

The six biggest challenges keeping L&D professionals up at night





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In a world where businesses need to adapt to survive, L&D has never been more important. Working within a turbulent landscape of constant digital transformation, L&D teams are expected to deliver impact at scale, with greater pressure and tighter budgets.

In this ebook, we'll explore six of the most important challenges that are keeping L&D professionals up at night, from how to demonstrate return on investment, to building a learning culture that allows employees to thrive, to using AI tools effectively.

Whether you're part of an L&D team or looking to refine your organization's approach to training, this ebook offers clarity, insight, and practical ways forward. Because sleepless nights don't solve problems, but a strong plan of action does.



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1. Proving return on investment

In an organizational context, L&D isn't done for the sake of it; training is always rolled out with the aim of making learners more knowledgeable and capable, and ultimately driving business success or reducing risk. Coupled with the fact that organizations have limited budgets to spend on training, it's essential to understand whether your learning is providing a return on investment (ROI). Stakeholders understand that L&D costs money, but the outcomes aren't always tangible – especially when nobody is measuring them. Having a plan to evaluate ROI helps businesses to spend their money efficiently and minimize waste.

When thinking about ROI, L&D teams should consider the following:

- Does the learning help the organization to save money?
- Does the learning generate revenue?
- Does the learning improve productivity?
- Does the learning accelerate time-to-competency?
- Does the learning improve retention and reduce turnover?



The important thing to understand here is that ROI will look different for every organization. Some businesses will be looking to maximize cost savings and efficiency, while others will care more about measurable behavior change, for example where it leads to less risk for the business. For most organizations, ROI will involve some combination of these factors, just weighted differently based on their business goals.

For L&D teams, this means understanding how their learning initiatives help the business. Therefore, organizations and their L&D professionals need to identify the outcomes they're hoping for, and how to measure their success.

When you can prove that learning and development have a measurable ROI, it's much easier to get other stakeholders to see the value of L&D, and get them on board with future initiatives. Finally, when you're seen to be solving the business's challenges, it's more likely that L&D will be seen as an essential function, not just a nice-to-have.



Productizing L&D content

While the majority of L&D teams are focused on internal delivery, there's an unorthodox opportunity for improving ROI by productizing your content. If you're in an industry with highly specialized requirements, there will likely be other businesses looking for cost-effective training without the resources to create it in-house. Creating training that is also applicable to other businesses can provide a new revenue channel and allow you to recoup the cost of your training.



CASE STUDY:

Charles River's cost savings

Charles River provides laboratory services to the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device industries.

As they rapidly expanded, they needed a modern LMS to deliver compliance training, develop skills, and enable professional development for over 19,000 employees across 22 countries.

They opted for Totara, working with Totara Partner Actua to create the Charles River Campus.

One of the aims of the project was to reduce costs by replacing their cumbersome training systems and reducing their reliance on face-to-face training.

The rollout of Charles River Campus provided immediate returns:

- The initial launch in Spain **saved ~\$23,500 on training**
- The US launch saved approximately \$250,000 and reduced over 1,000 hours of learning administration
- To date, Charles River has saved over \$11,000,000 with their Totara platform



If you want to hear more about how Charles River measured the cost of their learning and calculated ROI, [check out their webinar on the Totara Community.](#)



2. Demonstrating business value

Proving L&D's return on investment is just one part of the puzzle. To maximize your impact, you need buy-in and engagement from the wider business. This means ensuring that your L&D is aligned with the goals of the business, and that people understand how the work you're doing helps.



Prove the value of L&D [...] while being asked to do twice as much with half as much”

Donald H Taylor



L&D teams are often expected to deliver real change, while dealing with lower budgets and organizational barriers. Here we've outlined some of the key approaches and strategies that enable L&D teams to do more with less.

Get to know your business and its people

First, you need to understand the challenges your business faces, as well as those faced by individuals and teams. While you might be tempted to send out surveys (that will likely struggle to get any traction), the best way to get to know your business is to actually talk to people. Engage in real conversations and listen carefully, and you'll be able to understand the real challenges that L&D can help to solve.





Keep the North Star in sight

While you'll hear a range of perspectives while talking to people across your organization (some of which will conflict), it's important to remember what your business is ultimately trying to achieve. When researching your organization's challenges, think about how they contribute to the overall success of the business, as well as the business's values and mission.

