

What does a (real) continuous learning culture look like? - HR Executive

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the persistent gap between organizational investment in learning and development (L&D) and actual workforce skill acquisition. The author argues that traditional training-focused approaches fail because they prioritize content delivery over genuine learning, and that a fundamental cultural shift is required. The central argument draws on David Perkins' Theory One from Harvard University, which posits that people learn what they have both the opportunity and motivation to learn. The author contends that linking skill attainment to performance management creates the extrinsic motivation necessary to drive a 'pull learning economy,' wherein employees actively demand high-impact learning opportunities rather than passively receiving pushed training content. Key evidence is largely prescriptive rather than empirical, comprising practitioner recommendations across five areas: improving training quality, implementing capability academies, supporting informal learning, integrating generative AI tools, and adopting learning technology. The article concludes that transforming to a continuous learning culture is a multi-year, organization-wide endeavor requiring both short-term tactical action and long-term systemic change.

Key Insights

1. David Perkins' Theory One — that people learn what they have reasonable opportunity and motivation to learn — is presented as the foundational principle for designing a continuous learning culture.
2. Most organizations operate a 'push' learning economy where training is delivered with low employee uptake; linking skill gaps to performance management outcomes is proposed as a mechanism to shift to a 'pull' economy driven by employee demand.
3. Informal learning is identified as the dominant mode of workplace skill development, yet it remains underinvested and insufficiently visible within most L&D infrastructures.

Practical Takeaways

- Connecting skills gap data to performance management processes can create extrinsic motivation that encourages employees to prioritize learning amid competing demands.
- Diversifying learning content formats — blending formal courses with articles, peer-created modules, mentoring, and generative AI tools — addresses different learning preferences and contexts.

Frameworks Mentioned

Theory One — A principle distilled by Harvard researcher David Perkins stating that people will learn much of what they have the reasonable opportunity and motivation to learn, used here as the foundation for designing continuous learning cultures.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article draws on a credible academic source (David Perkins, Harvard University) and provides a coherent conceptual anchor in Theory One. The distinction between push and pull learning economies is analytically useful and practically grounded. The article covers a broad range of L&D levers, from formal training to generative AI. **Limitations:** The article offers no empirical citations beyond Theory One, relying heavily on assertion and practitioner intuition. Claims such as 'most learning at work doesn't happen in a formal setting' are presented without supporting data. The recommended interventions — capability academies, LXPs, AI coaches — are not evaluated against evidence of effectiveness. **Biases:** The article is written from an L&D practitioner perspective and tends toward advocacy for technology adoption and expanded L&D investment. The framing consistently positions L&D functions as underfunded and undervalued, which may reflect professional interest rather than neutral analysis. The article does not address potential counterarguments, such as the limitations of linking learning to performance management or risks of extrinsic motivation crowding out intrinsic motivation.

Organizational Practice

The article describes organizations that operate push-based L&D systems, where training content is distributed broadly with low employee engagement. It also references emerging practices including capability academies that blend formal training, mentoring, and project-based learning; the use of learning experience platforms (LXPs) to surface informal learning opportunities; and the integration of generative AI tools and meeting co-pilots for reflection and interpersonal skill feedback. Performance management systems are described as being used to communicate skills expectations and gaps to employees.

Strategic Implications

The article positions the integration of skills data into performance management as a structural lever that can alter employee learning behavior at scale, suggesting that organizations treating L&D as separate from performance evaluation may face persistent low engagement with learning initiatives. The emphasis on informal learning and generative AI points toward a broadening definition of what counts as organizational learning infrastructure. The characterization of learning culture transformation as a multi-year, whole-organization endeavor implies that point-in-time technology deployments or standalone training programs are unlikely to produce sustained capability shifts.

Validation Status: passed
