Demystifying the Modern Learner

How technology and new learning preferences are shaping modern-day learning
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Preface

2014 was an important year for many learning professionals with the publication of the seminal report “Meet the Modern Learner” by Josh Bersin and his team at Bersin by Deloitte. This report, which focused on how to engage the overwhelmed, distracted, and impatient employee, has been a must-read for anyone involved in the strategic development of talent.

Three years on, the findings of the report still hold true. HR and Learning professionals are still struggling to develop compelling and engaging learning programs for the Modern Learner.

Demystifying the Modern Learner is the first of a series of eBooks, associated webinars, and supporting material that Learnlight has produced to help shed more light on this subject. These insights will assist HR, Talent, and Learning professionals to harness the latest in learning technologies and instructional design to one clear end: how to design persuasive content that enhances learner engagement.
Now, look around your workspace and search for the following signs: Anyone surfing the internet, in any way, three times per hour in the working day. A colleague who hates online videos longer than four minutes. The person at the next desk who looks at their smartphone dozens of times per hour. Now let’s take our exercise in human behavior a little closer to home. If you can bear some self-analysis, take a close look at yourself. Are you:

1. Likely to work away from your office desk at some point in a working week?
2. Prone to solving on-the-spot problems by accessing your smartphone for solutions?
3. Likely to learn more from search engines than books, manuals or human interaction with colleagues?
4. Likely to share your new facts or skills with someone else?
5. Thinking of sourcing your own training, and even paying for it yourself?
6. Looking for a progression route to a promotion or a new job?

This questionnaire is a simple one to analyze. If you matched any of the descriptions or said ‘yes’ to any of the above questions, then you are possibly a ‘Modern Learner’. Even though you may never have heard this term before, a ‘Modern Learner’ is staring right back at you every time you look in a mirror!

Modern Learning is a revolution in personal development, and its proponents are, in their own way, ‘Learning Revolutionaries’.

Whatever age you are, it’s increasingly likely that you are a tech-savvy, eager learner, who relishes the ability to freely connect with your colleagues, managers and other experts within your organization. If we apply these behaviors to your approach to training, you probably expect accessible, interactive learning experiences anytime, anywhere and on any device. To understand the Modern Learner, we can look at four key indicators.

**The Modern Learner is Connected**

Modern Learning is fueled by digital apps, tools and social networks. Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, and the rest of the growing social media family, let us connect with peers, discover news, and share information.

It is unsurprising that this expectation for easy interactivity has seeped into our expectations at work, meaning that we expect, even demand, the same level of interactivity in our workplace. The modern learning environment is one that understands the importance of technology and social networking in developing talent.
The Modern Learner
Impatient, Distracted and Overwhelmed

**IMPATIENT**
Most learners won’t watch videos longer than 4 minutes.
Website designers now have between 5 and 10 seconds to grab someone’s attention before they click away.

**DISTRACTED**
27 times online every day.
People unlock their smartphone up to 9 times every hour.
Workers now get interrupted as frequently as every 5 minutes, often by work applications and collaboration tools.
Knowledge workers are constantly distracted with millions of websites, apps, and video clips.

**OVERWHELMED**
Workers spend 41% of their time on things that offer little personal satisfaction and do not help them get work done.
2/3 of knowledge workers actually complain that they don’t have time to do their jobs.

**UNTETHERED**
37% of the global workforce is now “mobile”
30% of full-time employees do most of their work somewhere other than the employer’s location
20% of workforce comprised of temps, contractors, and freelancers

**COLLABORATIVE**
80% of workforce learning happens via on-the-job interactions with peers, teammates and managers

Learners are:
- asking other people
- sharing what they know
- at Google, 55%

70%+ of workforce learning happens via on-the-job interactions with peers, teammates and managers

**ON-DEMAND**
To learn what they need for their jobs, employees access:

**EMPOWERED**
Half-life (in years) of many professional skills

2 1/2 to 5

38% of workers who say they have opportunities for learning and growth at their workplace
62% of IT professionals who report having paid for training out of their own pockets

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The Modern Learner is Always On

Technology has given employees 24/7 access to information, and smartphones have become their go-to sidekicks. Employees can access anything they want through their mobile devices, so why shouldn't they be able to access educational content, videos and other information about their roles and internal processes via their mobile devices as well?