Develop your strategy

Next, you can start to form your strategy:

- What are the problems you're aiming to solve?
- What does success look like?
- How will you measure success and impact?
- How will you get the data you need to measure impact?
- How can you achieve the desired impact?

Of course, this is trickier than it sounds, but it's certainly easier when you have a solid plan of action.

Get stakeholder buy-in

To put your plan into action, you need buy-in from your organization's leaders, managers, and other key stakeholders. It's important that these stakeholders feel heard, and that they're able to share their perspectives and concerns. Having all of the required stakeholders on board will make it easier to get the resources you need to implement successful L&D initiatives and measure their impact.

Measure, iterate and improve

Measuring the ROI of your learning is just the first step in the process; now you need to do something with that information. Understanding ROI helps you to identify what's working, what isn't, and where there is the most room for improvement. With this information in hand, you can adjust your plan, iterating with each subsequent initiative (or even intakes of learners) to improve learning quality and outcomes.

Shout about your success

Once you're delivering impactful learning that's contributing to the business in meaningful ways, it's time to share the good news. When other parts of the business see how L&D is helping them, they'll understand the value and importance of the L&D function. This doesn't just mean using internal comms channels to highlight your successes within the business; you can also share your story publicly via conferences, webinars, or blogs.





CASE STUDY:

PepsiCo's measurable business outcomes

As the second-largest food and beverage company in the world, PepsiCo faced a challenge in delivering training to their global network of employees and resellers. They needed a robust, scalable platform that could replace their costly face-to-face training, providing access to sales training in multiple languages, and in regions with limited connectivity.

Working with Totara Partner Accipio, PepsiCo aimed to deliver a platform that fully aligned with their business goals, and that would deliver measurable impact.

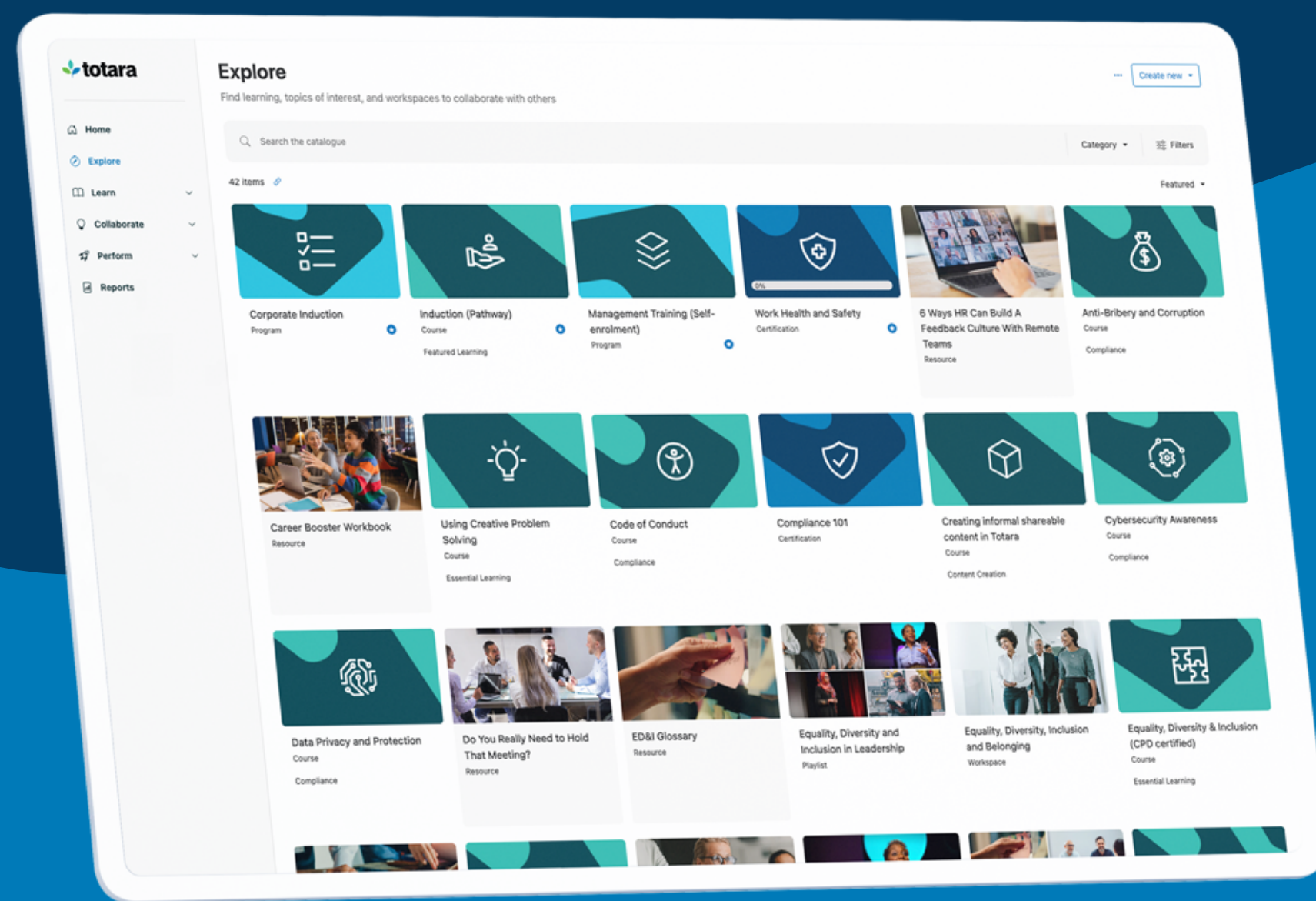
[Their Totara platform](#) solved a number of challenges for their people, and provided multiple important results for the business:

