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## Getting from 70-20-10 to Continuous Learning

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Learning and development (L&D) departments are in a constant struggle to ensure workers have the right knowledge and skills to keep their organizations competitive. Over the last 30 years or so, the 70-20-10 learning development model has found its way into the repertoire of almost all L&D professionals, shaping corporate learning to some extent. However, for all the good this model has done, L&D functions should now consider moving past 70-20-10 to a more holistic and externally focused continuous learning approach.

*This research bulletin discusses:*

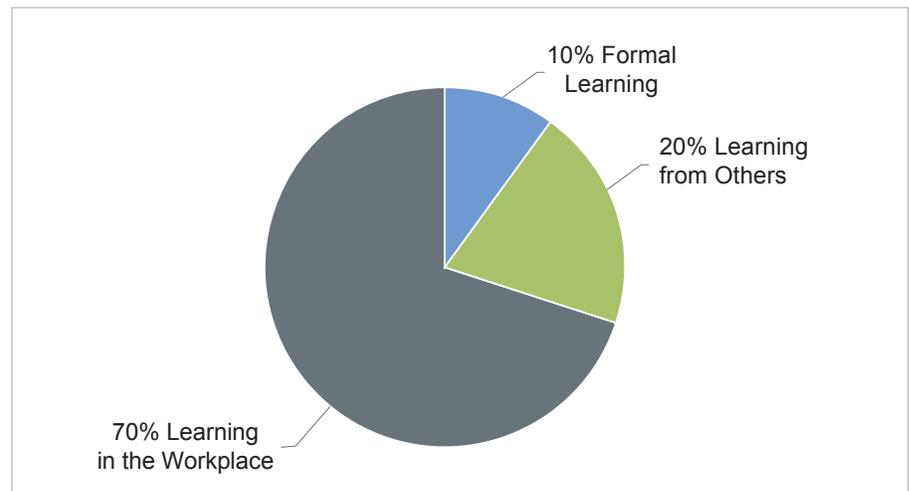
- How the 70-20-10 approach is falling short
- How a continuous learning model can more effectively serve the needs of learners and organizations
- How organizations can move from 70-20-10 to continuous learning

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## What's Wrong with 70-20-10?

The 70-20-10 approach is a model of development in which 70 percent of learning happens in the workplace through practice and on-the-job experiences; 20 percent comes through other people via coaching, feedback, and networking; and 10 percent is delivered through formal learning interventions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The 70-20-10 Learning Model



Source: Bersin by Deloitte, 2014.

The true origins of this model are a bit obscure. By most accounts, it was developed by Morgan McCall, Robert W. Eichinger, and Michael M. Lombardo in conjunction with the Center for Creative Leadership during the 1980s<sup>1</sup> and formalized in the book *The Career Architect Development Planner, 3rd Edition*, in 2000. The concept is also attributed to a 1998 Bureau of Labor Statistics report referencing research from 1993 to 1994 that suggests people learn 70 percent of their job skills informally.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Allen Tough has also been credited with the original idea as described in his 1979 book *The Adult's Learning Projects*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Source: "Learning Philosophy," Princeton University Human Resources, June 21, 2011, [www.princeton.edu/hr/learning/philosophy/](http://www.princeton.edu/hr/learning/philosophy/).

<sup>2</sup> Source: *Informal Training: A Review of Existing Data and Some New Evidence*, U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics / Mark A. Loewenstein and James R. Spletzer, June 1994, [www.bls.gov/ore/abstract/ec/ec940090.htm](http://www.bls.gov/ore/abstract/ec/ec940090.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Source: *The Adult's Learning Projects: A Fresh Approach to Theory and Practice in Adult Learning*, Allen Tough / Pfeiffer & Co., April 1979.



## KEY POINT

Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support its use, 70-20-10 has shaped the way we design corporate learning to a large extent.

