



Engage remote workers with a culture of learning

Remote work has been a popular option among employees for some time now. In Buffer's 2019 State of Remote Work report, 99% of respondents said they'd like to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of their career.¹ In 2018, that figure was 90%.²

But over recent months, we've witnessed a major paradigm shift. Remote work is no longer a nice-to-have benefit that companies are factoring into their long-term plans. It's a requirement and a reality that we have to be ready to embrace now. 84% of employers expect that many or most office workers will work remotely at least one day a week, up from 64% before COVID.³

The good news is that remote work can bring a variety of benefits to employees and employers—from reduced expenses⁴ to increased productivity⁵ and engagement.⁶ But it isn't without its challenges. Some of the hurdles remote workers highlight include effective collaboration, access to resources, and achieving a work-life balance. Companies need to tackle issues like these head-on, so they aren't allowed to run rampant.

"A culture of learning represents a shared direction towards your organization's mission," said Ana Goodman, Director of Corporate Operations and People and Culture at D2L. "How learning is delivered is going to look very different for a remote employee, but it should be designed in a way that's in alignment with your ultimate goals."

In this eBook, we'll explore three steps every organization can take toward building a culture of learning that gives everyone, especially remote workers, access to the same caliber of professional development and skills-mapping support they need to thrive in their careers and support their organization's growth.

3 challenges that can accompany remote work

As more organizations turn to partial or fully remote workforces, three common roadblocks emerge: making room for informal and relationship-building communication, providing equal access to valuable learning opportunities, and defining and building an intentional company culture. They're familiar to companies around the world, from digitally native start-ups to transitioning digital brands, and can undermine even the most sophisticated efforts to build a culture of learning if they're not handled effectively.

¹ <https://buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2019>

² <https://www.slideshare.net/Bufferapp/state-of-remote-work-2018-data-analysis>

³ <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html>

⁴ <https://www.tecla.io/blog/2019-remote-it-workers-stats-companies-should-know/>

⁵ <https://www.inc.com/scott-mautz/a-2-year-stanford-study-shows-astonishing-productivity-boost-of-working-from-home.html>

⁶ <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/why-working-home-future-looking-technology>

A lack of informal communication opportunities

Technology has removed much of the stigma associated with formal remote meetings, as video-enabled conference calls and webchats allow team members to collaborate with relative ease. But replicating fleeting, ad-hoc conversations can be more difficult. Unfortunately, failing to do this can eliminate critical opportunities for building relationships and sharing knowledge.

“Most companies have no trouble re-creating their weekly formal meetings for a digital workforce,” said Kiara Graham, a learning strategy consultant at D2L. “But informal interaction—the kind of connection you can build when teammates can stop by a coworker’s cubicle for a quick chat—requires intention and planning to keep relationships strong.”



“One of the biggest challenges to face when expanding your team to include remote employees is thinking creatively about how to ensure those who are not in headquarters feel as connected and engaged in the company’s social engagement events. Always be asking the question, ‘How do we translate and offer this experience to those who are not physically here?’”

Chantal Thorn, Director of Learning and Leadership Development, D2L



Unequal access to learning

The same limits on informal relationship-building apply to learning and development. Although 55% of employees consider career growth and opportunity more important than salary, 47% of remote workers aren't satisfied with their employer's learning and development opportunities.¹

“Just-in-time learning with peer-to-peer feedback shouldn't be a privilege for employees who happen to work on-site,” Graham said. “If you want to take advantage of the productivity and retention gains that can come with a remote workforce, you need to offer them equal access to development opportunities.”



“You can't build a culture of learning if learning is only supported and available for some of the company. It might not be possible to have all learning opportunities available equally to your dispersed workforce, but if you take it step by step, you can absolutely offer them equitably. And when you do that, not only are you truly supporting a culture of learning, you're creating a culture of equity and engagement.”

Chantal Thorn, Director of Learning and Leadership Development, D2L



¹ “New Survey: Nearly Half Of Workers Unsatisfied With Learning And Development Programs,” Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/chriswestfall/2019/10/08/new-survey-workers-unsatisfied-with-learning-and-development-programs-training-leadership/#7d1d71648a42>



The scattered development of a company culture

Formalizing and building an intentional company culture can be challenging even when your team members rub shoulders with one another all day. When relationships are digital, it's even more important that this isn't allowed to happen by accident—because there's a good risk it won't happen at all.

“When all or part of your company is remote, you have to go out of your way to find ways to document and share your values,” Graham said. “It won't just happen organically like it can when you're in the same building day in and day out. How you learn and how you communicate must be very intentional if you want it to have an impact on your team.”



“Company culture isn't a set of values plucked out of the air at a leadership retreat. It's a product of people at all levels of your company—what brought them to your company, what makes them stay. The process of identifying and sharing your company culture starts with your entire workforce, on and offsite.”

Kiara Graham, Learning Strategy Consultant, D2L



3 strategies for building a vibrant culture of learning with a remote team

It might be tempting to use the challenges of working remotely as an excuse to not embrace this evolution in the way we work, particularly after the pandemic has ended. Instead, they should highlight for us how critical it is to build a strong learning culture that encourages behaviors that alleviate and eliminate them: open communication, intentional culture development, and accessible learning opportunities.