- Boosted training compliance to over 80%
- Benchmarked sales capability to feed into performance management and coaching
- Content delivered in multiple languages across PepsiCo's markets
- Decentralized administration and management via multitenancy
- Estimated savings of over £500,000 compared to their face-to-face training

Importantly, PepsiCo isn't stopping there; they are continually listening to learner feedback in order to iteratively improve the platform and its offering.



3. Fostering learning as a habit



One core part of building your organization's learning culture is making learning a habit, instead of an afterthought. As an L&D team, you understand the importance of the learning you're delivering. But for learners, training is just one of their competing priorities; many learners will want to focus on their core responsibilities, and fit in their training when they can.

Therefore, one of the first challenges is ensuring that learners have ring-fenced time to actually complete their required learning, and better still if they have time to pursue their own professional development. By carving out time from employees' standard responsibilities, managers signal that learning is a priority for the organization. Without this reinforcement, learning can be forgotten and deprioritized.

It's also important for managers to ensure that their teams understand how the learning connects to their job roles, so that they're better able to apply their skills and knowledge.

Next, you need to ensure that your learners know what content is available, and when you launch new content. This should include in-platform discovery, such as Totara's Explore catalogue and recommendations engine, in tandem with marketing via your internal comms channels. When new learning is available, you should be promoting it to learners who may be interested, whether that's via an internal newsletter or signposting on your site's homepage. For this aspect of delivery, L&D professionals need to put on their marketing hats to make sure learners are getting the most out of the resources available.



L&D teams also need to think about how learners want to consume their learning. [As Adam Lacey put it in his recent webinar](#), “think about the formats that make it easy for people to build habits around”. For example, maybe delivering more audio-based content means your teams can learn during their commutes, instead of having to set aside time at a computer.

Finally, making sure learners are able to apply what they’ve learned helps them to understand the value of learning and professional development. When this happens consistently, learners are more likely to seek out further learning opportunities.





CASE STUDY:

Building a culture of learning at easyJet

easyJet, the UK's largest airline, worked with Kineo to update their Totara-based Online Learning Academy (OLA). While a key driver of the project was to make use of Totara's latest features and overhaul their learning content and delivery, they were also looking to change the culture around their learning and development. Specifically, they aimed to curate a culture that would empower, develop, and retain staff, building a resilient workforce with transferable skills.

This was achieved in a few ways. Firstly, the seamless integrations ensured that the platform was embedded in easyJet's ecosystem, allowing learners to jump directly from the OLA into their seminars, and connect to their performance management in easyJet's People Development Hub. Next, they enhanced content discoverability with an advanced tagging tool, making it easier for employees to find relevant content around their busy schedules.

Finally, the rebuild of their content and development of certifications and learning pathways presented the connection between skills development and career progression. There was a clear impact from this shift from obligation to opportunity:

- Seminar attendance more than doubled
- Courses with limited enrollments sold out in less than one week
- **Compliance completion rates increased to 93%**
- E-learning completions increased by more than 6x
- Importantly, PepsiCo isn't stopping there; they are continually listening to learner feedback in order to iteratively improve the platform and its offering.

