you have a free-form learning culture. You have just hired a new employee who comes from a much more traditional learning culture. After a couple of months, you find that employee complaining they “haven’t been trained” and wondering when they will get the “classes” they need to get up to speed. You wonder why this is, given that you have made several learning tools available and keep an “open door” policy for new hires.

Here the employee expected a much more traditional onboarding experience, whereas your culture was built for the curious go-getter. This employee will need to be prodded to use your training tools—essentially be “taught” how to be a self-directed learner. Onboarding is now taking much more time than it should, which in turn means more time before the employee becomes fully productive. This is money lost.

\$4,129

The average cost of onboarding a new employee, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)

The cost of onboarding a new employee can put a substantial strain on an organization’s budget. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the average cost per hire is \$4,129. This figure accounts for recruiting and integrating a new employee, which are major contributors to these expenses.

However, total costs typically range from \$7,500 to \$28,000, encompassing hard costs like job board fees, background checks, employee training, and benefits as a percentage of overall compensation.

These expenses can vary significantly based on factors such as industry, job complexity, required training, and geographic location. Additionally, soft costs from lost productivity during the onboarding process can increase the total hiring expense by up to 60%.



Development

Traditional and immersive cultures tend to have much more regimented development opportunities. Employees need to be made aware of these. In pioneer and free-form learning cultures, things are less clear. Employees might simply need to “prove” their skills when the right project comes up.

For example, imagine you are the CEO of a startup and to help with growth, you hire a number of salespeople. All are capable, all land good accounts, and all seem happy with their new job. Still, after about two years, some of the salespeople begin grumbling about the “lack of opportunity”—odd, since your market penetration is not huge and there are plenty of prospects left to convert.

You notice that one salesperson in particular has really taken to the job. Not only has he had the largest account growth over the last year, but he has shown an interest in managing a team: He seeks you out as a mentor, asks questions, and even takes an online course on sales management. Being the obvious choice, you promote him. But then a chorus of protest comes from the other salespeople, accusing you of “favoritism” toward the “suck up.” What went wrong?

In this case, your startup had much more of a pioneering learning culture. Employees were free to pursue opportunities as they saw fit. One did, and by doing so set himself up for a management role further down the line.

But the other salespeople likely came from a traditional or immersive learning culture. They expected to be told what opportunities for promotion there were and how to achieve them (hence their complaints of little opportunity).

They also expected to be given explicit training opportunities that matched that path to promotion. No wonder they responded so negatively. In their eyes, one of their associates was promoted before they even knew that promotion was possible, much less how to make it happen. To them, this was very unfair.

It would not be surprising if, in this scenario, several good salespeople left the company to pursue other opportunities. Again, knowing the learning culture could have prevented this from happening.

Opportunities for learning, development, and professional growth have become a priority for employees. In fact, according to [LinkedIn Learning's 2024 Workplace Learning Report](#), 7 in 10 people say learning improves their sense of connection to their organization, and 8 in 10 say learning adds purpose to their work. And 53% of Gen Z employees agreed that through learning, they can explore potential career paths at their company.

[McKinsey research](#) notes employee interest in development as a driver for turnover — employees rate a lack of career growth and development opportunities as the top reason for leaving a job. That same LinkedIn report also notes that 90% of organizations are concerned about employee retention, and providing learning opportunities is the #1 retention strategy.

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Management and Engagement

Different learning cultures can also set the tone for different kinds of company culture, period. If employees are expected to be innovative, creative, and flexible, an immersive or free-form culture can help foster those qualities. If employees are expected to master specific skills quickly and efficiently, a traditional or pioneering learning culture, might be more appropriate.

Likewise, your learning culture could affect how your newer employees approach their job. For example, you can't create a free-form learning culture and expect employees to get up to speed quickly; likewise, you can't create a traditional learning culture and expect employees to think outside the box.

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How New Technologies, Including eLearning, Work for Each Culture

Technology and learning culture are both key components in your organization's overall learning ecosystem. The ways in which technology and learning culture interact are going to depend not only on what technologies are available, but on the type of learning culture you have.

Integrating specific technologies into a particular organization is not always as straightforward as one would hope. Each learning culture is bound to have different attitudes toward eLearning technology and will use these tools differently. Once an organization has identified its learning culture, it can capitalize on the best ways to use technology to reach its training and education goals.

eLearning Technology and the Traditional Learning Culture

Traditional learning cultures benefit most from using eLearning tools for two purposes: To automate and accelerate onboarding, and to provide "refreshers" for vital skills. For the first, microlearning formats are useful, especially when there is a lot of information that needs to be presented and processed by new employees. Microlearning divides content into digestible chunks and presents it in video format for easy, flexible consumption.

Having a range of different topics available on demand is also great for refreshing skills.

You can purchase just the right off-the-shelf content and then assign it, as needed, to give your employees a refresher on job-critical skills. See our white paper, ["How Many eLearning Courses Do You Really Need?"](#) for additional information.



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eLearning Technology and the Immersive Learning Culture

Immersive learning cultures focus heavily on the training experience. Microlearning videos and interactive tools can provide an immersive experience that can be used inside or outside of the classroom.

Training reinforcement will be important too. This is usually done through reminder videos, engagement questions, and quizzes. Training reinforcement tools help craft these kinds of immersive experiences.

