

The great learning disconnect: What your employees aren't telling you





Executive summary: At the edge of the cliff— The overwhelming challenges of today's workforce

Psychology research shows that when we face an overwhelming number of challenges, it's easy to lose hope and feel helpless. In reality, today's employees are faced with more challenges than ever before, and while some of the variables are outside employer control, that doesn't make the situation any less difficult for the workforce.

For example, headlines abound focusing on the business risk of losing high-performing employees, and a recent PwC report indicates that the second wave of the Great Resignation could be just around the corner.¹ Not only that, but for yet another year, Gallup and other reputable organizations indicate that employee engagement remains stagnant, costing employers upwards of nine trillion dollars annually in lost productivity.²

In addition, burnout rates and mental stress are also a critical problem, and Deloitte reports that less than two third of employees highlight their mental state at work as 'excellent' or 'good'.³ To cap it off, news and stories about the proliferation of artificial intelligence have made seven out of 10 workers concerned about the long-term viability of their skills.

It's an overwhelming series of challenges for employers as they attempt to support a productive and capable workforce. What options exist to help

drive engagement and retention while giving each employee a sense of progress in their skills and work?

In a new research study of 2,000 global learners, the team at Lighthouse Research & Advisory partnered with Adobe to uncover some of the aspirations, needs, and priorities of workers, and one clear opportunity stands out as an option to combat this variety of challenges—**a culture of learning based on autonomy and opportunity.**

Is a culture of learning the best solution to workforce disengagement and turnover?



The concept of a "culture of learning" isn't exactly new, but many companies have struggled to clearly define, enact, and support the type of culture that drives real results for the workforce and the business.

But out of all the potential strategies organizations can pursue, developing a true culture of learning seems to resolve each of the challenges laid out above. For instance:

- Learning availability and uptake links to **stronger employee retention** and a sense of belonging.
- Learning, especially with modern technology, **helps employees feel more control over their skill development** in a fast-paced, disruptive work environment.
- Learning **elevates performance and productivity.**
- Learning **based on opportunity and autonomy gives burnt out workers a path forward** instead of just spinning their wheels.

This is a great solution, but some gaps are holding employers back from success. For instance, **nearly half the workforce thinks their learning technology is archaic and in need of modernization.** This is especially true for Gen Z, which is estimated to make up about one-third of the workforce by 2030. In addition, the most typical reason learners say they learn at work is because it was mandatory or required. In other words: **someone made them do it,** not because it was voluntary or for career growth. Finally, about half the workforce says their manager isn't fully supportive of their career development, which creates a sense of stagnation that ultimately leads to higher turnover.

¹ <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/workforce/hopes-and-fears.html>
² <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/393497/world-trillion-workplace-problem.aspx>
³ Advancing workplace well-being | Deloitte Insights

The data points in the research indicate a path forward, though. Within the following pages, we'll uncover:

- How employers can create a culture of learning in practical, concrete terms.
- The top priorities of learners today and how to meet them.
- Key benefits of a culture that meets the needs of learners.

It's time to go beyond words and begin actively connecting learner needs with the culture and values of the organization. This powerful connection drives real and lasting value both for the business as a whole and for each individual person across the workforce.



Using learner desires as a roadmap for success: Key preferences of the modern learner

The book *The Flaw of Averages* shares an intriguing look at the intersection of statistical problems relating to humans in the workplace. Several decades ago, the United States Air Force had a problem. Its planes were crashing at alarming rates, and it began an investigation to determine the source of the issue. Because no issues could be found with the mechanical elements in the aircraft, the issue was noted as pilot error. Ultimately, leadership decided to measure each pilot to make sure the cockpit was designed to be safely operated by a pilot of "average size." After measuring more than 4,000 pilots on 140 different measurements

However, one of the researchers had a curiosity. He looked across all of the data on the thousands of pilots to understand how many were average across just 10 of the measurements. The number? Exactly zero. The takeaway for this researcher was simple: it's easy to define averages when it comes to math, but it's difficult to average out the many variables in a group of people and create an "average human."

Within the context of learning, different ages and other demographics can shift someone's preferences and perspectives. We'll demonstrate that based on the research. However, we'll also highlight some key elements across the entire population that are relevant and applicable to nearly everyone.



Generational breakdowns across the workforce

The headlines regularly touch on generational differences in the workplace, but some of the common assumptions were completely overturned in the study. For example, Gen Z isn't sitting around "quiet quitting" or looking to accomplish the bare minimum when it comes to developing their skills. At the same time, the Boomer end of the age spectrum isn't coasting out of the workforce in their final working years, either.

