Learning Technology in Practice



Adaptive Learning

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Jasmine Smith CEO of Accreditate

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Accreditate is the next generation of corporate learning, designed to empower teams and leaders with cutting-edge skills and knowledge.

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Foreword

Adaptive learning technology has been around for a few years, but is not well known. The technology is built on artificial intelligence and focuses on solving some of the systemic challenges facing digital learning. For example, tailoring resources to the needs of the individual and using learning science, such as spaced repetition, to make learning effective. It also has the potential to deliver the value and impact that L&D teams want and senior stakeholders increasingly expect.

At Insights Media, we want to shine a light on some of the technologies that will transform the learning experience for workers, and we decided to start with adaptive learning. Another reason for writing this report is to provide a balanced view of the technologies shaping the learning market and to give voice to those who are innovating the learning experience for workers. This is not marketing-led – we are not promoting any technologies or vendors.

We think the learning industry is awash with marketing content but light on editorial insight, so we hope to do our bit to change this by producing reports like this.

We hope you find it useful, and we'd like to thank all those who participated in it.

Martin Couzins CEO Insights Media

Summary points

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Personalises learning

Adaptive learning tailors content to individual learner needs, ensuring relevance and efficiency.



Increases engagement

Learners are more engaged with content that addresses their specific knowledge gaps.



Efficient use of time

By focusing only on necessary learning, adaptive learning is a significant time saver for learners and organisations.



Improved ROI

Personalised training can lead to better skill acquisition and performance, offering a higher return on investment.



Spaced repetition

This technique, supported by adaptive learning, enhances knowledge retention and reduces the forgetting curve.



Data-driven insights

Adaptive learning provides detailed data on learner progress and areas needing improvement.

Introduction

Imagine the scenario. You have a group of employees embarking on first-level management training. Some are already a few months into their new management role, some have project management experience, others have no management experience whatsoever. Some are internal recruits, others are fresh to the organisation.

They come from a variety of disciplines and have different skills, experiences, knowledge and behaviours. Do you give them all exactly the same learning, regardless of what they already know and do? Or do you tailor the learning, according to their individual needs and priorities?

The second option is, of course, the holy grail of learning – only giving people the learning they need, when they need it, and not making them plough through loads of stuff they already know. It's what L&D has been promising for years but is still struggling to deliver. What usually happens is that learners get the first option – a one-size-fitsall training programme. There might be a level of personalisation, but it doesn't go very deep and it doesn't meet learner or organisational needs.

This is the perennial problem facing L&D, organisations and employees, but it could all be about to change. Word has it that the profession is on the cusp of transformative change, propelled by adaptive learning technology. But, as with all emerging technologies (with the exception of gen AI), take-up has been slow, partly because of the upfront costs, but also because there is some confusion about what adaptive learning actually means, what it offers and how to implement it. This report aims to eliminate that confusion, exploring the key facets of adaptive learning, the benefits, the challenges and the direction of travel. We have interviewed several experts, a mix of adaptive learning vendors and industry analysts. We have also interviewed a learning provider who says all learning should be adaptive, tech or no tech.

During our conversations, we asked everyone to give us three key words that, for them, encapsulate adaptive learning. Some words cropped up more than once (the ones in bold). Here's the list: relevant, efficient, effective, mandatory, fit for purpose, easy, LMS, precise, insightful, personalised, underestimated, motivating, engaging, individualised, impactful, responsive, intuitive, scalable, necessary, and easier to calculate ROI.

It's an interesting collection of descriptors. With some of the words, it was immediately obvious what was meant, but others required probing mandatory, for example.

Currently, adaptive learning means different things to different people. Because it's a relatively immature market, it is not clearly defined, plus different vendors offer different levels of adaptive learning, which confuses the picture further. More about that in a bit.

What is adaptive learning?

Adaptive learning personalises learning to the learner, giving them content and activities that they need, how they need them, until they have mastery, and short circuiting any learning that isn't needed. "If you take 1,000 learners, every course will look different, because people get different activities based on what they know and what they don't know," says Roy de Vries, learning innovator at the learning platform for learning provider, aNewSpring.

Adaptive learning platforms are increasingly sophisticated, designed to identify each learner's existing knowledge, skills and competencies and where the gaps are, at a very granular level. The gaps are the learning need.

