4 Strategies for Building a Vibrant Culture of Learning with a Remote Team

A Guide to Overcoming Common Challenges

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Adopting remote-work opportunities is paying off for companies around the world, delivering positive changes to critical business metrics, such as reduced expenses,[1] increased productivity and engagement,[2] and decreased turnover and attrition.[3]

It's also becoming increasingly popular among employees — 43% of people already work remotely to varying degrees,[4] and 99% would like to have remote work be an option at least some of the time for the rest of their careers.[5]

But for all the benefits remote work can bring, it isn't without hurdles. These challenges — barriers to effective communication, ongoing learning, and a thriving company culture — can run rampant if not proactively addressed.

"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 four steps every organization can take to build a culture of learning that maximizes each employee's potential and gives remote workers access to the same professional development and skills-mapping support as those on-site.

3 Challenges That Can Accompany Remote Work

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

"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 at D2L

1. A Lack of Informal Communication Opportunities

In recent years, technology has removed the stigma often associated with formal remote meetings, as video-enabled conference calls and webchats allow on-site and off-site team members to collaborate seamlessly. But replicating fleeting, ad hoc conversations can be more difficult. Unfortunately, failing to do this eliminates 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 co-worker's cubicle for a quick chat — requires intention and planning to keep relationships strong."
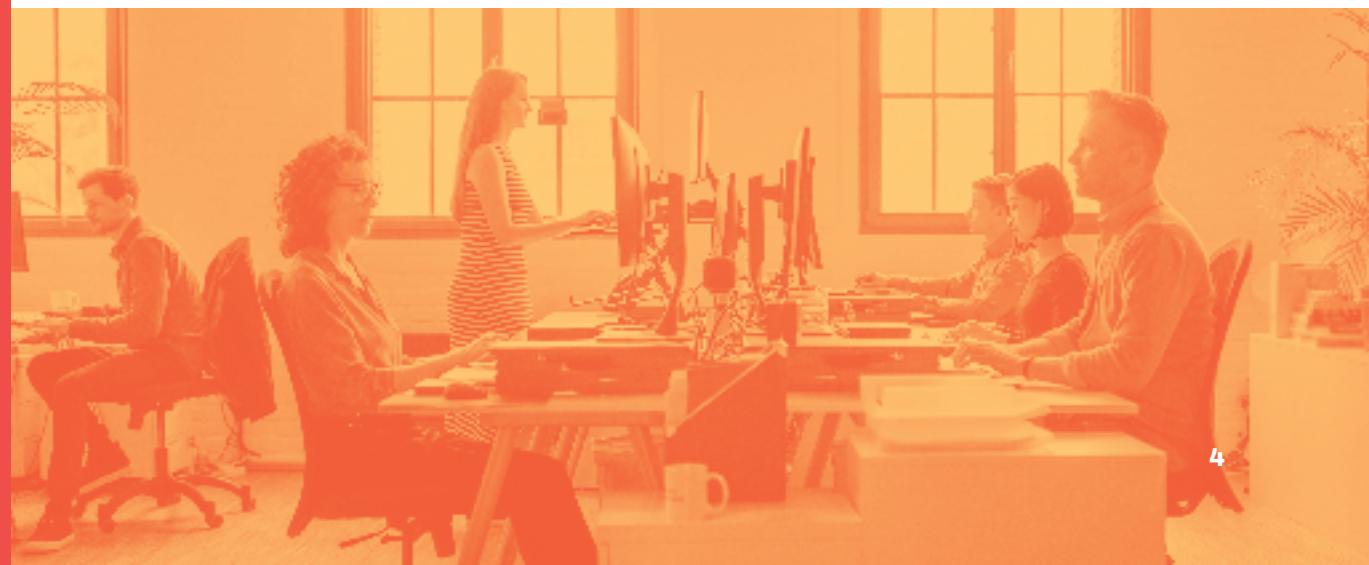
2. Unequal Access to Learning

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.[6]