Just as importantly, management will want access to tools to track employees' progress in training. For example, immersive learning cultures want to be able to prove that their employees are consuming the required content and that this content is being retained and used. Thus, in addition to the reinforcement tools mentioned above, immersive learning cultures often request comprehensive reporting on views, exams, topics, and users.

eLearning Technology and the Pioneering Learning Culture

In a pioneering culture, employees will need content for getting up to speed. Offering a library that can build the needed skills, and that can be accessed precisely when needed, is key. (Keeping this library organized and up to date will take some work, though this is easier when you can purchase an off-the-shelf library.)

Social learning tools also tend to be well-received in pioneering learning cultures. Allowing employees to share content and comment on that content to leave a “trail of breadcrumbs” for others can help employees zero in on needed skills and information more quickly.



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eLearning Technology and the Free-form Learning Culture

One might think that a large inventory of on-demand content is key here. Quite the contrary. A huge library can be overwhelming to any single employee. It's better to provide a stock of popular off-the-shelf content, and then let employee demands drive acquisition from there.

Importantly, though, this library will need to be easily accessible, all the time, from any location. This will give your self-directed learners the access they need to forge their own developmental path.

Social learning tools are also a good idea because they empower learners to share good content, comment on it, and interact with other learners. In free-form learning cultures, employees learn from each other as much as anything, so these social learning tools can help facilitate that interaction.



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Learning Cultures, Fit, and ROI

Whether your organization is actively trying to shape its learning culture or takes a more laissez-faire approach, the values, conventions, processes, and practices are there already. When leaders pay attention to, and work toward cultivating, a healthy learning culture, companies do better.

According to an [Association for Talent Development report](#), companies offering comprehensive training programs have 218% higher income per employee than those with less comprehensive training. Furthermore, these companies enjoy a 24% higher profit margin than those who spend less on training.

Still, many organizations have invested in their learning culture, or so they thought, without seeing such a huge return on their investment or any other noticeable results. Why not?

We have suggested that one of the main reasons is that the fit is not there: The organization has one kind of learning culture, but the employees expect another. Or its training programs are more appropriate for a different kind of culture. Or the organization's needs don't align with

the learning culture. Find the right fit, and it will be that much easier to achieve harmony within your learning ecosystem.

To achieve harmony with your learning culture, there are a few options available. Either your learning culture needs to change to fit the needs and expectations of those in the organization, or else your practices and training materials need to change to better fit the learning culture. Either way, knowing what the organization's learning culture is represents an important first step toward progress.

Finally, and importantly, we have found that eLearning tools do not pigeon-hole organizations into adopting one culture or another. Rather, they have a broad application across organizations. Different cultures can use these tools differently, and so their ideal use will differ from culture to culture. Whatever their use, they can, when used properly, help an organization achieve that huge return on investment for its training dollars.

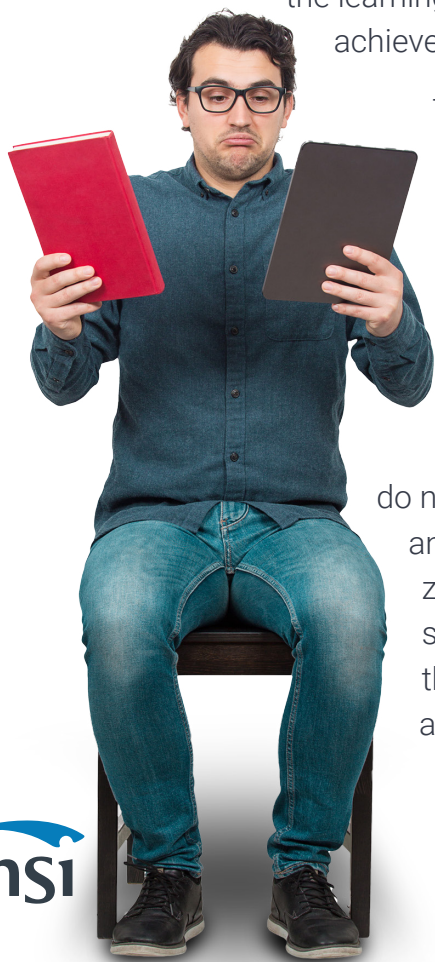
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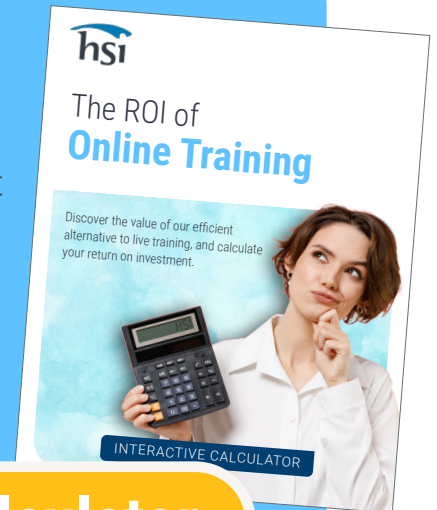
24%

higher profit margin



Calculate Your Savings Using Online Training

Unlock greater returns on your investment by choosing the most efficient training solution available. Our online **training allows your team to get back to work faster, driving productivity and results.** Experience the value of our streamlined alternative to traditional in-person training and see how much you can save. Calculate your ROI today and make every training dollar count.



[Download the Calculator](#)

Additional Resources

- [The Learning Ecosystem](#)
- [How Many eLearning Courses Do You Really Need?](#)
- [7 Critical Questions for Evaluating Your Learning Strategy](#)
- [Training and Development: An Integral Part of Employee Recruitment and Retention](#)

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