This means, for example, that if one of those employees doing first level management training is already proficient in 20% of the material, they skip that part of the learning and only focus on the 80% that they don't know. But even the 80% isn't a static learning programme – the tech continually assesses the learner's understanding of the topic or skill and adapts the content and delivery according to the learner's evolving needs. If a gap isn't closing, drill in deeper and give them more learning until the learning lands.

"Adaptive learning is based on real time feedback," explains David Perring, chief insights officer at HR analysts Fosway Group. "That's what gives you the adaption. It creates a learning experience for individuals that targets their priorities and needs in a very focused way, giving them something that is really tuned and paced. As individuals build their expertise, the experience adapts to make sure they focus on the areas they need to build further."

A common misconception, says Perring, is that adaptive learning is just about personalisation of the curriculum. Yes, the curriculum is personalised as learners move through their learning, but true adaptive learning personalises the whole learning experience - the crafting of modules, the pace of learning, spaced repetition, etc.

TJ Kuhny, vice president of product marketing at the adaptive learning platform Realizeit, agrees with Perring that people often equate adaptive learning with the Netflix approach – "just suggesting what content you would like". And this is the level some vendors are operating at, those who have jumped on the adaptive learning bandwagon. But that's a very light touch approach, only scratching the surface of what adaptive learning can actually do and enable. Go deeper and Kuhny says you get something much more powerful and personalised. "We see it as something that's very precise to each learner, building an adaptive learning experience around a deep level of skill building. It's not a one-size-fits all experience and you hope they get something out of it. With adaptive learning, you know that learners are ready to do the job that you've taught them. We call it business critical training needs."

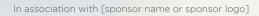
Learning that delivers business benefits

Business critical training needs is a good way of looking at it. Adaptive learning has the potential to be transformative because it enables L&D and organisations to hone in on the skills and behaviours and knowledge they want to build in the workforce – the skills that are critical for organisational success. And because it's not a one-size-fits all approach, adaptive learning gets into the real nitty gritty of what the learning is for and why. We need this course to develop x skills and y behaviours so that these employees can do x effectively and perform better in their roles.

This process helps all stakeholders (L&D, line managers, employees and the C-suite) think about and understand what is needed from the learning. "Adaptive learning helps you structure the thinking around 'what is the job that I'm here to train'," says Kuhny. "It really helps focus on the skill you're trying to build, the job you're trying to train for. It is building it in a more granular, knowledge-structured way."

The forgetting curve

Perring talks about the importance of spaced repetition, as do many of the other interviewees. In 1885, German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus famously created 'the forgetting curve' – the loss of learned information - when testing his own ability to retain information. He discovered that most new knowledge is lost soon after learning it – within 20 minutes to an hour. And within a week, 80% has faded away, says software company and adaptive learning experts Drillster. Marco van Sterkenburg, CEO at Drillster, says spaced repetition is key to embedding learning, and key to Drillster's technology. "Adaptive learning helps with anchoring and retention. When a knowledge gap is identified, you can provide shorts bits of information with spaced repetition." He co-founded Drillster 13 years ago, after working for an international bank and witnessing the forgetting curve first hand. As with all financial institutions, employees were required to complete regular mandatory training updates, but the learning wasn't designed to be effective – no differentiated pathways, no personalisation, no spaced repetition...







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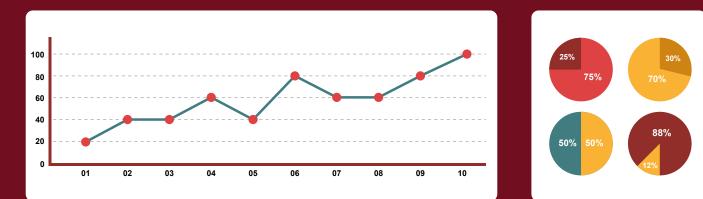
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The benefits of adaptive learning



This leads us on to the benefits of adaptive learning, of which there are many, for learners, for organisations and for L&D teams.

Learners first.

Engagement

The one-size-fits all, sheep dip approach to learning is counterproductive. A lot of time is wasted on unnecessary content and activities, eroding people's motivation to learn and their faith in workplace learning. People disengage with the process, making it harder for them to engage with the learning they actually need. "If you're sitting there and you already know stuff, you're bored to death," says Nancy Munro, CEO at AI-powered coaching platform, Verbal Transactions. "And employees aren't engaged if they're bored to death."