This new learning culture is helping easyJet to develop talent internally, upskilling their teams for reliable career progression and personal development.

4. Cultivating learning cultures

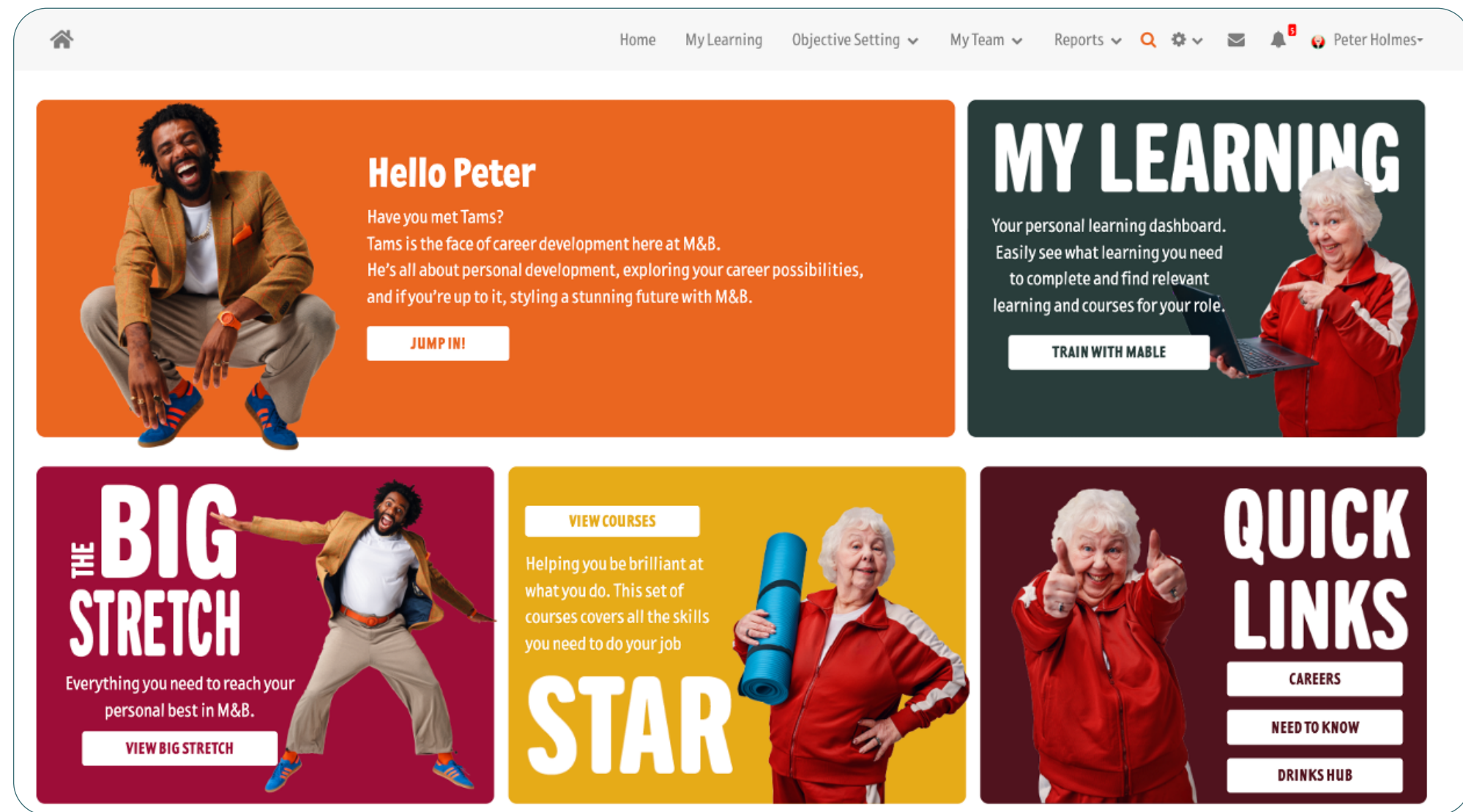
Following on from building learning as a habit in your organization, the next step is to think about the broader culture around learning. This isn't always under the L&D team's control, as organizational culture is heavily influenced from the top down.

However, L&D teams absolutely can (and should) influence the culture of the business, ensuring that people see the value of learning, rather than considering it a necessary evil (think tick-box compliance training).