Businesses should offer easy access to learning programs via mobile devices, and give employees control over when and how they access content and knowledge-sharing collaboration tools.

The Modern Learner Has a Short Attention Span

To use vernacular from the early 1980s, when music TV channels poured forth fast-cut music promo videos on a hungry young audience, Modern Learners exhibit all the signs of the 'MTV Generation'.

However, these days it isn't the latest music video which is shortening attention spans. It's the constant consumption, of information via devices and platforms that have made them so short. The average attention span in North America dropped from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2015, thanks in large part to smartphones.1

Smartphones are allowing employees to consume information continuously, but those shorter attention spans make it more difficult for them to focus on a single task for a prolonged period. The odds that your employees will filter out all outside distractions to engage with an in-depth learning course are increasingly small.

The Modern Learner is Hungry for Information

Whether it’s analysis, techniques or simple hacks/tips, there is a demanding mind, hungry for insight, at the core of the Modern Learner. This hunger is only going to increase as new digital tools and platforms enter the mix.

The definition of the Modern Learner is like learning itself: a simple enough concept, but once you get under the skin, it is complex, multi-faceted and challenging. What we can say for certain is that Modern Learning is a revolution in personal development, and its proponents are, in their own way, 'Learning Revolutionaries'.

The real challenge isn’t in understanding the Modern Learner’s needs; it is in accommodating them. Deloitte's research gives us a single piece of data which throws this challenge into sharp relief.

1% The percentage of the working week available to an average employee for training and development.2

That’s 24 minutes in a 40-hour working week to develop talent. This is where the Modern Learner lives; in the narrow gap where technology curiosity and a hunger for information are fighting a monochromatic culture intent on squeezing learning into a tiny box. It sounds like we need that revolution after all!

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1 Oracle, Meet the Modern Learner: 4 Reasons Your Learning Programs Need to Change 2015
2 Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner Infographic
The Modern Learner: Fiction vs Reality

For many, learning happens in the classroom, in the training suite or in the lecture theatre, but anyone involved in teaching or training will agree in part with this simple premise: Learning takes place in a space that doesn’t exist in the physical sense. It occurs in the spaces where people fail, then want to find out why, or where people are motivated to progress. Learning can only take place when someone wants to learn, and they are given the means to connect with new ideas.

Technology for Technology’s Sake

Back in the mid-2000s, schools throughout the UK were equipped with ‘interactive white boards’, seemingly overnight, and at enormous cost to the public purse. This exciting new technology was hailed as a revolution in classroom teaching techniques.

The reality is that younger workers today are much like their counterparts of 10, 25, and even 50 years ago. However, with technology in schools costing an estimated £623 million in 2015 alone, research carried out by Instructure, a cloud-based education platform, suggests that thousands of pounds worth of technology could be lying around unused in every school.³

Visit schools today and the technology is still there, but if we look at the proportion of students achieving top grades at the age of 16, the numbers are up in some subjects, the same in a few and equally down in others.⁴

Many believe that it’s a myth that this technology was worth the investment. Arguably the most successful educational establishments have the best classroom content because of engaging teaching. Teachers who can connect with their audience by relating the lessons through language, context and delivery method are always the best.

Cross-Generational Stereotypes

Let’s introduce another myth, and this one is a cross-generational stereotype. More senior members of the workforce often believe that new starters or junior team members are less motivated, less focused, and take work less seriously.

The reality is that younger workers today are much like their counterparts of 10, 25, and even 50 years ago, only they are much more adept at ‘Snapchatting’. According to research by IBM, they want to make a positive impact, help solve social and environmental challenges, and work with diverse colleagues. They are in fact much like the middle-aged workers who might misjudge them.⁵

How about the stereotype about Millennials having less focus on ethics, goals and professional skills? Traditional employers have been increasingly concerned about employing ‘Generation Y’ candidates perhaps because of their new digital skill sets and super-fast aptitude in absorbing information from digital sources.

Ambition isn’t a young person’s exclusive right and Modern Learning isn’t restricted to that energetic demographic

Any development manager working with new graduate recruits will disappoint myth fans with the real story, which is that Millennials are no different in their will to do well and progress than the baby boomer generation. Half a decade of technological revolution hasn’t quenched the thirst of ambition; it has simply given it a new way of drinking in all the required input, information, and training on offer.