With the adaptive route, the focus is on knowledge gaps. This is an instant benefit because people engage with learning that is relevant to them and their needs and when they can see a clear reason for doing it – ie. being able to do their job better and more easily.

Paced learning

With adaptive learning, the pace at which learning happens is determined by how the learner is progressing. "Some people learn faster and some people learn slower, but traditional training tools don't allow for that in a scalable way," says Munro. "But we can create triggers to say 'You've got this, you're accelerating this, let's move up to the next level'."

It works the other way too - the technology recognises when a person is struggling and needs further learning or to come at the learning from a different angle.

Saving a precious resource - time

"If you're sitting there and

CEO, Verbal Transactions.

you already know stuff, you're bored to death"

Nancy Munro,

Cutting out the unnecessary content and activities saves learners a huge amount of time and time is a very precious resource in today's world.

"Nobody has enough time, so for learners to get what they need, when they need it and how they want it, on a customised path, and not having to do the stuff they already know – it's a pro," says John Leh, analyst, consultant and CEO at Talented Learning. "It's something they have been hearing vendors talk about for three decades and now they can have it. It's a huge saver of time."

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What about the benefits of adaptive learning to organisations?

Many of the benefits for employees are also benefits for organisations. Personalised, effective, efficient learning leads to more skilled, effective, efficient employees, which leads to better organisational outcomes.

Organisations don't want to release employees for learning that takes them away from work and doesn't deliver. Where's the ROI in that? But if the learning does deliver and the time spent away from work is much shorter, then organisations can see the ROI. "The same things are good for the organisation, who are trying to develop people but don't have enough time," says Leh. "They need learning to be more nimble, more adaptive and what learners actually need, in order to move the organisation forward."

Time savings

The learning platform aNewSpring conducted a randomised research trial during a medical mathematics training programme at a university in the Netherlands. Three hundred nurses went through a traditional, linear learning journey (everybody completing the same learning), while another 300 went through an adaptive learning journey, following a pre-test that established their existing knowledge. The linear learning journey lasted two hours, seven minutes, whereas the adaptive learning journey took an average of one hour, 25 minutes.

"It saved {the adaptive} learners 33% of their time," says de Vries. "What if every nurse does the specific training, and we've got 75,000 nurses in the Netherlands, and we pay them this amount of money per hour - how much money will we save?"

Costs - pros and cons

A challenge for L&D teams wanting to implement adaptive learning is that it comes with a hefty price tag - creating personalised learning that assesses skills, knowledge and competencies at a very granular level chews up a lot more resource than a generic piece of elearning. Costs should reduce in the future, as the tech keeps innovating and improving, but current pricing might cause organisations to hold off for now.

Plus, many employers are hoping to drive down the cost of learning through AI doing some of the heavy lifting. Battling constant disruption and economic headwinds, they are feeling the pinch so asking them to increase their spend by investing in adaptive learning could be a hard sell. There's another major challenge facing L&D teams – the profession is known for heralding the arrival of a new, shiny piece of technology that is going to answer everyone's prayers, if only the organisation jumps on board. Many of those technologies don't live up to the promise or need several iterations until performance improves. According to Fosway's Digital Learning Realities 2023 (https://www.fosway.com/ research/next-gen-learning/digital-learningrealities-2023/), nearly 50% of respondents say their learning systems are not fit for their workforce.

L&D teams need to be able to make a clear business case, including the potential ROI, if they want to convince CEOs that it's worth shelling out for adaptive learning.

Is the reward worth the spend?

Will organisations get back what they spend? Perring says yes, and more. But he thinks employers need to flip their thinking regarding the cost of learning. "For organisations, it's potentially one of the most significant unrealised opportunities within digital learning, because it transfers our perception of learning from being about the cost to develop and acquire to the cost of delivery and the value that's generated. We need to be more value centred and value isn't just about the money. It's about 'What value does it give to the individual? What value does it give the manager? What value does it give senior leaders and the business as a whole, when people learn faster and are better at the other end?"

Think of the aNewSpring trial – 33% less time spent completing the learning is a very significant cost saving. Jessica Aloe, head of business development at adaptive learning provider Obrizium, says its tech cuts learning times even more for customers - by 50%, typically. "Not only are individuals happier, more satisfied, more engaged with learning because content is hyper relevant to their levels of understanding and expertise, but from the organisational standpoint, training becomes much more efficient and productive. If someone's spending time in training, they're spending it on their knowledge gaps."

