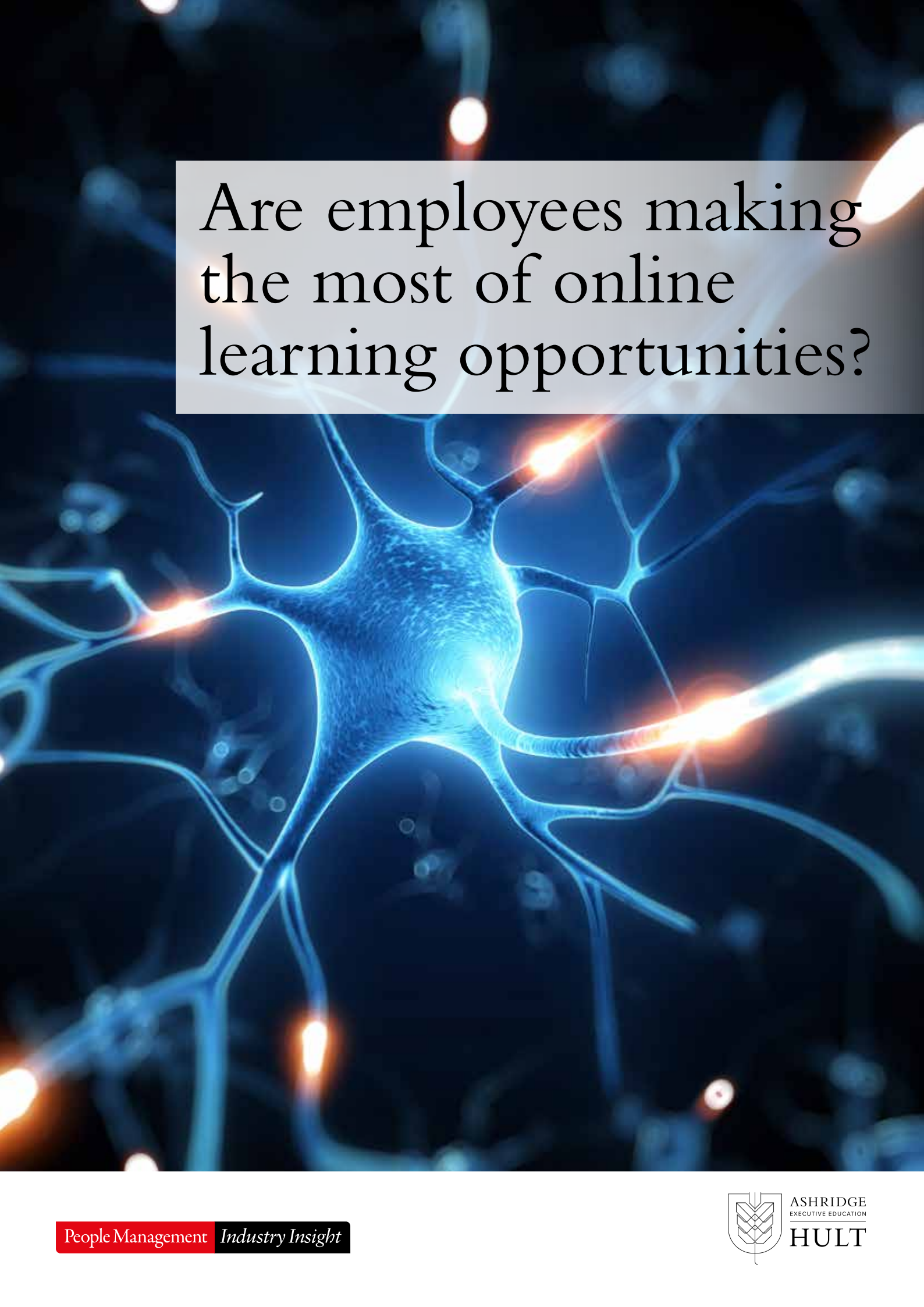




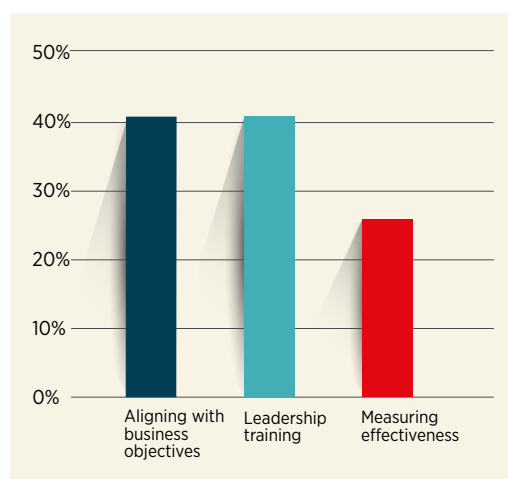
Are employees making  
the most of online  
learning opportunities?