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³ The Telegraph, 24-11-15 ‘Classroom technology ‘rarely used’ by half of teachers’
⁴ Gov.uk Statistics: GCSEs (key stage 4)
⁵ Learning Solutions Magazine, Portrait of the Modern Learner
⁶ The Guardian, Why employers worry about recruiting Generation Y
It's a fair bet that many of these myths, fictions and stereotypes come from less fresh-faced workers. Middle-aged professionals are less likely to change jobs than younger workers, who might change employer three times in their 20s alone. It's a prospect that would have 40-somethings indulging in some good old-fashioned fear of change.

The bottom line is that there isn't that much of a difference across generations in what they want out of work. Ambition isn't a young person's exclusive right and Modern Learning isn't restricted to that energetic demographic. Unlike the whiteboard revolution, the Modern Learning phenomenon would seem to be a naturally occurring one and the simple result of a decade of exciting new Information Technologies.

**Five Generations Now Occupy the Modern Workplace**

Stereotypes and fiction aside, it's important to note two important differences between today's workforce and the employees of the past:

According to the Harvard Business Review, IBM Institute for Business Value, and others, an unprecedented five generations are staffing today's workplace. It’s also becoming increasingly common for younger employees to be in positions of leadership over older employees.

Additionally, Modern Learners of all ages have vastly different expectations of their training and digital content than workers had ten, or even five, years ago. Managers and instructional designers should keep the needs of this varied, multigenerational workforce in mind when designing eLearning programs; they also must tailor training to meet Modern Learners' expectations.

Modern Learners represent an evolutionary step, with the missing link in this metaphor played by a number of protagonists. For the Modern Learner their version of the “whiteboard”, whether it be an iPhone, laptop, or even the good old-fashioned paper and ink book, should be filled with relevant content that connects with their needs in an engaging way.

The ideas and lessons held within that content should demonstrably hold the potential to positively impact their working life by enabling them to progress, be promoted and move on to their next challenge.

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7 The Independent, In the War between Millennials and baby boomers we have forgotten about the work-hard,play hard generation X
8 Learning Solutions Magazine, Portrait of a Modern Learner, April 2017
Is Instructor-Led Training Now Extinct in the Age of the Modern Learner?

The temptation with any revolution in technology or human thinking is to jump in feet first and throw out everything that has gone before, like instructor-led training. History provides a sage reminder that this is flawed thinking. E-Readers haven’t heralded the death of print, because there are clear advantages to scanning text on paper. Ask any proofreader, and they will happily tell you about the benefits of paper over the screen. Grumpy parents will tell us that text communication and social media are destroying interpersonal communication, but people still successfully talk on a face-to-face basis, just as they did before. Even teenagers still know how to speak with each other. So before we go any further let’s clarify that Modern Learning does not make instructor-led learning a thing of the past. Here’s why:

Social Learning
People today socialize in a much more diverse way than they did twenty years ago, making use of pocket technology to supplement the old-fashioned face-to-face approach. It’s a merging or mashing-up of methods that are evolving right in front of us, but the truth is that people will always enjoy and crave ‘real’ social interaction.

…saw how learners comprehended new information and skills more effectively when watching someone else demonstrating the information or performing the skill.

Albert Bandura, Professor Emeritus of Social Science in Psychology at Stanford University, has a few useful ideas about this. As one of the world’s most cited psychologists, his views are well respected and, even to the layman, they make a lot of sense. His original theories centered on the learner’s physical presence within a social learning environment, such as a classroom, and the principles of social learning theory can still be applied to the world of online social networks.9

Dr Bandura saw how learners comprehended new information and skills more effectively when watching someone else demonstrating the information or performing the skill. Many of us know this by the vernacular ‘learning by doing’ and it’s a key motivator for the ‘input followed by practical exercise’ format used in many different types of teaching, training and development activities.

The Rise of Video Learning
This theory applies to modern learning through the introduction of increasing amounts of video content in learning materials.10 This has become more cost-effective and low-maintenance as YouTube marches well into its second decade of instant and flexible on-demand video delivery. Videos that show learners how to apply certain information in a real-life context can be of great benefit to today’s Modern Learner.

Even the retail sector has been hooked by this concept with a growing tide of businesses spending massive budgets on seemingly speculative ‘instructor videos’ that old-school businesses might see as a waste of budget. The upside of these clips is the way they engage the modern consumer, often by allowing them to easily imagine themselves using the product before they have purchased it.