Reducing organisational risk

Adaptive learning helps organisations hone in on what learning needs to happen and how, and then if it is doing what it is supposed to do – ie. the learning has worked. Kuhny says this is a critically important benefit for learning teams and for employers, enabling them to identify and demonstrate where the knowledge gaps (risks) are initially, and when those gaps have been addressed. "It gives you that visibility into what they knew to start with, how much they progressed and where the risks are.

It's about knowing that people are better prepared in their jobs and mitigating the risk of something bad happening."

The risk could be that an employee hasn't developed the communication skills required to work effectively in a customer-facing role and ensure a positive customer experience. Organisations operating in high-risk sectors – defence, finance, healthcare and aviation, for example - are already showing a keen interest in adaptive learning because of the ability to identify and mitigate risk. Some of them are early adopters.



Mandatory

Leh explains why mandatory was one of his three words: "When we think about adaptive learning in corporates, the mind automatically goes to employee learning. What's really interesting is organisations using it as a competitive differentiator. Strategic education is a competitive differentiator - it's not about compliance, it's about how competitive you are in the marketplace. It's a combination of education and marketing – adaptive marketing."

When Leh talks about education in this context, he means educating the market, customers and prospective customers. He says leading organisations are already leveraging adaptive learning in this way, creating very targeted, personalised messaging about products and services. He says it's a case of: "I want to move the business needle better than my competitor down the street and education is the ninja tool." Incorporating adaptive learning into customer education and employee learning will become mandatory, Leh says, in the sense that organisations that don't do it risk losing their competitive edge.

He's not the only person talking about adaptive learning in these terms. Nick Eriksen, chief technology officer and co-founder of customer training company Eurekos, agrees that adaptive learning offers a huge amount of value to organisations when interacting with new and existing audiences. Just like employees, customers don't want to be served up information that they already know or is irrelevant to their needs. Do that and Eriksen says you run the risk of them switching off and disengaging from your message. "If I'm a customer who has been using a company's products for eight years, I already know so much about the products, so I just want what's new to me or what's relevant to my experience."



When will adaptive learning take off?

Very soon, thinks Leh. He says adaptive learning is fast becoming a critical requirement for all his customers and that wholesale take-up is just around the corner – "adaptive learning will wash into all LMSs over the next 12-24 months."

Al - adaptive technology is powered by Al - has been around for many years but gen Al only came on the scene recently and it' is gen Al that has got people thinking about adaptive learning. Organisations are waking up to what's possible and employees will increasingly expect personalised learning. Kuhny thinks mindset has been the biggest hurdle to the adoption of adaptive learning, and now that employers can see the technology's potential and how it will help them, that barrier is coming down.

Perring also says there has been a shift in attitude. This will accelerate as costs reduce, making the technology more accessible and visible. And as the number of use cases rises and CEOs and learning heads see other organisations using the tech, demand will grow. Organisations everywhere are trying to incorporate AI into their strategy, which could be the foothold that adaptive learning needs. "I think it's going to take off once we see the next wave of AI, supporting people's creation of digital learning programmes," says Perring. "I think that's going to be the tipping point."

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But, and this is a big but, there does need to be more visibility of adaptive learning and a greater understanding of the value it generates for organisations. Budgets are tight, so the market will want to see case studies, stories of how and why it's worked. CEOs and learning heads will want to see evidence of ROI, compelling reasons why the investment is worth it. And right now, Perring thinks a lot of the implementation and discovery is happening behind closed doors. "Typically, the organisations that are making the most progress aren't always the ones who want to be visible and want to share because they see it as part of their business advantage, so I'm not sure if the level of transparency is there as it should be."



Adaptive learning - a different perspective

So far, this report has focused on technologyenabled adaptive learning. But, one of the people we interviewed gave a very different perspective. Paul Matthews, founder and CEO of People Alchemy, thinks there is too much focus on tech in learning and not enough on humans, line managers in particular.

"Most people immediately head into tech application and how technology can help them not teach stuff they already know. It's a very tech driven approach but you don't need any of that to make learning adaptive and fulfil all the things you need it to do."