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Neil Morrison,  
group HR director  
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#### WHAT ARE YOUR TOP THREE L&D PRIORITIES FOR 2016?



## Overview

New research from People Management Industry Insight (PMII) and Ashridge Executive Education finds that wide organisational interest in online learning and development (L&D) is yet to be put into practice.

Between January and March 2016, PMII and Ashridge Executive Education polled 335 professionals from the L&D and HR community to discover whether organisations are providing employees with the opportunities to fulfill their potential and nurture skill gaps.

The survey also explored L&D priorities for 2016, and the role that online learning plays in an employee’s personal and professional development. In addition, respondents shared their methods for measuring learning among employees.

Despite the amount of time people spend online doubling over the last decade, a key finding of the survey shows learning online is still in its infancy. While respondents demonstrated a clear appetite for exploring digital learning methods, 52 per cent said that only a quarter of employee learning takes place online. We asked key industry figures why this might be, and why professional skills development ranks behind other business priorities.

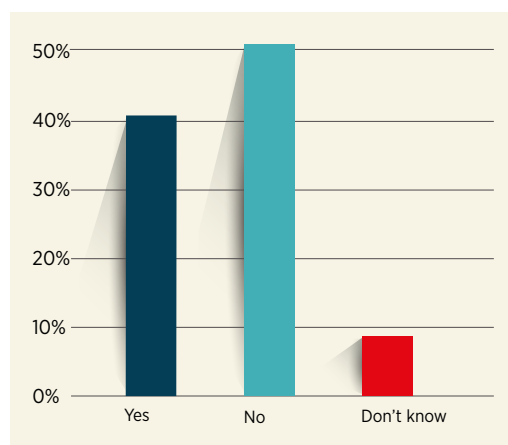
#### WHAT ARE ORGANISATIONS’ MAIN L&D PRIORITIES FOR 2016?

A strong business brand is paramount for L&D professionals in 2016. 41 per cent of respondents placed alignment with business objectives, and leadership training as their chief priorities for the upcoming year. This was followed by measuring effectiveness (27 per cent), professional skills development (25 per cent) and implementing a more blended learning solution (22 per cent).

With only a quarter of respondents ranking professional skills development as an L&D priority, it could seem as though organisational learning is being lost in the face of branding. Jane Hart, author of *Modern Workplace Learning*, cites a lack of awareness as a possible cause, “It could be because the top three items are buzz terms circulating in the industry at the moment”, she says. “Or it might be because there is a lack of understanding what that term actually means for them.”

Neil Morrison, group HR director at Penguin Random House UK, says it may be an unconscious response: “It’s not something that people actually think about. Professional skills development lacks a little bit of sexiness which, for example, ‘business alignment’ has.”

#### DO YOU MEASURE THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT, MANDATORY OR UNSTRUCTURED?



“It’s the not terribly well-hidden guilty secret of L&D that, broadly speaking, we struggle to monitor and evidence outcomes and outcomes of the learning we try to deliver or support,”

Dr Mark Cole, head of learning and development at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust.

Morrison also suggests that the ownership of learning is moving away from L&D and HR departments. “There’s a lot of experiential learning that is happening. So what we are witnessing is a shift, in which the responsibility is going away from the organisation towards the individual to become self-directed learners.”

Jason Cassidy, president of Ashridge Executive Education, explains the level of importance Ashridge places on experiential learning: “Our faculty are unusual in that they all possess real-world experience, and know that making an impact requires more than just understanding business theory. Experiential learning, whether it’s using actors to simulate situations or heart rate monitors to measure stress levels, is a hallmark of our unique learning methodology.”

As L&D becomes increasingly autonomous – with the responsibility for success moving away from the organisation and towards the individual – professional skills development becomes significantly less quantifiable, which could explain the unwillingness to make it a priority. More than half (52 per cent) of those polled noted their organisation did not measure the impact of personal development, on a mandatory or unstructured level.