One strategy that's worked for a number of businesses is running learning-focused events, whether that's a big annual event or regular events throughout the year. These events are a chance for the organization to communicate its commitment to learning and development; if possible, with business leaders adding weight to the message. One goal of these events is to energize learners, and encourage them to be active participants in their own development, rather than passively consuming assigned content.





CASE STUDY:

Social learning at Mitchells and Butlers

Working with Think Learning, Mitchells and Butlers rolled out MABLE, their product-centric LMS. Along with providing more formal product training with role-based learning pathways, one of the core goals of the platform was to foster collaborative and social learning.

The platform's branded workspaces were established to facilitate discussion and knowledge-sharing between learners. Here learners can create and share useful resources and playlists, and engage in asynchronous discussion threads. These social features make learning more engaging, and help to build a strong culture around learning and continuous improvement.



To find out more about how MABLE helped to shape Mitchells and Butlers' culture, check out the [LMS Mixology webinar recording from Think Learning](#).



5. Building psychological safety

One aspect of learning cultures that's often forgotten is the concept of psychological safety. [McKinsey](#) [defines psychological safety](#) as:

“
**The absence of
interpersonal fear”**

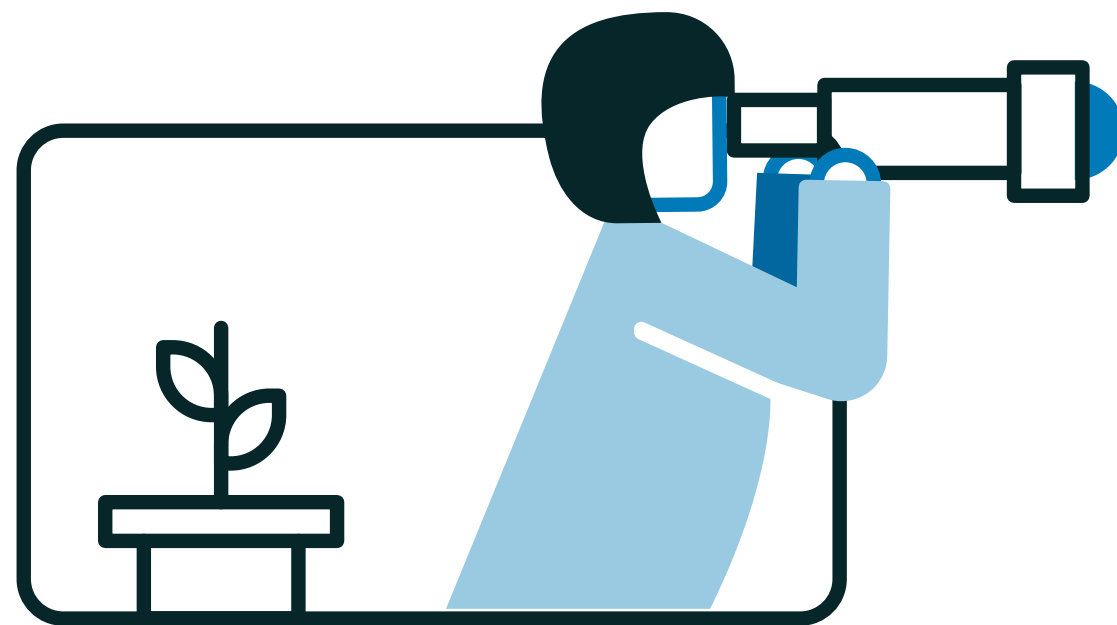
Essentially, when people aren't afraid to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas in the workplace, they'll be able to produce their best work. When learners don't feel psychologically safe, on the other hand, they won't want to share or engage with the content or their peers.

Imagine a trainer-led, in-person session where participants are all terrified to speak up for fear of judgment from their peers. Not only will it be a stressful and uncomfortable experience, it's also not going to be remotely productive.

Therefore it's essential for L&D teams to do what they can to promote a culture that fosters psychological safety for learners. Here are two ideas that organizations can use to do this.



Building psychological safety



Safe space to fail

One of the most powerful ways to build psychological safety is to normalize failure as part of the learning process. When learners don't feel embarrassed to ask 'obvious' questions or experiment, they're far more likely to take ownership of their own development. This means creating a culture in which people can identify room for improvement without blame or shame.