More startling than its unclear history, however, is the lack of empirical data supporting this approach. In a DeakinPrime white paper entitled *Demystifying 70:20:10*<sup>4</sup>, authors Kelly Kajewski and Valerie Madsen conclude:

*“From our review it is clear that there is a lack of empirical data supporting 70:20:10 and, while the above mentioned sources are frequently credited, there is also a lack of certainty about the origin.”*

Despite this lack of evidence, the 70-20-10 learning development model has been the common-sense rule of thumb utilized by L&D practitioners for the last few decades. In fact, L&D is steeped in the ways of this approach. Learning assets are regularly classified using this model, learning programs are built to it, and discussions abound concerning the right metrics to use to track the elusive 70 percent of the model. To a large extent, 70-20-10 has shaped the way we design corporate learning.

However, in our conversations with L&D organizations, we’re seeing that this model can only go so far in aiding development before it begins to hamper progress. The decreasing effectiveness of 70-20-10 happens for three main reasons:

- 1. L&D functions often use this approach prescriptively.** Many L&D departments tend to take this model too literally, using it as a guideline for the overall mix of their learning portfolio. The 70-20-10 formula is often applied regardless of learner needs, industry, or management level.
- 2. The focus of this model is internal.** Focusing on a 70-20-10 formula can lead to loss of perspective. The goal of L&D is not to provide training in (or to divide training programs into) these three quantities; rather, the goal is to develop worker knowledge and skills that will make the organization more competitive. Additionally, 70-20-10 places an emphasis on *what* is being created rather than on *how* people are being developed.

<sup>4</sup> Source: “Demystifying 70:20:10,” DeakinPrime / Kelly Kajewski and Valerie Madsen, June 2013, [http://deakinprime.com/media/47821/002978\\_dpwp\\_70-20-10wp\\_v01\\_fa.pdf](http://deakinprime.com/media/47821/002978_dpwp_70-20-10wp_v01_fa.pdf).



## KEY POINT

The 70-20-10 model encourages an L&D-centric perspective that hinders the development of learners—and therefore organizations—over time.



## DEFINITION

Continuous learning is defined as “structuring resources, expectations, and learning culture in such a way as to encourage employees to learn continuously throughout their tenure with the organization.”

3. **A 70-20-10 approach can isolate L&D and take responsibility off other stakeholders.** This type of model often isolates L&D, making it responsible for the creation, delivery, and success of learning initiatives without providing for collaboration with other pertinent stakeholders, such as line management, HR, talent management, and even learners themselves.

Our intent here is not to disparage any of the great work organizations have done implementing a 70-20-10 model or any of the successes they have seen as a result. In fact, in its purest form, we don't think 70-20-10 is a bad idea. This concept has helped L&D departments move from a fully formal approach to training and development to one that acknowledges and utilizes other resources to help workers improve their capabilities.