“When you build a culture of learning that embodies your company values, it’s easier to integrate remote teams into your culture,” Graham said. “Provide opportunities for clear feedback, put in the work to define your culture and reward learning achievements, and you’ll be in a great position to reap the benefits of a remote workforce.”

With a clear vision of the challenges to overcome, the following strategies can help you build or maintain your culture of learning with remote workers:





Involve every level of your organization

A culture of learning cannot be a top-down executive initiative, nor can it be remote-only. Relying solely on either one of these will lead you out of alignment. To build a culture of learning that serves your long-term goals, you must involve your whole organization (as many levels and locations as you can). Here are a few suggestions to make learning more accessible in your organization:

- **Make sure all learning opportunities are replicated at an equivalent quality.** Fight the two-tier experience that can occur for those who are in an office location versus those who are remote.
- **Avoid a headquarters-heavy perspective when making decisions.** Involve remote and regional employees in your planning to increase how relevant, accessible, and engaging the final result may be.
- **Call on your leaders to set the example.** Ask managers and culture-of-learning champions to continue sharing insights from their own professional development, promoting learning opportunities, and removing barriers so employees can participate in learning.

“Be explicit with your vision for culture and learning. Ensure that the message of relevance and support of work-life balance and learning at your company is shared early and often—and make sure remote employees know how to take advantage of more formal learning opportunities and any frameworks or resources that are available.”

Chantal Thorn, Director of learning and leadership development, D2L



Set expectations around work and learning

Organizations new to managing a remote workforce probably won't be surprised that the remote employee experience will be different, but they may not expect how it will change — sometimes significantly. For example, people who work from home can have trouble setting limits on their workday and learning goals, which can lead to burnout and disengagement over time. They can also have trouble prioritizing learning and development because they don't have the cultural reinforcement from their teammates.

“Be explicit with your vision for culture and learning,” said Chantal Thorn, Director of learning and leadership development at D2L. “Ensure that the message of relevance and support of work-life balance and learning at your company is shared early and often — and make sure remote employees know how to take advantage of more formal learning opportunities and any frameworks or resources that are available.”



“Remote organizations need to put a little more effort into staying connected: observe, check-in, communicate, and do it all more frequently.”

Ana Goodman, Director of Corporate Operations and People and Culture, D2L



Make your LMS the center of community

The reality is that if you have even a single remote worker, your company culture and learning culture need to be remote too. And the only way to ensure you're delivering an experience that meets the needs of on-site and off-site employees is to build your culture of learning in a central, cloud-based learning management system (LMS).

“Modern learning technology creates a space where everyone within your organization can access the learning opportunities and social support they need to achieve their potential,” Graham said.

“Translate your face-to-face learning experiences into equivalent digital experiences to create a central, virtual learning repository that everyone within your organization can access.”

Ultimately, your LMS needs to be a central hub for your organization, providing on-site and off-site employees alike with equal access to social engagement, learning opportunities, and cultural

development. Remember—enabling and training employees to visit and engage with your LMS as a community touchpoint requires strategy and planning. Here are a few suggestions to help turn your LMS into a focal point of engagement:

- Set a reminder to regularly update your LMS newsfeed or announcement page with new content.
- Create an engagement calendar of community-building questions and updates you can feature weekly or monthly.
- Decide in advance what content will be exclusive to your LMS and what content will be distributed via email or other communication platforms.
- Schedule regular companywide discussion forums with access to executives or members of the leadership team.
- Connect other business tools to your LMS, such as your email, calendar, and communication tools for messaging and videoconferencing so that employees can access everything they need in one place.
- Reward employees who participate in LMS community activity with praise or prizes.

“Where learning takes place in more formal formats, like courses, workshops and videos, consider an LMS a globally accessible online space where you can build, store and allow for employee engagement around your learning and development initiatives. An LMS can also be leveraged in many ways for less formal learning, like feedback and social learning, self-reflections and lessons learned, and general sharing of other learning artifacts.”

Chantal Thorn, Director of Learning and Leadership Development, D2L



Modern learning is remote learning

Remote work, in full or in part, has become a reality for most organizations today. Organizations need to be ready to adapt to meet the evolving needs and expectations of current and future employees. A cornerstone of this is making sure people have access to the kinds of training and development that will improve their skills and advance their careers.

This is where a strategically deployed LMS comes in. By taking steps to move learning into the cloud, involve every level of your organization, set expectations around work and learning, and build a bustling community hub, you can ensure all your employees—especially the remote ones—have access to the opportunities they need to grow and thrive in their careers.



About D2L

D2L is the creator of Brightspace, a learning platform for associations who value member engagement as a driver of business success. Grow your membership with personalized learning experiences tailored to suit members' needs and peer-to-peer knowledge sharing that allows them to share their expertise and get feedback via video, audio, and inline annotations. The fully responsive design means they'll be able to learn anytime, anywhere, and on any device. With a fully open API Brightspace can easily integrate within your existing technology ecosystem, and smarter reporting will help you monitor performance and engagement so you can make informed decisions about training and development.

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