Positive role models

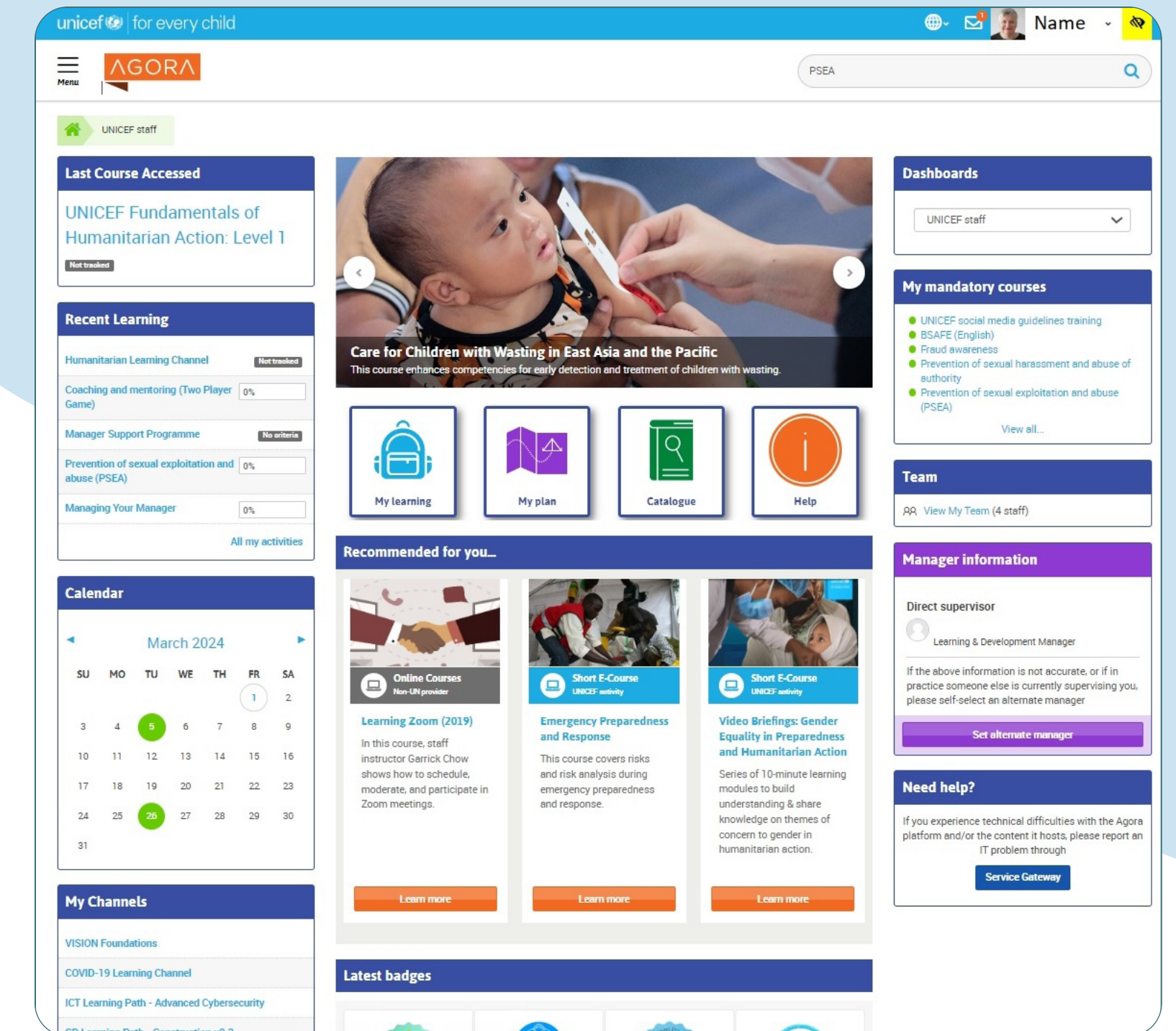
Psychological safety flourishes when there are role models who help to set the tone. That includes being open about their own learning journeys, uncertainties, and even missteps. When learners see respected figures embracing vulnerability, it gives them permission to do the same. As an L&D team, you can identify leaders or employees who are comfortable being vulnerable and open, and see if they're willing to share their stories and model the behaviors you're looking to replicate.