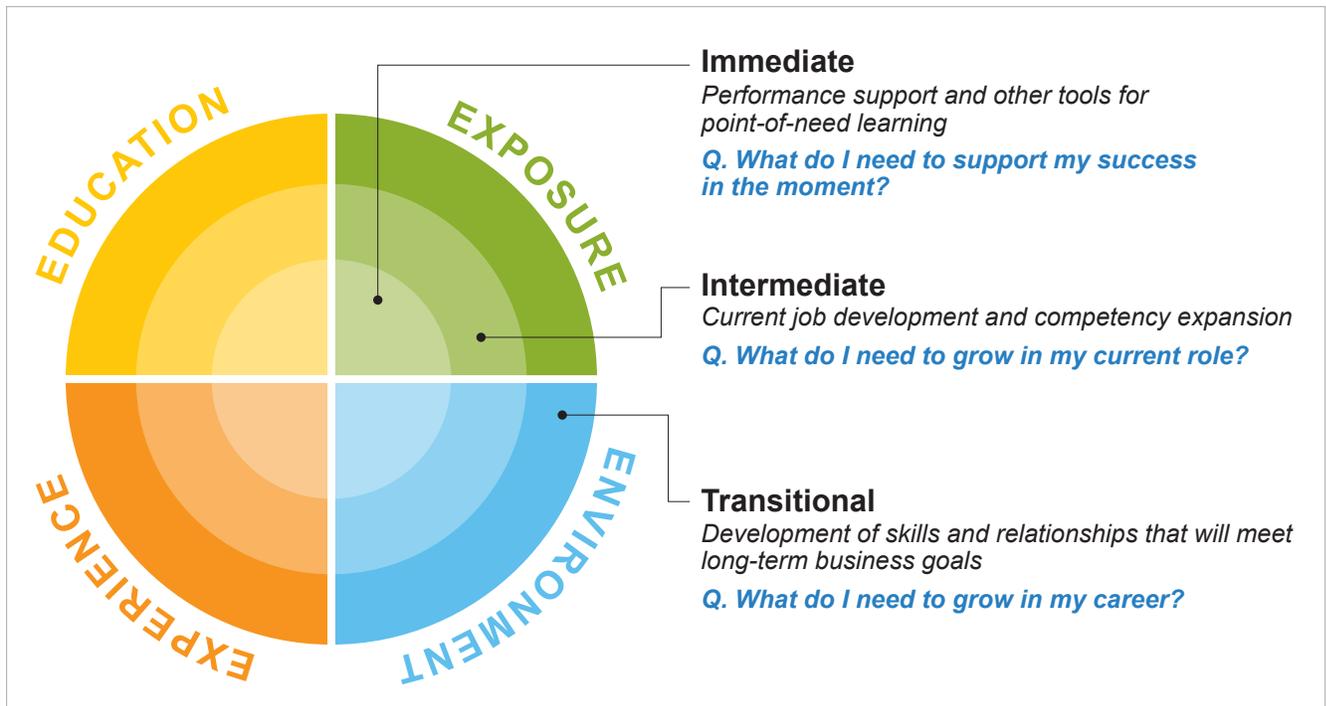
We do think, however, that this model encourages an L&D-centric perspective that hinders the development of learners—and therefore organizations—over time. We think there is a better way to encourage the correct mindset and make it easier for L&D to focus on both business priorities and the learner experience. This approach is referred to as “continuous learning.”

## What Is Continuous Learning?

Continuous learning is defined as “structuring resources, expectations, and learning culture in such a way as to encourage employees to learn continuously throughout their tenure with the organization.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, unlike traditional training, continuous learning considers learning to be a process rather than a series of programs (see our Continuous Learning Model, Figure 2).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, *The Learning Architecture: Defining Development and Enabling Continuous Learning*, Bersin by Deloitte / David Mallon and Dani Johnson, May 2014. Available to research members at [www.bersin.com/library](http://www.bersin.com/library).

Figure 2: The Continuous Learning Model



Source: Bersin by Deloitte, 2013.

All seasoned L&D professionals know employees learn constantly and in many different ways. In fact, this is what spawned the 70-20-10 learning model in the first place. Our Continuous Learning Model takes the reality of constant learning into account in two ways:

- 1. The model accounts for different types of learner needs.** For example, not all needs require a 30-minute e-learning course. Our model classifies needs into three main categories, represented by the concentric circles shown in Figure 2<sup>6</sup>:

<sup>6</sup> We should clarify that these three categories do not indicate skill level. While those at a higher management level may find that more of their development activities are transitional, the model is descriptive, not prescriptive. Employees at all levels should find themselves jumping between all of these categories. This model allows all stakeholders—workers, line management, L&D, and talent management—to take stock of available activities and tailor learning and development opportunities based on their own interests, as well as business needs.