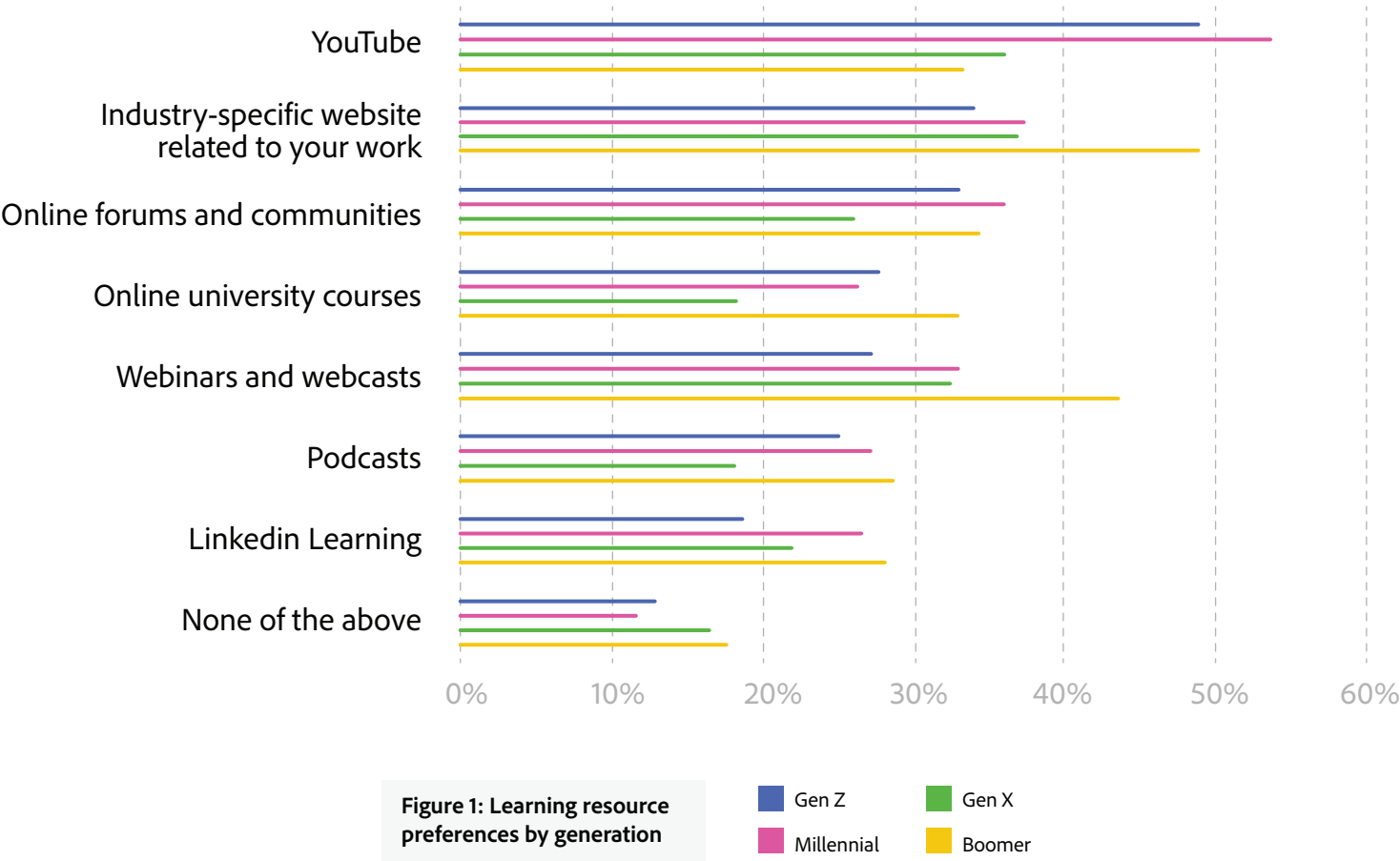
For example, **the number one driver of greater learning uptake across all generations was learning aligned to a career path.** That's true for Gen Z, who could have 40-plus years left in their careers as well as Boomers who are likely in the last decade of work. The takeaway here is clear: giving career path context to learning is going to drive interest for all staff.

Across the different age groups, we saw a deep commitment to learning and growth, but we did find some different preferences that employers should know. We share these not to indict or negatively portray any generation in the workforce; instead, **it's our hope that employers use the findings to engage and support each generation in their learning journeys in unique ways.**




For instance, while 80-90% of workers identified learning resources they used outside of those provided at work, the top preferences for those resources were different by generation.

Which of the following sources do you utilize to learn skills on your own (not offered by your employer)?



Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

Interestingly, while YouTube is the top answer for Millennials and Gen Z, industry-specific websites topped out at the number one answer for both Boomers and Gen X.

In some of our follow-up conversations, the qualitative inputs from workers were telling:



Mary, Social Media Manager, Gen Z:

“The world moves so fast today, especially in my job. I need the latest insights in short, video-based formats that give me what I need quickly so I can get back to work. I don’t have time to read a 40-page article for the one piece of information I need to put into action.”



Barrett, Data Analyst, Gen X:

“My work is so nuanced that I can’t really use general information on sites like YouTube and others. I wasn’t surprised to see “industry websites” as the number one option for my age group. I use these types of sources daily to stay on top of trends and sharpen my knowledge.”