“It’s the not terribly well-hidden guilty secret of L&D that we struggle to monitor and evidence outcomes and outputs of the learning we try to deliver or support,” says Dr Mark Cole, head of learning and development at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust. “There’s very little longitudinal work done to assess the application of learning and its impact on performance, but formal learning events that are strongly oriented towards practice, have a commitment to experiential learning, and use live and real-time projects for professionals to derive and test learning, are ones that will lend themselves best to proper evaluation.”

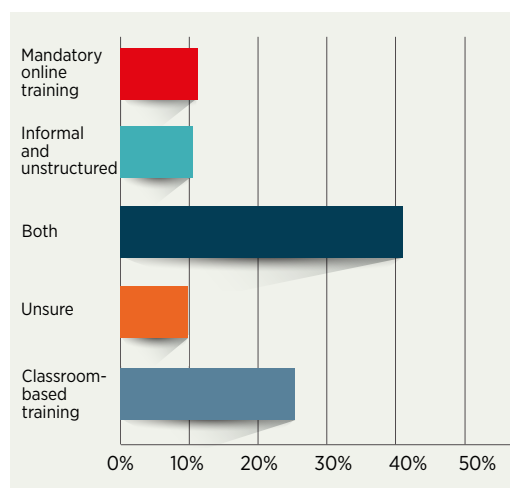
#### ARE EMPLOYEES CAUTIOUS OF ONLINE LEARNING?

**D**espite the increasing flexibility of the modern workforce, the growth of global businesses and the onset of the big economy, organisational L&D remains dominated by face-to-face learning, with 52 per cent of respondents reporting that three quarters of all learning takes place offline.

Classroom-based learning remains popular, with 36 per cent of respondents saying that their organisation uses a combination of day-long workshops, half-day workshops, conferences, one-on-one sessions (coaching and mentoring), short courses, bespoke training and other methods. The areas where e-learning is being implemented appear to be sector-led, as they are more commonly used in the public sector and by large private organisations.

Morrison believes that online learning is yet to see a significant uptake because the process is still driven by HR & L&D teams rather than individuals. “Learning from other people and learning in the

### WHAT PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU HAVE IN PLACE FOR EMPLOYEES?



physical presence of others is still preferred,” he says. “You just can’t replicate that online. If, for example, you wanted to learn how to play football you would never just be able to watch a YouTube video of someone playing the game – you’d always have to transfer that learning to the pitch and play with a team.”

Ashridge Executive Education has been exploring factors known to critically influence their ability to apply learning from development programmes since 2011.

The five factors that stand out are:

1. Individual attitude to learning
2. Manager support
3. Organisational attitude to learning
4. Support from peers
5. Support from direct reports

Lee Waller, director of the Ashridge Centre for Research in Executive Development, explains that “It is important to understand more about an organisation’s learning context, and how the working environment and individual attitudes to learning may affect the ability of employees to use their new skills back in the workplace in order to enhance learning transfer.” Her recent research projects have explored the neurological processes involved in experiential learning, the transfer of learning, and the role and influence of leadership development.

Many organisations also display a lack of confidence in implementing e-learning solutions effectively. The 2015 CIPD Learning and Development Survey reports that just a quarter feel ‘extremely’ or ‘very confident’ in their ability to harness the technology to increase the effectiveness of their L&D interventions. Meanwhile, the report also says that 75 per cent of organisations use learning technologies – but the extent to which they use them varies widely and face-to-face delivery remains dominant.

Where online learning is in use, our survey found that online resources are the most popular tool, with 17 per cent of respondents ranking them more highly than intranets (14 per cent) and webinars (13 per cent). It is apparent that online learning is not a standalone solution – it has to work hand-in-hand with a variety of offline methods.

“For a professional, their richest source of learning is found in and through practice,” Dr Mark Cole says. “The workplace is their classroom, but support needs to be put in place to help them reflect and learn from their experience – to close the reflective loop and take action in light of that learning.”

Courtney Gainer, Ashridge’s product development director, explains:



“Critically, online learning should not look to translate a paper-based or face-to-face resource in the virtual space.”