- o **Immediate.** What learners need to be successful in their jobs right now.
  - o **Intermediate.** What learners need to progress in their current positions, expand their competencies, and develop their own career interests.
  - o **Transitional.** What learners need to meet long-term business goals or systemic jumps (such as a new role or a career shift).
2. **The model describes paradigms, or contexts, in which employees learn.** Not all learning happens (or should happen) within the walls of a classroom. Our Continuous Learning Model addresses four paradigms, referred to as the “Four Es”:
- o **Education** encompasses elements we often think of in the context of learning and development. These elements generally have a defined beginning and end, and can be tracked.
  - o **Experience** includes elements that generally occur while employees are in the workplace and may include things such as stretch assignments, job rotations, and special projects.
  - o **Exposure** comprises learning elements that involve interaction and relationships. It helps employees develop by building connections with other professionals and thought leaders.
  - o **Environment** covers tools, systems, and other infrastructure employees use on the job to learn or support them in their work.

This emphasis on different types of learning needs and the paradigms or contexts in which employees learn gives a continuous learning model some distinct advantages over the 70-20-10 approach, such as:

- **Focusing externally and holistically on how people are being developed.** While 70-20-10 focuses on what L&D produces, the purpose of the continuous learning model is to view learning through the context of the four Es described earlier and to manage those paradigms to ensure consistent learning over an employee’s tenure with the organization.

- **Emphasizing the learning experience.** Instead of focusing on assets, the continuous learning model addresses the learning experience as a whole and provides the right kinds of learning approaches for specific learners at specific points in time in their careers. Continuous learning moves away from thinking programmatically altogether and allows for personalization in learning experiences.
- **Insisting on collaboration.** Instead of relying only on L&D to produce, deliver, and measure all learning and development, continuous learning involves all stakeholders, including L&D, line management, learners themselves, and the organization as a whole. Continuous learning is about ensuring everyone is on the same page about the organization's learning culture, processes, inputs, and outputs.
- **Providing expectations and priorities that are descriptive rather than prescriptive.** A well-defined continuous learning model offers L&D, the organization, and learners with a map for development. It sets expectations and priorities but does not generally prescribe some types of learning over others.

Adopting a continuous learning model can change the focus of an L&D department from internal to external; from learning assets to learning experiences; from isolation to collaboration; and from prescriptive to descriptive. But how do organizations move from 70-20-10 to continuous learning?

### Moving to a Continuous Learning Model

Moving from a 70-20-10 model to a continuous learning approach will require effort and change on the part of both L&D and the rest of the organization. The good news is there is incentive for all stakeholders to evolve the learning model. The other good news is that this evolution does not have to happen all at once. Changes in mindset and culture take time. We recommend beginning with three relatively small actions:

1. Claim responsibility for organizational learning.
2. Change your vocabulary and mindset.
3. Involve and coordinate with stakeholders outside of L&D.

## ★ LEADING PRACTICE

L&D should see itself as the enabler for all learning within the organization.



## KEY POINT

L&D should begin to speak of “enabling” learning instead of “delivering” it.

## Claim Responsibility for Organizational Learning

L&D professionals have a good handle on the learning they are responsible for creating and distributing (items that generally fall into the **education** and **environment** quadrants) but often are not much involved in developing or accounting for learning that happens in the **experience** or **exposure** quadrants.

What’s more, business units and functions often seek and purchase their own learning solutions. This siloing often means L&D is not even aware of all the educational activities happening within their organization. Claiming responsibility begins with taking stock of what learning and development is happening whether L&D is currently responsible for it or not.

We are not suggesting that L&D wrestle mentoring programs away from the talent management function if that is where those programs currently reside. We know not all learning management and development will fall under the stewardship of L&D. However, unless L&D understands the learning opportunities available within all four quadrants and in all areas of the company, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish continuous learning as a functional idea. L&D should see itself as the enabler for all learning within the organization.

## Change Your Vocabulary and Mindset

Our second recommendation is to begin speaking about learning differently. This applies both within the L&D department and in communication with the larger organization. Replace terms such as *70-20-10*, *formal*, and *informal* with vocabulary such as *continuous learning*, *learner experience*, *education*, *experience*, *exposure*, and *environment*. L&D should begin to speak of “enabling” learning instead of “delivering” it.