Those perspectives help to shed light on why answers vary in popularity, but for employers that want to try to meet the needs of a diverse learner base, this set of information delivers some great options for how to adapt learning resources to the nuanced desires of the workforce.

Speaking of adapting learning resources, let’s take a look at a popular discussion topic for talent development executives: learning methods. The figure below offers insight into the preferences across each generation.

Which methods are your most preferred way to learn new skills?



Figure 2: Learning method preferences by generation

■ Gen Z ■ Gen X
■ Millennial ■ Boomer

Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

Interest in mentorship and coaching is highest among Gen Z, but most Millennials most want to learn at their own pace. In addition, Boomers like the control and autonomy of self-paced learning, while Gen X has a near-tie between digital learning content and self-paced learning activities. Because Boomers have an interest in both self-paced and instructor-led training, blended learning opportunities that tie together the both of those methods will be appealing to this demographic.

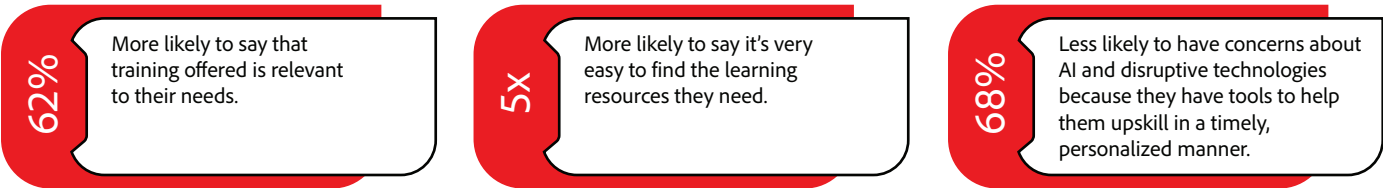
When it comes to the old standard, instructor-led training, interest with this option wanes the younger an employee is. Perhaps it's because training doesn't have to be classroom-based to be effective in the eyes of these younger generations, or it's possible that they prefer the autonomy of learning at their own pace. Either way, employers might have more success with this option if they blend in some other aspects like mentoring or coaching into the experience.

Not only that, but the way the technology works is also a concern. In the age of fake news and black box algorithms, Gen Z and Millennials are 50% more concerned about content accuracy than their peers in Gen X or Boomer generations.

One final comment on generations: Gen Z is 69% more likely than Gen X or Boomers to prioritize learning aligned with their personal interests, but at this time, only 27% of Gen Z strongly agree that their company's learning resources help them find a sense of purpose in their work. It's worth noting that **a learning-driven sense of purpose is correlated with a twofold increase in employee retention**. Creating connections among learning, a sense of purpose, and learner interests/aspirations is a worthy goal for every organizational learning team.

Modern learners prefer modern technology

Today, it's nearly impossible for any learning team, no matter how fully staffed, to actually help connect the dots for every single learner across the organization. That is one of the core reasons that technology has to play a part in the bigger learning strategy. For instance, when workers have access to modern, easy-to-use learning technology, they are:



Learning technologies like this are more personalized and engaging for the learner, which can help to increase their uptake of training content and pursuit of longer-term development activities.

One of our advisory board members, a Chief Learning Officer for a healthcare organization, recently explained that while they may not have an unlimited budget for learning, they always prioritize learning technology as a key strategic investment in the future success of the workforce.

Beyond learning methods and content sources, there's a clear delineation about perceptions of employer-provided learning technology.



42% of workers feel that their company's learning technology is outdated, but this number increases for Gen Z and Millennials, who are 50% more likely than Boomers to agree with this sentiment.

Employers that are using outdated technology are going to struggle to engage their emerging leaders and experts in younger generations.

For clarity, some of the hallmarks of outdated technology include a lack of support for personalized learning, an out-of-date design and user experience, and the inability to access learning activities on a mobile device. These elements have become expectations of the modern workforce when it comes to workplace technology.

So just what is modern learning technology? Consider these callouts from the research:



76% of learners are interested in a confidential personal learning coach or tutor.

More than just content navigation, this type of AI-driven feature can serve as a supporter, guide, or sounding board as learners explore how to best grow their skills for the future. And unlike a human, this coach is available 24 hours a day and isn't affected by some of the common biases in the workplace that might affect the support someone receives.



Only 43% of learners say it's easy to find learning content to support their work

That means six in 10 workers have some degree of difficulty in discovering and consuming the learning they need to perform on the job. Easy search features can help cut through the clutter so learners can get right to the content they need.

The number one thing that would drive additional learning participation at work isn't personalized recommendations, leaderboards, or digital badges. **It's clear objectives for learning content.** In a world where one in three workers say that people at their organization don't have time to learn because they are too busy, learners need to know before they begin if the content is going to meet their needs or close a skill gap.