Most people love a good video clip, and it’s easy to assume that video will lift learning ideas off the page and make them easily understandable and applicable to your role. But what if the video isn’t pitched appropriately, or isn’t aligned with the way you learn?

Videos have no means of adapting and changing themselves to understand your individual needs. It's

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9 Simply Psychology, https://www.simplypsychology.org/bandura.html
true that the illustrative narrative provided by the genre of instructor video is a far more effective way of engaging learners, but only if it is correctly targeted, written and illustrated, and includes appropriate information and language.

Content Curation is the Key
Now apply this thinking to on-demand learning from apps, learning platforms and search engines. This is a mass of information that’s on tap anytime and ready for the eager learner. The genie isn’t going back into the bottle, but it has a flaw. If Modern Learners find learning input themselves, how do they know that what they have found is the best solution to their skill-gap? The old expression, “I don’t know what I don’t know” would seem to apply.

Curation is the key here. Modern Learners are bright-minded, well-motivated learners with the technical aptitude and often financial resources to source information, whether free or with an associated cost. Around 70% use search engines (i.e. Google!) to learn what they need for their jobs, compared to 50-60% using online courses.11

Around 70% (of Modern Learners) use search engines to learn what they need for their jobs, compared to 50-60% using online courses.

This could be described as entrepreneurial learning. They can digest this information on the train or bus, in the bath, on the treadmill, anywhere one can imagine. Add the curation of an instructor, either in the training room or working remotely, and that learning information can be properly organized, selected, programmed and delivered for maximum effect.

Much like a well-pitched presentation, one of the key components of teaching is mutual understanding. For a course to be successful, some form of curation and organization of the learning materials and program would promote a higher level of understanding from the learner.

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The mix of learning methods has diversified and Modern Learners have more access to learning tools than any who have gone before. The instructor’s role may well be changing and evolving too, but it is not evolving towards extinction. Archives need curators; libraries need librarians. Training needs people with the expertise to point the right people towards the right information, and this is the role of the instructor or trainer.

11 Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner

Social Learning

Putting the Learner at the Center
Social learning is the concept that individuals learn best in a social environment where the learner is at the heart of the learning process.

Community Network
Following, scoring, commenting and contributing to a community gives learners a link to similar like-minded employees in the organization.

Security
Ensuring that the social learning platform is secure is key to a successful social learning program.

Spread the Word to Colleagues
Allowing learners to interact with other employees who they might not engage with regularly is a great way to break down silos. It also opens up communication and learning channels across the organization.

Broaden the Horizon
Social learning doesn’t just start and finish with your organization. The best social learning programs are those that go beyond your company to your customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

The 1-9-90 Rule
The 1-9-90 rule (Jakob Nielsen) states that 90% of individuals don’t contribute (but rather they consume), the next 9% will add existing content while the last 1% will contribute the majority of content to the community.
How to Engage the Modern Learner

Usually, a relationship starts with eye contact. Then perhaps a subtle smile followed by an approach, a handshake and a warm greeting. This is human engagement 101 in the 21st Century, but only if you’re in the same room. The Modern Learner likes to learn away from the old environments with their whiteboards, flipcharts and on-tap coffee, sipped while sitting in chairs of questionable comfort. These days, 30% of workers do most of their work somewhere other than their employer’s location. Virtual training rooms can be wherever you want them to be, which makes engaging the Modern Learner an ‘undiscovered country’ for many.

The Engagement Game

The view from the other side of the learning fence is equally challenging. Social networking and the rise of mobile technology have opened some exciting new avenues in the field of elearning, but they have also left Modern Learners overwhelmed, distracted, and even occasionally uninterested.

According to the strategists at Bersin by Deloitte, this is because Modern Learners are being pulled in many different directions at once. They unlock their phones nine times an hour and go online 27 times per day, yet spend 41% of their time on things that do not help them get their work done.

Modern learners unlock their phones 9 times an hour and go online 27 times per day, yet spend 41% of their time on things that do not help them get their work done.

Think for a moment about that special teacher at school. The one who could take a complicated subject area and ‘nutshell’ it for you into something you could understand. They would use a metaphor, simile, narrative or even a relevant drawing. It’s amazing what teachers could do with whiteboard pens, or even chalk. The complicated idea, full of data, research and confusion to an eager but inexperienced mind became evident and exciting.