Changing language can go a long way to helping an organization think differently about the role of L&D and learning. For example, when we say *formal learning*, L&D professionals most likely think about classroom training, e-learning, or simulations. Under the 70-20-10 model, L&D professionals attempt to ensure no more than 10 percent of the learning portfolio falls within this category. However, if we reorganize learning approaches into the paradigms introduced by the continuous learning model, new possibilities open up (as shown in Figures 3, 4, and 5).

Figure 3: Traditionally “Formal” Learning Approaches and Alignment with the Four Es

	Education	Experience	Exposure	Environment
Instructor-Led Training (ILT) / Classroom Training	ILT / classroom training is the most traditional of L&D offerings. It plays an important role in providing key information and teaching key skills.	Reflection activities, journaling, and management check-ins can be built into classroom training to extend the learning experience and make it applicable on the job.	Executive education can be considered classroom training but also exposes employees to new ideas and the latest from thought leaders and peers in other organizations.	
e-Learning	In the past, e-learning has fallen into the “formal” training bucket. As part of the education component of L&D, it can be used to provide consistent information across large audiences.			Short e-learning courses can be created and used as a part of asset libraries.
Virtual Classrooms	Virtual classrooms can provide formal instruction to smaller, geographically dispersed audiences.	Virtual classrooms can be collaboration tools for employees in similar job functions to learn from each other and share leading practices.		
Simulations	Simulations fall primarily in the education bucket. Whether in the classroom or online, simulations provide a safe environment in which learners can practice new skills and apply new knowledge.			

Source: Bersin by Deloitte, 2014.

Figure 4: Traditionally “Informal” or “Coaching / Mentoring” Learning Approaches and Alignment with the Four Es

	Education	Experience	Exposure	Environment
Job Aids				Job aids and desk procedures can help newer employees to gain their footing in the beginning. They can also be used for reference throughout their tenure.
Digital Asset Libraries	Animations, videos, and handouts generated as a part of an ILT or e-learning course can be repurposed as part of a digital asset library.			As with job aids, digital asset libraries can be used to provide short, uniform instruction on how to accomplish certain tasks.
Communities of Practice		Communities of practice provide opportunities for employees to give and receive feedback on challenges they face in their positions.	Communities of practice provide opportunities to network and learn from those within similar industries or functions.	
Professional Organizations			Participation in professional organizations exposes employees to the latest in leading practices and thought leadership. It also encourages employees to connect with others in their field who they can then go to for help when needed.	
Mentoring / Coaching		Coaching from supervisors on the job facilitates learning.	Mentors provided via formal mentoring programs are a way to both build workers’ learning networks within an organization and borrow mentors’ networks for growth experiences.	

Source: Bersin by Deloitte, 2014.

Figure 5: Traditionally “On-the-Job” Learning Approaches and Alignment with the Four Es

	Education	Experience	Exposure	Environment
Stretch Assignments		Stretch assignments provide opportunities for workers to gain on-the-job experience for their current role, as well as to prepare for future roles.	Stretch assignments often require workers to move outside their comfort zone and create new connections that will help them in their development.	
Job Rotations		Job rotations, particularly through different organizational functions, give workers new perspectives.		
Search Engines / Social Media / Discussion Groups	Search engines, social media, and discussion groups can be integrated into existing formal education to extend the learning experience and help employees to build professional networks.	Discussion groups and social media can be leveraged in communities of practice to develop workers in their current assignments.	Professional social media groups can be leveraged to help workers build networks and expose them to the latest thinking.	Learning management systems (LMSs) and other delivery platforms can incorporate search, social media, and discussion groups to help learners find what they need when they need it.
Shadowing		Job shadowing mentors or others can expose workers to new roles and help to transfer knowledge.	Job shadowing can help workers build their networks.	
Checklists and Competency Models	Checklists and competency models can be introduced using formal training and reinforced through experience and exposure.	Checklists and competency models can provide structure for the development of workers within a specific job. They also provide a vehicle for guidance and feedback, as well as corrective actions when needed.		Checklists and competency models can be made available as reference tools.