The only thing worse than a lack of learning access is access to irrelevant training content. Modern learning technology touches on these crucial needs of the workforce so that every learner can be developed, aligned, and engaged at an individual level. Bottom line: **we have to know our learners if we want to serve our learners and help them accomplish their best work.**

A practical guide to creating a culture of learning

There's a term in psychology called "expectation violation." It describes the gap between what we expect in any given situation and what we actually experience. For instance, if you enter an upscale restaurant and expect amazing food and excellent service, but you end up receiving lackluster service and terrible food, that gap between what you expected and received is your degree of expectation violation. It's almost as if someone lied to you—bottom line: it's not pleasant.

Organizational culture is the same way. If we expect a culture of X and we get a culture of Y, that can create a sense of expectation violation that's hard to recover from.

Within any organization, the culture isn't just what leadership thinks or says it is—it's what everyone lives out at work. Culture is both a powerful and a fragile thing. Alignment with culture and values can strengthen performance, retention, and other key metrics. But when words and actions don't align, that can damage culture and the people who are part of it.

For instance, let's assume that organizational leadership says learning and skill development are critical organizational priorities. However, at the same time, the company is using outdated learning technology, allots no time for learning activities, and offers no support for skill development. It's fairly obvious at that point what the real priorities are, and learning isn't one of them.

In a recent interview with Cheryl Gochis, the Chief Human Resources Officer of Baylor University, she offered a piece of wisdom from their internal leadership training that is relevant to this discussion.⁴

We tell the managers in our classes that employees will talk about them at the dinner table with family and friends. They don't want to believe it, but it's true. We also tell them that they have the opportunity to influence those conversations: they can either be negative or positive. That 'aha' moment helps to get them committed to learning how to embrace the challenges and joys of leading others.

Let's look at that same concept through the lens of a culture of learning. Our employees will talk about our culture one way or the other. But are we investing in and supporting one that shows learning and career growth matter, or are we showing that learning isn't one of the real priorities for business? Within the research, we gave learners a few different ways to identify the type of learning culture at their organization.

Mandatory training is a part of life. Employees need harassment training, ethics refreshers, and other similar support on a regular basis. But if that's the **only** reason and opportunity they have to learn, they will lose interest in other training. One of the most common questions we hear from learning and HR executives is: "How do we get our people to pursue additional learning opportunities?" The research is clear: 51% of learners said that stronger alignment to their career path would make them interested in additional training, and 42% said autonomy and choice in their learning options would also positively influence the pursuit of additional learning opportunities.

When prompted, learners had some specific suggestions for how their learning culture could be improved.

How could your company's learning culture be improved?

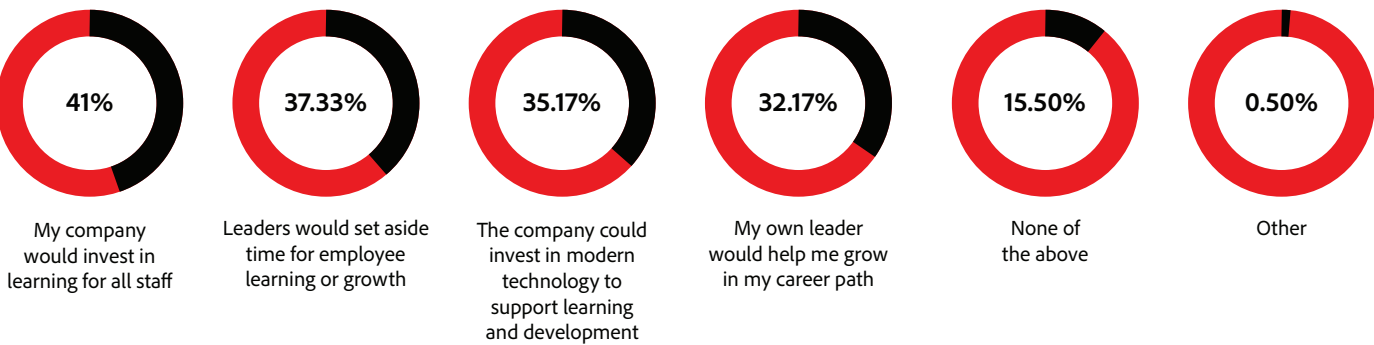


Figure 4: Improvements to learning culture

Each of these is an important element, but one comment from a survey respondent was telling: "[Our learning culture could be improved by] Carefully planned professional development. Often times our professional development is thrown together at the last minute."

Learning must be seen as an essential element of work, not a separate part. Just 14% of learners in an empowered learning culture say that people are too busy to learn, but in companies with a corrective learning culture, that number increases nearly 280%. And there's an unpleasant side effect of working at a company where people are too busy to learn—workers are twice as likely to have plans to quit their jobs.

Let's look at some of the other aspects of a positive, empowered learning culture and why it is a superior approach.

What is the learning culture like at your company?