Matthews thinks adaptive learning can happen without any technology being involved. He says managers and other stakeholders – colleagues, for example - are critically important in an employee's learning journey. They can add layers of knowledge and understanding and help employees apply learning in the workplace. And a good line manager knows how to adapt their input to the needs and priorities of individual employees. "Some people like a lot of detail, other people want the bigger picture. A line manager should know enough about someone to do that," says Matthews. "A line manager has the ability to add an awful lot of information, guidance, coaching and mentoring to help employees through a programme. Line managers have been let off the hook for too long with helping with the learning transfer and process."

It's true that adaptive learning isn't a new phenomenon – teachers have been doing it for years and adaptive learning technology first emerged in the education space. Eriksen agrees: "For me, adaptive learning is not something new. It's been there for ages. If you look at traditional classrooms, people have been doing this for ever - trying to accommodate what individual students need to know. Coaching and mentoring is adaptive learning."

Aloe has a different take on adaptive learning versus the human touch. She thinks adaptive learning technology brings the more personal touch back into digital learning - because it is so focused on individual needs and individual progress, it can act like a professional coach or assistant. "It says to you, actually, I think you're struggling here, I think you might be guessing, I don't think you really understand... So let me feed you - let me pull this resource, let me pull up this video for you... That's what adaptive is doing, and it's shaping a journey based on who you are as an individual."

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The benefit to learning teams

We've established that adaptive learning helps individuals and organisations learn better, more quickly and more effectively, benefits that also help L&D. But how else does adaptive learning benefit learning teams?

Learning that works

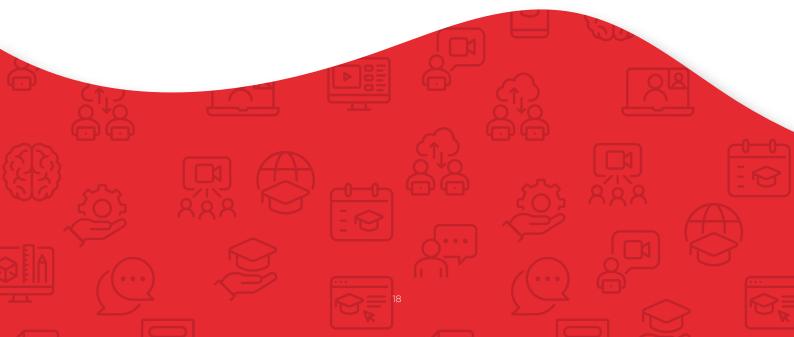
If L&D can introduce technology that enables employees to access the learning they need and gain the skills and knowledge they need to do their jobs better, then L&D is doing the job it exists to do. And if it can cut waste (time spent on material that the learner already knows), then even better.

Business impact

For workplace learning to be effective, it has to have business impact and that means it needs to be aligned to business needs. This is something learning teams have struggled with for a long time, criticised for being order takers rather than business partners. If, as the experts say, the process of creating adaptive learning helps everyone identify what learning needs to happen and why, then that will lead to greater business impact.

Measuring the impact of learning

L&D teams have also been repeatedly criticised for measuring the wrong learning metrics. Who needs to know how enjoyable a piece of learning was? Or how many people completed a training programme? What needs to be measured is impact – did a learning intervention that was designed to improve x actually improve x? If yes, by how much? By which method? And so on. L&D needs to measure the effectiveness of learning and the business outcomes. With adaptive learning, there is a lot of tracking and it starts from the word go. "You've got data about each step of the way," says Kuhny. "You know what learners knew to begin with, and you can see how much they progress - so you measure learning."





The return on your investment

Measuring impact means learning teams can demonstrate the ROI. We onboarded 100 employees 40% faster through adaptive learning... The sales team is 25% more effective...We can see that 15% of the customer satisfaction department are a risk factor because their communication skills need improving, so this is the training need...

Better learning interventions

Learning teams can also use adaptive learning to improve the content and materials produced. For example, the data shows that a significant number of learners struggle with the same piece of content – is this a particularly difficult area or does the material need improving or another layer of intervention?

What to do next?

You've read this far, so you hopefully have a very clear idea about the benefits and challenges of adaptive learning. But how do you convince your CEO and CLO to invest in it? And where do you start?

Do your homework

Find out more about adaptive learning, although be aware that this is still a relatively unknown market so there isn't a huge amount of material on offer.

Talk to providers

Find out how their technology is being used, by whom, and why. Look and ask for case studies.

When you're ready to take the plunge, start small. Find an area of the business that has a need and run a pilot. Once you've got some data and insights you can start to build.

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