CASE STUDY: UNICEF's Agora platform

UNICEF, The United Nations Children's Fund, works across the world to help children survive and thrive. As an organization with equity and inclusivity at its core, UNICEF needed a platform that would align with the UN's principle of 'Leave No One Behind'.

UNICEF worked with Catalyst to create Agora, a truly equitable and [accessible learning management system](#) built on Totara. At every part of the platform's design and delivery (and in a process of continuous improvement), Agora was shaped by the desire to allow learners to flourish. With a comprehensive accessibility audit, learner-focused design, and great care to cater to learners' needs, the platform is built on a foundation of psychological safety.



Katalin Csoma, Global Learning Platform Lead at UNICEF, highlighted how Agora is “empowering individuals and organizations to unlock their full potential and make a tangible difference in the world” with its “inclusive design”.



6. Embedding AI in learning

Everyone is talking about AI, and businesses are actively trying to optimize their processes using different AI tools. As adoption becomes more widespread, we're seeing L&D professionals using AI as part of their delivery systems in a range of ways:

- Creating, repurposing and improving e-learning content, including text and image generation
- Creating personalized learning pathways at scale without excessive admin burden
- Providing real-time feedback to learners on assessments, challenges and simulations
- Translating and localizing content to make learning more widely accessible
- Analysing data and identifying learning trends

Naturally, there's a lot of excitement as small teams are able to get more done with limited time and budgets, and in turn launch more ambitious L&D initiatives. However, it's important to understand the challenges and pitfalls of working with AI.



Embedding AI in learning



Where to start?

Firstly, L&D professionals aren't sure where to start with AI. It can be tempting to just start experimenting and seeing what works, especially when it feels like you're getting more done with your time. If you use AI tools indiscriminately, costs can accumulate quickly, so it's important to look at where AI can provide the most value.



Overreliance

Another risk is that teams become overreliant on AI tools, to the point where they might present organizational risks. This can include data security vulnerabilities, dependence on tools that will become monetized over time, and L&D professionals not keeping their own skills sharp as AI does their work for them.



Losing the human touch

One issue with AI content is that it loses the human touch, and often lacks a unique voice. Where tools such as large language models (LLMs) effectively aggregate content from across the internet, the resulting output can often be a bit 'beige' or bland. For L&D professionals, this can lead to reduced engagement. [One study by Bynder](#) found that 50% of participants could correctly identify AI-generated content, and a majority of participants said they'd feel less engaged if they even suspected the content wasn't created by a human. Even if the quality isn't affected, the perception of AI involvement and inauthenticity can be off-putting for learners. learning systems to incorporate other sophisticated analytics capabilities, including tools for predictive and prescriptive analysis.



New AI features in Totara

Totara 19.1 introduces a suite of new AI features for Site Administrators, Course Creators, and learners:

- AI writing assistant
- AI image generation
- Informal AI check-in quizzes
- AI-assisted goal-setting

Find out more about [Totara's AI plugins](#), or check the [Totara roadmap](#) to see what's coming next.



[Check out this webinar clip](#) that shows how MaibornWolff are developing an AI Learning Assistant that sits within their LMS.



CASE STUDY:

AI at MaibornWolff

MaibornWolff provides digital consultancy across the globe and across industries. Continuous learning and development is an essential component of their mission to drive excellence and innovation in their solutions.

As well as centralizing their learning delivery in a single platform, MaibornWolff has been working with Totara Partner LearnChamp to integrate AI into their platform. So far, they've started using AI-driven insights and recommendations to create personalized learning experiences for their teams. As Totara continues to add further AI-driven integrations and features, the platform will continue to evolve, fully embedding AI into their adaptive learning pathways.





Learning from others

Getting the most out of your learning technology investments can be a challenge. But with open dialogue and collaboration we can make the experience more effective. One way is to learn from your peers.

Join thousands of learning professionals in the [Totara Community](#), and tap into their experience of involved in buying and using learning technologies that include platforms, authoring tools, content and other learning-related products and services. It's open for all and could help shape how you build and sustain your extended enterprise learning service.

With free digital training on Totara products and best practice in learning and development, plus discussion forums and regular online events, the Community is your one-stop-shop for support and collaboration.

To learn more about how Totara is supporting organizations with open technology solutions there is an extensive database of [customer stories](#) from all sectors freely available for you to review.



Want to see how Totara helps solve the L&D challenges keeping you up at night?

Get started with a no-obligation demo today.

[Book a demo](#)

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