Figure 3: Identifying existing learning cultures

Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

To translate these answers above: Organizations approach learning as



Let's touch on those two words that set apart a high-quality learning culture: autonomy and opportunity. **Autonomy** is simply having choices and options when it comes to learning, not just a set of prescribed, mandatory courses. **Opportunity** is more about having the support and time freedom to pursue learning activities.

	Employees are trained when not performing well (Corrective)	Employees have autonomy and opportunity to learn (Empowered)
My organization offers learning to grow my skills and performance	56%	90%
My manager is very supportive of my development	37%	73%
I am not confident that I am making career progress	28%	4%
I have regular, ongoing opportunities for social learning	15%	52%
I have full visibility into internal learning opportunities	42%	81%
I'm happy in my job with no plans to quit	46%	81%

Figure 5: Comparing learning cultures

Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

In addition to some of the other aspects highlighted above, one other element in a culture of learning is how the tools and technology fit in. Culture can be a bit undefined, but the investments and support a company makes give a very tangible perspective of what is really important.

Instead of thinking about a culture as a loose collection of words, values, or ideas, we have to look at the practical and visible practices and outcomes that define it. The following four questions can be asked to evaluate progress towards the intended learning culture:

- Modern learning technology makes relevant learning easily accessible to the workforce. **Is the company investing in modern learning technology? Do all employees have access, or is it reserved for a select portion of the workforce?**
- Relevant and valuable content help to engage and upskill learners. **Does the company provide access to job-relevant content for its workforce? If so, is the content easy to find and access?**
- Regular manager conversations about skills give a jumping-off point for growth and development opportunities. **Does the company prioritize manager development conversations with their team members? Are those discussions modeled by leaders across all levels of the organization?**
- Employers that seek to understand and meet the needs of a diverse learner population will have more success than those with a one-size-fits-all approach. **Does the organization have an awareness of the unique needs of different demographics? If so, does the organization offer multiple modalities or channels so that learners can be developed in their preferred manner?**

Three notable impacts of a powerful learning experience

The successful result of learning isn't course completions. It's not the amount of content consumed.

It's about performance.

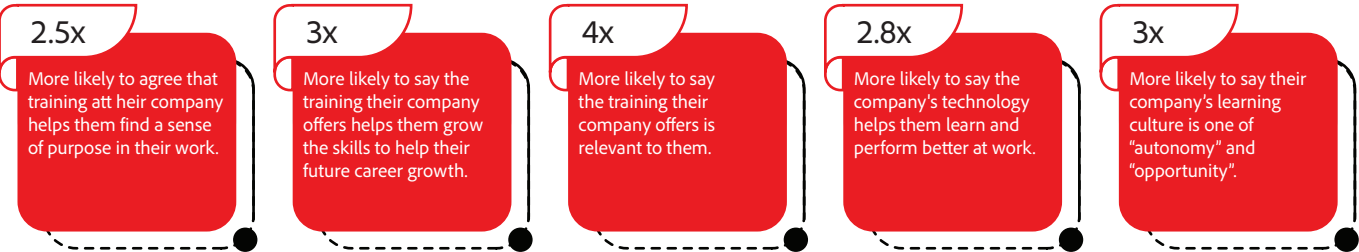
Employers provide training in order to support, maintain, or elevate employee performance. **Whether it's mandatory or voluntary, assigned or chosen, microlearning or long-form content, learning is ultimately about creating outcomes of value to the business.**

If employers knew that investing a dollar in learning activities would generate two dollars in benefit to the organization in higher productivity, reduced compliance risk, or better employee retention, there would always be a consistent investment into organizational learning initiatives. The following data points drawn from the research show just how much learning can drive powerful outcomes that matter to every business leader.

Learning and belonging

Employee belonging has gotten tied to some softer metrics in recent years, but our measures for belonging help to indicate why some workers produce greater effort and innovation while others do not. Within the research, we looked at three elements that indicate employee belonging: acceptance, respect, and appreciation. When an employee has those three crucial elements in place, they feel like they truly belong, and it unlocks some exciting outcomes and benefits for the employer.

Employees with a high belonging score are:



In contrast with the positive aspects, low-belonging employees have some alarming characteristics as well. For example, low-belonging employees are four times more likely to say they don't see the availability of internal training opportunities, and they are six times more likely to feel like they are stagnant when it comes to progress on their career goals.

The short version of this is straightforward: **when employees feel like they belong, they welcome learning as a gift from the employer.** In turn, high-belonging employees take the initiative to seek out and participate in learning that will grow their skills and make them more valuable over time.

Learning and performance

The number one learning experience priority for learners isn't a fun session or one aligned with their personal interests. No, it's actually learning that helps grow their work skills (70%). The second most popular response was learning that helps drive performance (52%). Whether they like training or not, employees participate in learning activities in the hopes that they will generate value for them in terms of overall performance impact. In short, relevance matters, as Figure 6 indicates clearly.

Which of the following are barriers to completing learning activities at work?