Source: Bersin by Deloitte, 2014.

While these three figures are not comprehensive, they do show how a change in mindset away from the categories set forth by 70-20-10 can give L&D professionals new options to enable continuous learning. For example, learning approaches can be utilized in more than one paradigm or context; learning assets, software, or infrastructure can serve more than one purpose; and L&D professionals may be better able to understand how to create holistic and targeted solutions that serve both learners and the organization.

### Involve and Coordinate with Stakeholders Outside of L&D

Our final recommendation for shifting from a 70-20-10 learning model to a continuous learning approach is to involve and coordinate with stakeholders. This is crucial, as L&D cannot be everywhere and does not have direct supervision over all learning activities. In essence, it “takes a village” to train workers.

While L&D should take responsibility for overall organizational learning, this does not mean they must execute everything by themselves. They should seek input from several functions and coordinate with other groups in order to make these changes happen. For example:

- **Line management** has a large role to play when it comes to learning approaches that fall into the exposure and experience paradigms. Line managers are also an excellent source of information concerning the types of knowledge and skills that should be developed to meet business needs.
- **Talent management** often owns several of the programs that fall under the experience and exposure paradigms. L&D should be aware of these programs, how they fit within continuous learning, and what kinds of supporting learning activities should be available to complete these learning experiences.
- **Organizational executives and leaders** are responsible for setting the strategy for the business. Understanding that strategy and the challenges facing the business in the next five years will help to guide L&D as it fills out its portfolio.
- **Employees** should assume much more of the responsibility for their own development. This means L&D should understand learners’



#### KEY POINT

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**KEY POINT**

As stakeholders and L&D begin to communicate and cooperate using a continuous learning approach, L&D departments should be able to better align their goals and meet expectations.

needs, motivations, goals, and habits, and should craft continuous learning experiences so employees receive the guidance they need and are able to find resources when they need them.

One final thought about the involvement of stakeholders in continuous learning: Papers, blogs, and even our own statistics indicate that there is a lack of trust between the majority of these stakeholders and L&D departments. For whatever reason, most organizations feel L&D has done a poor job of meeting their needs.

We feel this perception might exist because of a misalignment in goals and expectations rather than due to any incompetency on the part of L&D. Using an explicitly stated and widely adopted continuous learning model can help to change this disconnect. As stakeholders and L&D begin to communicate and cooperate using the common language and structure that a continuous learning model offers, L&D departments should be able to better align their goals with the larger goals of the business and better meet expectations.

**Conclusion**

Too many L&D departments that we speak with are still struggling to get beyond formal training methods. As helpful as 70-20-10 has been to get L&D to think differently about their role, it isn't enough. Its L&D-centric focus, emphasis on assets and programs, and tendency to isolate L&D prevent it from being truly useful as companies face today's business challenges.

Learning leaders should consider a different, more continuous learning model that offers many advantages, including its external focus, its collaborative nature, and its emphasis on the learning experience.

To move to a continuous model, L&D departments should focus on consciously owning and coordinating learning in the organization—whether they have direct stewardship over a given area or not. Additionally, they should begin to modify their mindset and vocabulary, becoming familiar with and using terms that help L&D professionals think more broadly about learning. Finally, they should also involve other key stakeholders in creating and delivering learning in the organization.



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The 70-20-10 learning and development model is inadequate for today's business environment and presents several challenges to continued development and growth within an organization.

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- Shifting from a 70-20-10 learning and development model to a continuous learning approach offers a more comprehensive, holistic, and outwardly focused mindset that better allows L&D to meet business needs.

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- To adopt a continuous learning model, L&D departments must do three things:
  1. Take ownership of organizational learning—not just formal training.
  2. Shift vocabulary and mindset to align with continuous learning.
  3. Coordinate with stakeholders outside of the L&D organization, including line management, HR, talent management, and learners themselves, involving them in the learning process.

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