"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."
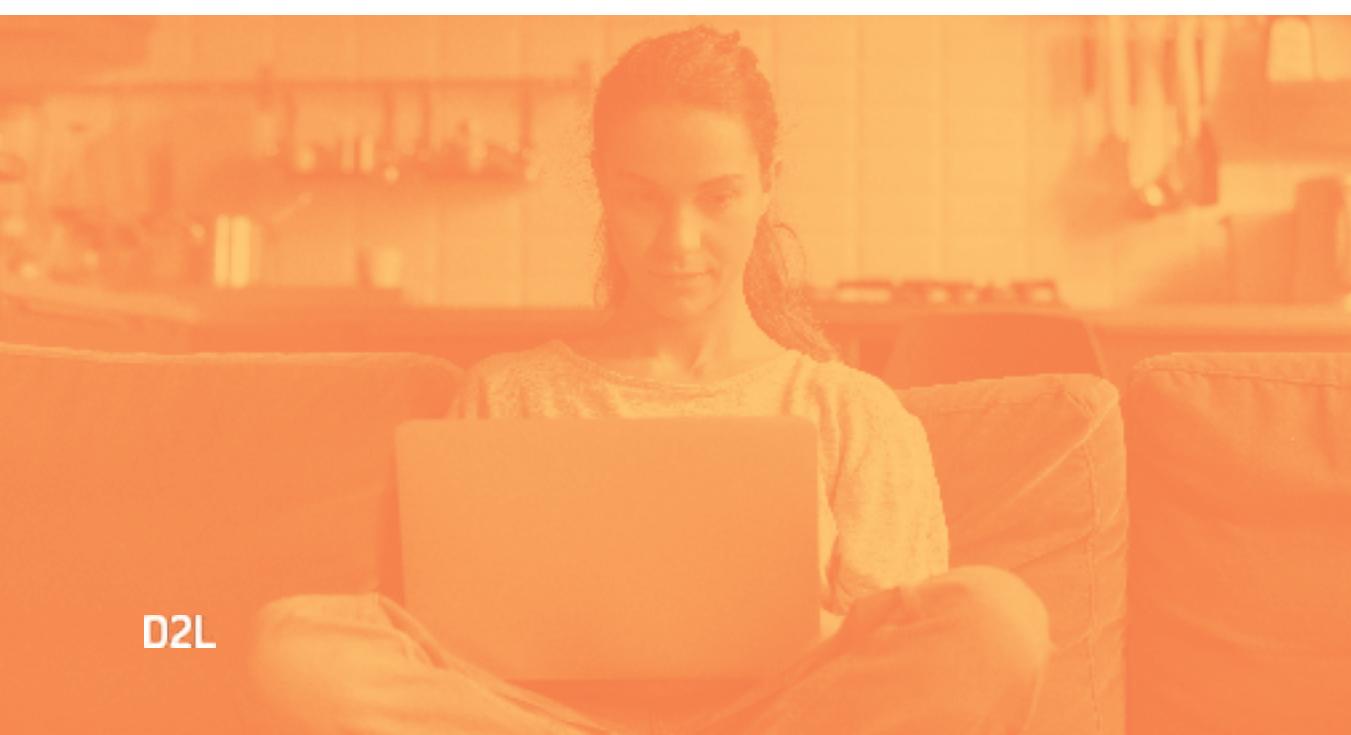
"You can't build a culture of learning if learning is only supported and available for some of the company. It might not be possible to have all learning opportunities available equally to your dispersed workforce, but if you take it step by step, you can absolutely offer them equitably. And when you 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 at D2L