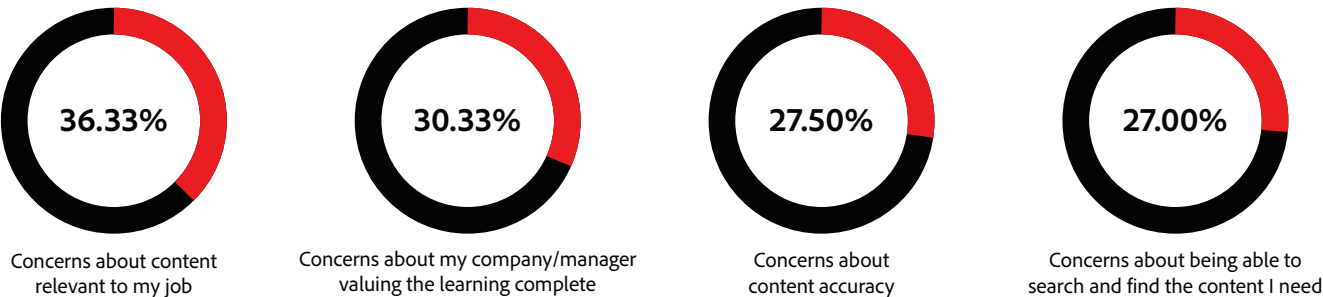


Figure 6: Barriers to learning at work

Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

As evidenced above, the number one concern employees have about consuming learning at work is the relevance of the content to their actual job duties. There's an opportunity cost for everything, even when it comes to employee learning. The learners can't get that time back, so they need to know that the time they are investing is actually going to support their job performance. However, only one in three workers say that the learning they take is fully aligned to their work and job requirements.

But here's an interesting data point: **workers whose employers are helping them develop their skills to perform on the job today are four times more likely to say their employer is helping them develop the skills to perform in the future.**

Statistically, that means it's nearly impossible for workers to believe their company is helping prepare them for the future if they aren't helping to upskill and develop them for the challenges of today. The future isn't just some vague concept, either. With 70% of learners more concerned about their skills due to artificial intelligence and other workplace disruption, the workforce sees learning as a hedge against skill disruption. Nearly two-thirds of learners say that learning will make them more future-proof as AI encroaches on the workplace.

One final callout on the performance front: learning can't be seen only as a tool to "fix" poor performers. When employers have a culture where learning is mainly about closing performance gaps and correcting issues, employees overwhelmingly agree that approach makes them feel worse about their employer.

Learning and retention

Retention is the last on this list because it's worth noting that there is a compounding effect. Not only do workers feel a stronger sense of belonging and perform at a higher level, but they also stay with their employers over a longer period of time, generating even greater results than any of these separate outcomes.

Within the research, there are multiple factors aligned with high employee retention. For starters, having little to no visibility into growth opportunities drives a 73% higher likelihood of quitting among learners. Logically, that makes sense. If there's no hope for future growth, then why not seek an employer that might offer that appealing sort of opportunity? In addition to visibility, a sense of progression and growth is also associated with a 76% increase in employee intent to stay.

Overall, we see that when employers establish the right environment and support their people with relevant and helpful skill development, it contributes to higher retention overall.

Retention correlates to learning activities

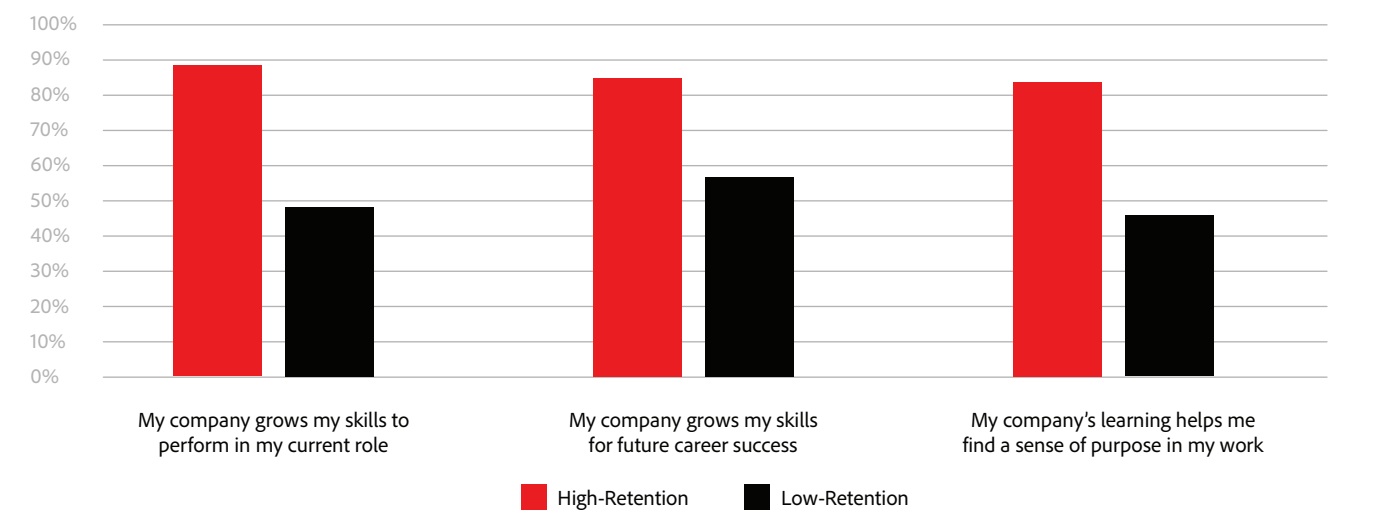


Figure 7: Employee retention and skill development

Source: 2024 Corporate Learner Experience Study (n=2,000 workers)