It’s easy to forget that good teaching, training or development need not pack 100 slides into an hour of training. Understanding comes in small moments of connection with the learner. The Modern Learner can simply be distracted by too much information.

According to Sweller’s Cognitive Load Theory, all of these distractions increase the mental burden on the learner, which results in an overall decrease in comprehension when they’re faced with the responsibility of learning something new. Coupled with new research that shows the clear majority of Modern Learners have shorter attention spans and less patience for educational coursework, the outlook is suddenly less optimistic.

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12 Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner
13 Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner
6 Ways to Engage the Modern Learner

USE INFORMATION ACCESS AS A RESOURCE

Today’s learner needs resources and training that will prepare them to solve a problem when it happens. Today’s learners need to see the immediate value of their training, perhaps because the half-life of many professional skills is now between just two-and-a-half and five years.¹⁵

Therefore, make sure that your training can help your learners solve problems common to their industry and specialization. Not sure how? Then you probably haven’t worked out what your training aims are. Nor do you know what the training outcome should be.

Once you’ve worked it out and adjusted the content, remember that today’s trainers like to get on with it themselves. For example, 62% of IT professionals report paying for training out of their own pockets.¹⁶ Let learners navigate through the training at their own pace and give them supplemental resources like job aids or materials that they can access easily. This will promote a sense of engagement and immediate value.

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MOBILE AND ON DEMAND

This point is so obvious it feels a little insulting to mention it. If you are a Modern Learner you will likely read it and shout frustratingly, “Obviously!” You’re probably reading this on a mobile device which means that you could be anywhere. Therefore, Modern Learning needs to be accessible from anywhere.

If Modern Learners have some flexibility surrounding when and where they can take development courses, they have the freedom to integrate their training into their existing schedules.

Not only does this demonstrate confidence in the learner’s ability to manage their own time, but it helps make sure that the learners are taking development courses at the time when they are most prepared to manage their cognitive load.

¹⁵ Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner
¹⁶ Bersin by Deloitte, Meet the Modern Learner

The Modern Learner: Training on their terms
SHORT IS BEST

Despite modern tech claiming to offer time-saving solutions, isn’t it funny how no-one seems to have any extra time as a result? Offering online training in short five-minute bursts each day means employees can increase their knowledge on an ongoing basis over time without feeling overwhelmed. It also helps them to squeeze their learning into tiny gaps in their day. Take a short lesson while queuing for a tall, frothy latte and you are living the Modern Learning dream.

BESPOKE IS EVEN BETTER

The brain is a wonderfully unique object, with each of us absorbing information in subtly or massively different ways. The best suits are tailor made, and the most effective learning is bespoke, to fit the learner’s pace and needs.

Adaptive eLearning technology provides individuals with the training information they need at the time they need it. Depending on how learners answer questions, the material changes to either re-educate them on certain subjects or reinforce information they already know. Learners with more knowledge have higher rates of success, which translates into increased success for the organization.

INTERACTIVE IS GREAT - ISN’T IT?

More than 90% of the information we learn can be forgotten in as little as a month. Technology that allows Modern Learners to take a more active role in their learning promotes interaction, engagement and long-term memory. It also reinforces the information in the brain, so learners have a lower chance of forgetting the material completely.

I KNOW WE SAID SHORT IS GOOD, BUT LONG IS AMAZING!

eLearning technology that uses questions to challenge learners to recall information at different intervals, from days to months apart, increases information retention.\(^{17}\) Research shows memory retention improves as the time intervals between the information increase, helping the brain to transfer the information to long-term memory.

Get Under the Skin of the Modern Learner

To engage the modern learner, you need to get into their pockets, bags or briefcases. They will learn where they can, so to promote engagement, make sure that your delivery platform works wherever they are. Make sure it is truly and functionally mobile. We wish you every success with your learning and modern learner engagement strategies.

Research shows memory retention improves as the time intervals between the information increase.

\(^{17}\) Work-Learning Research Inc, Space Learning Events over Time: What the research says, Will Thalheimer PhD
Learnlight is an award-winning EdTech company that provides language and soft skills training to more than 1,000 clients and over 100,000 learners in 150 countries.

Since our foundation, our dream has been to bridge the gap between the disparate worlds of education and technology by harnessing cutting-edge technology to optimize instructor-led training. Our obsession was, and continues to be, to empower talented trainers to create transformative learning experiences because we think people are the real killer app.

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