# 3. 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."
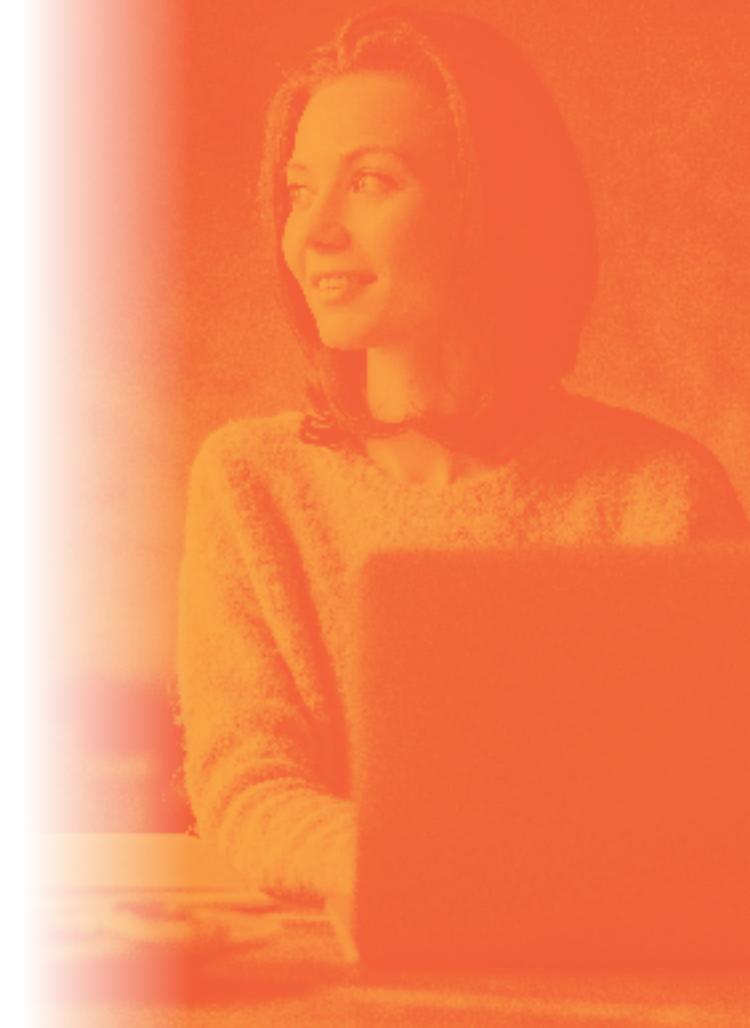
"Company culture isn't a set of values plucked out of the air at a leadership retreat. It's a product of people at all levels of your company — what brought them to your company, what makes them stay. The process of identifying and sharing your company culture starts with your entire workforce, on and offsite."

— Kiara Graham, Learning Strategy Consultant at D2L

How to Build 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. But that would be a mistake. Instead, they should simply highlight 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 team members:

STRATEGY #1

Take your learning to the cloud

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."
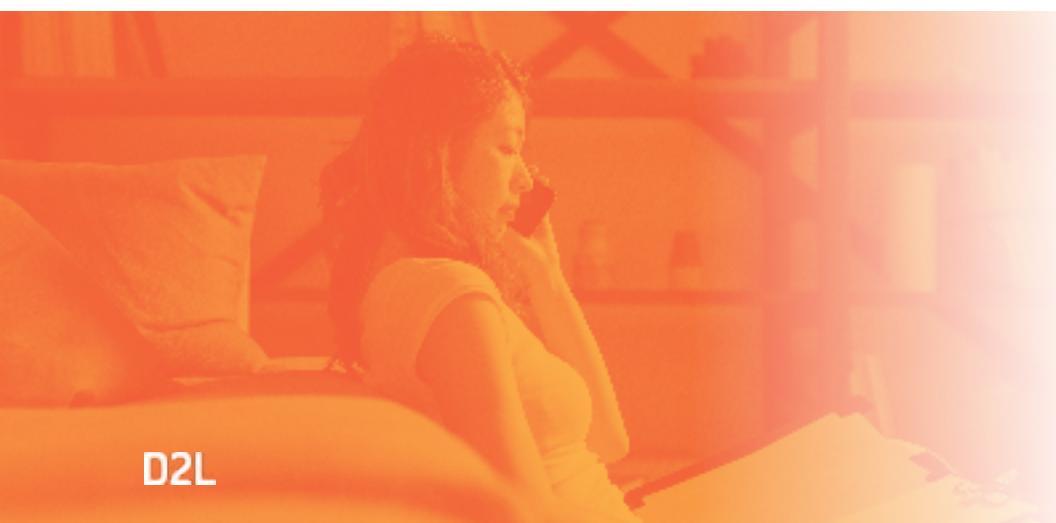
STRATEGY #2

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.

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> "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 at 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."

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Make your LMS the center of community

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 video conferencing 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 at D2L

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Modern Learning Is Remote Learning

The reality is that every successful organization today must at some point face the possibility of having a remote workforce, either full or partial. Inevitably, those employees will need 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 remote — have access to the opportunities they need to grow and thrive in their careers.

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Our learning platform, Brightspace, helps maximize the impact of training and keep learners on track with personalized experiences, peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, Social Assessment™, video assignments, and more. A fully responsive design means people can go at their own pace and learn on any device—at home, in the office, or on the go. We're a leader in content creation and curation and with a fully open API, Brightspace can easily integrate into your existing technology ecosystem.

Equip remote employees with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed, and create a thriving learning culture that makes everyone feel like they're part of the team. As your online learning partner, we're here to help make that happen.

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