The value of a supportive leader has been well-documented over the years, and this study echoes that fact: **supportive managers can double the chances of someone remaining happy in their job with no plans to quit.** However, let's look at that through the more specific lens of learning. That type of managerial support can include tailoring development opportunities to the individual or setting aside time or resources to grow specific team members. About one out of three learners say that a more supportive manager would change their company's learning culture for the better. In terms of practical ideas, the top way that workers identify a caring manager is time:





74% of employees say that their managers are supportive specifically because they invest time with them.

An easy option for managers is to ask questions and understand what skills someone wants to learn, then give them chances to develop those skills through experiential opportunities, training courses, and other avenues. Often times it takes no additional investment to pair an employee with hands-on learning aligned to their interests—it simply takes a little time and understanding on the part of the manager. When the manager is too busy to support their team members in this regard, it nearly always increases turnover risk.

Overall, there are several highly valuable outcomes driven by a culture of learning. Not only do employees perform better, but they also feel like they truly belong, which unlocks their best creativity, effort, and focus. And at the end of the day, those workers end up sticking around for a longer period of time, benefiting their employer with a highly skilled, long-term workforce.

Does this mean that some of the larger challenges with burnout, retention, and technology disruption cease to matter? Certainly not. But establishing an employee-centric culture of learning that is predicated on autonomy and opportunity leads to a workforce that feels a stronger sense of control and direction. That's ultimately a win for the employees and for employers as well.

Key takeaways

Learners today have an expansive set of pressures that are challenging them at work. One of the most pressing is the overall concern about AI and other disruptive trends and technologies changing the skills they need in the near future. **Nearly two out of three learners say that learning will make them more future-proof as AI continues to infiltrate the workplace.**

More than half of learners say their company's learning technology feels outdated. Having a learning technology that is modern, intuitive, and useful doesn't just affect the learning experience overall. It can offer everything from personalized support for learner needs to easier and faster access to relevant, helpful resources that create a sense of control over skill development and success.

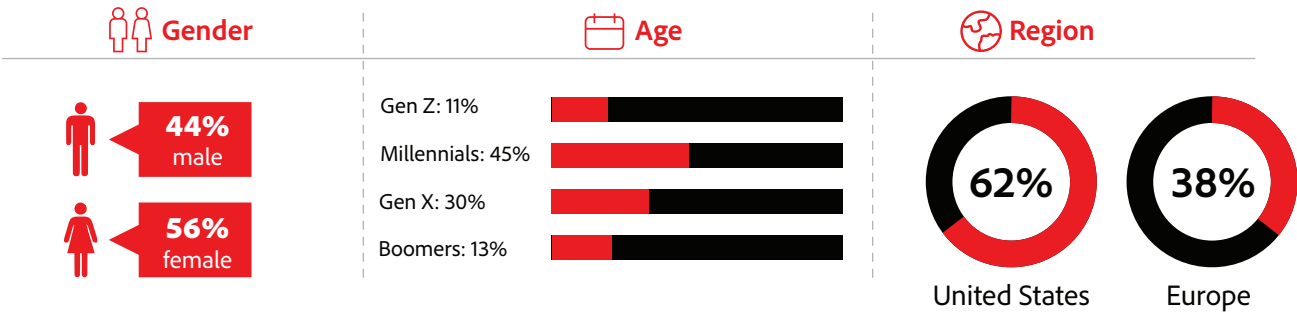
Learning cultures can be defined as corrective, mandatory, or empowered. The two most compelling aspects of an empowered, positive learning culture are autonomy and opportunity. **When workers have both of those elements present, they are 40% more likely to take interest in other learning opportunities within the business.**

Employees who are happy in their work with no intent to quit are nearly twice as likely to say their company's culture of learning is built on autonomy and growth. Learning can have a profound impact on employee performance, belonging, and retention, creating value for the business as a whole.

About the study

The 2024 Corporate Learner Benchmarking Study was developed by Lighthouse Research & Advisory and commissioned by Adobe. Data points were gathered via online surveys of 2,000 global workers in Q2 2024.