Courtney Gainer,  
project development director,  
Ashridge Executive Education

“Unless the online learning is compliance based, it is critical to engage the learners so that they want to use the learning tool”. Gainer adds: “Learners will not go out of their way to use the online materials on offer unless the learning will allow them to progress within the organisation or is directly relevant to their day-to-day work and professional development objective.”

Despite inconsistencies in implementation, L&D and HR practitioners do recognise the benefits in online learning methods for personal development. Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of respondents said their organisation views online learning as an important enabler for personal development; a significant figure given that a substantial portion of online learning is voluntary.

#### MAKING THE MOST OF ONLINE LEARNING

While the popularity of online learning is clearly indicated in the study, 54 per cent of respondents admitted their employees aren’t making the most of online learning opportunities – possibly because many organisations have not yet committed to delivering effective online learning solutions. Poor user interfaces stifle take-up of online learning courses.

“This is usually the case when e-learning is not delivered in an appropriate or appealing format, typically via big online courses in ‘click-next’ presentation-style that forces people to go through every slide to ‘prove’ they have completed it and therefore ‘learned’ it. People avoid this type of online learning like the plague, as it is very unlike the way they learn online for themselves – methods which they can control,” says Hart.

Gainer adds: “the engagement of the learner is impacted by both the quality of the content and the way in which it is accessible. Critically, online learning should not look to translate a paper-based or face-to-face resource in the virtual space. Instead it should look to take advantage of the technology to make the content more personalised, more accessible and more digestible to increase the engagement with an organisation’s online learning tools.”

The report also finds that online learning is conducted outside of core working hours, 60 per cent of the time. Just 40 per cent of respondents said that most of their online learning took place during the normal working day, which might explain why the survey shows a clear preference for unstructured online learning. Two-thirds said that learning is unstructured in their organisation for at least half of the time. It’s a strong indication that people prefer to self-direct their learning without the restrictions of a formal approach.



“The world is changing so fast that everyone needs to be continuously learning new knowledge and skills. There is no such thing as a job for life, only a life of jobs, so individuals will need to keep up to date themselves.”

Jane Hart, author of *Modern Workplace Learning*

#### FUTURE APPETITE FOR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

There is a clear appetite for personal development among employees. Between one and four hours is currently dedicated to personal development per month, according to 74 per cent of respondents. Importantly over half of organisations that responded to the survey expect the time dedicated to personal development to increase within the next twelve months.

The fact that organisations only allocate a fraction of the working week to personal development suggests they don't include social learning (learning that occurs from talking to people, both with colleagues as well as people outside of work) as a contributing factor.

The survey reveals that 60 per cent of organisations allocate time during the day for employees' personal development. A quarter of respondents ranked continuous professional development as a priority for the future, with 43 per cent regarding it as 'very important' and 42 per cent saying it is 'quite important'. This looks set to be maintained and increased in the future.

Many organisations have a “command and control approach” to learning that is at odds with a culture of self-organised learning. They often don't want to spend time on helping people improve, in case they lose them and the effort has been wasted, which is short-sighted – because if they don't, they risk losing people anyway.

There is an evident desire for more learning opportunities to occur online: 78 per cent of respondents say they would like more online L&D opportunities to be available. This may be unsurprising to many with the pace of business moving so fast, people continuously need to learn new knowledge and skills.

As for the part played by organisations, they need to facilitate and offer the chance for people to organise learning themselves. It's not just about providing opportunities for people, but also helping people to do this for themselves, with an emphasis on building the new skills involved for organising and managing their own learning, and also rewarding them for it – in order to retain them.

Lee Waller says: “the importance of understanding the barriers to an individual learning and transferring that learning back into the workplace should not be ignored. Where an individual is motivated to learn, organisations should ensure they overcome any existing barriers to learning. In return, organisations will see a greater positive impact on the learners' work performance”.

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Lee Waller, director of the Ashridge Centre for Research in Executive Development

#### SIX KEY TAKE-AWAYS:

1. There is a clear appetite for personal development among employees
2. There is a desire for more online learning opportunities as employees need to keep up to date with the fast-changing pace of business
3. Online learning should be user-friendly, engaging and enjoyable
4. Online learning is not a standalone solution – it should work hand-in-hand with a variety of offline methods. Being able to apply what they’ve learnt in practice is key
5. Help people to organise their personal development as well as giving them the opportunities
6. Reward employees for developing their skills and demonstrating good performance as a result