Breakdowns:



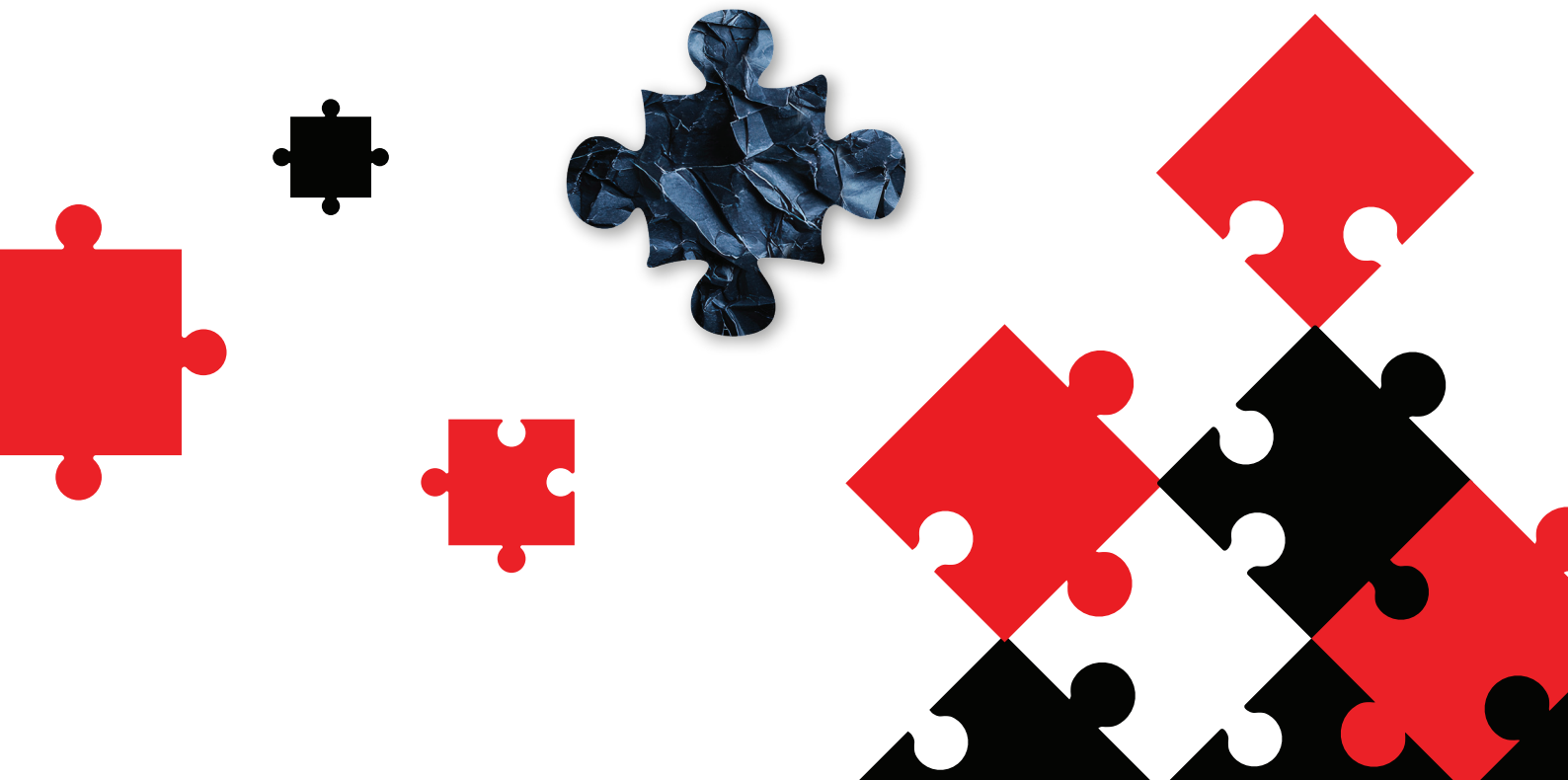
About Lighthouse Research

Lighthouse Research & Advisory is a research and advisory services firm that supports HR technology providers and employers in the talent, learning, and HR disciplines. This firm differentiates itself from other analyst firms through its accessibility, flexibility, and deep understanding of evolving trends and technologies in human capital management. Leveraging global research, an extensive practitioner network, and hands-on experience, Lighthouse offers advisory support, research insights, and compelling content to enhance the intersection of people, technology, and the workplace.

About Adobe

Founded 40 years ago on the simple idea of creating innovative products that change the world, Adobe offers groundbreaking technology that empowers everyone, everywhere to imagine, create, and bring any digital experience to life. Adobe has always been committed to doing the right thing by focusing on people, purpose, and community. This commitment has guided their evolution, and inspired their employees to invent the future and change the world for the better.

[Adobe Learning Manager](#), is an award-winning learning platform from Adobe that offers personalized learning experiences at scale for employees, customers and partners alike. Released in 2015 as Adobe Captivate Prime and then re-branded in 2022 as Adobe Learning Manager, the platform is widely used by leading enterprises, small and medium businesses and non-profits across the world to deliver learning programs to a range of audiences.



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