



D2L

Unlocking opportunity:

How professional associations are using learning to empower members and grow revenue

Contributors

D2L INSIGHTS

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Introduction

Professional associations are under enormous pressure. Not only must they find new ways to increase retention rates and remain relevant to members throughout their careers—they also need to build new revenue streams.

Continuous professional development (CPD), upskilling and reskilling can all help increase the value of membership and present commercial opportunities for the associations themselves. To deliver these services effectively, associations must adapt to the demands of the modern learner. This means delivering the best possible learning experience and allowing people to choose how, when and where they learn. Technology is playing a huge part in making this happen.

In this paper we examine the challenges facing today's professional associations and the opportunities that have opened up through digital transformation. With the help of our contributors from the British Society of Lifestyle Medicine (BSLM), the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) and the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych), we look at how associations can achieve their strategic vision and what excites them most about the future.

Space for lifelong learning

Professional associations, or professional bodies, exist for the benefit of their professions and their members. There are hundreds in the UK alone, educating and informing people working in everything from finance to fisheries, palaeontology to publishing. Their role is to promote the latest thinking, research and training within the sectors they represent, and to support the development and interests of the people who work within them.

Lifelong learning is at the heart of this, but the way in which members want to learn is constantly changing. Associations know that a more personalised approach to learning is essential to their future relevance and commercial success, and they are embracing digital transformation to enable this. Despite the challenges—from complex legacy systems to a need for more resources and support—many of these transformation journeys are well underway.

Digital-first thinking

There's no doubt that the events of the past few years accelerated the move to online learning. Associations, along with organisations in most sectors, were forced to adapt quickly.



RCPsych is the professional medical body responsible for supporting psychiatrists throughout their careers from training to retirement as well as for both setting and raising the standards of psychiatry across the UK. As Katie Hughes, Head of eLearning at RCPsych, explains:

“The spotlight really turned to e-learning during the pandemic. We were able to respond very quickly by developing podcasts and digital learning material—and we recognised early on that this was going to be a big opportunity to change the way we support our members in the long term.”

RCPsych has around 21,000 members across the globe, so there is a real opportunity to get as many of them to subscribe to its e-learning resources as possible,

“I want to see people choosing lifestyle medicine electives at universities. Or even using our core accreditation course as the foundation for a masters course, so we can see even more value being attached to lifecycle medicine as a practice.”

- Andrew Howie, Chief Finance and Commercial Officer,
British Society of Lifestyle Medicine

 British Society of
lifestyle medicine

no matter where they are based. The ability to produce and sell shorter form pieces of content alongside traditional CPD materials offers huge potential.

The associations that we spoke to also see productising content as being key to the long-term retention of members. They aim to provide up-to-date training no matter where someone is in their professional development and also to add value by providing content that's relevant to their specific areas of interest.

To do this they need to understand the individual profile of each learner and develop joined up thinking across departments about how the association will engage and interact with them. The quality of the content also has to be exceptional.

A relatively young association, the BSLM is facing those challenges head on, as Andrew Howie, its Chief Finance and Commercial Officer explains:

"We know we need to get better at understanding how, when and where learning happens. We're conscious of the fact that good learning practices can open up new revenue streams and increase value for our members."

The BSLM is an independent charity, set up to promote the role of Lifestyle Medicine in improving people's health and wellbeing. Lifestyle Medicine aims to support patients in preventing, managing and reversing certain chronic conditions, using supporting behaviour change skills and techniques. Its 2,500 members are drawn from a range of disciplines and include primary and secondary care clinicians, allied and public health professionals, scientists, educators and researchers, as well as patients themselves.

Unlike other associations, the BSLM does not have a long heritage to rely on for loyalty. It is also operating



2500 members

Ranging from primary and secondary care clinicians, allied and public health professionals, scientists, educators and researchers, as well as patients themselves.



in a relatively new field, one that is constantly having to prove itself. “General practitioners and surgeons have very high expectations, and they need to be able to trust us,” Andrew adds. “Our content has to be clinically robust, but we also have to feel confident that we have the best possible learning platform and the best quality offering.”

Education as accessible and as high quality as possible

The high expectations of learners make quality of content a clear priority across the board. Associations position themselves at the forefront of thinking within their industries, but that has to be backed up by exceptional experiences.

“People don’t want to watch long presentations and sit through lots of face-to-face learning anymore,” says Andrew. “We’re conscious that everything we produce needs to be geared towards self-paced learning.

made available on streaming platforms, as well as on learning management systems (LMSs) so learners can listen to them on the move and then log into the LMS at a later date to complete any tests and receive their certification and CPD points.

“We’re conscious that as our membership and learner base continually grows, we must ensure we’re appealing to and keeping up with different learning styles and preferences”, says Katie. “For example, with streaming, we’re seeing such high numbers for our podcasts on SoundCloud.”

But when it comes to content design, some associations find that getting everyone to move in the same direction, at the same speed, is not always easy.

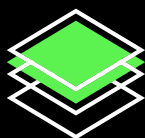
The RCOG works to improve women’s healthcare across the world. With more than 17,000 members, it is committed to developing the accessibility and quality of education, training and assessments for doctors wishing to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology.

Founded in 1929, the RCOG’s journey towards digital transformation has been very different to that of the BSLM.

LEARNING FORMATS



Audio/Podcast



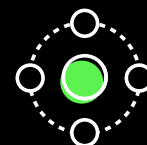
Visual



Micro-Content



Certificate



Flexible Access

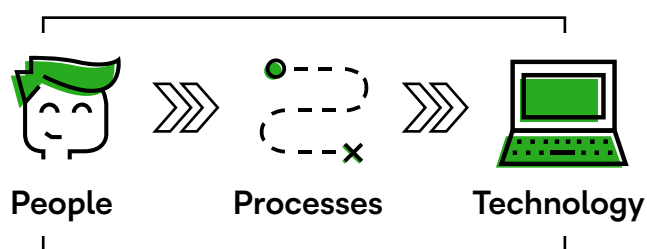
We want to make education in Lifestyle Medicine as accessible and as high quality as possible.” Katie at RCPsych agrees. “The learners who access our content are generally very busy clinicians with little time,” she says. “We have to make sure that we’re producing content in a format that suits them and that they can fit in around their working patterns.”

This has meant a big rise in audio and visual output, and more micro, digestible content. Podcasts are being

“There’s buy in from the very top of the organisation to make changes, but it does take time,” says Robyn North, Director of Digital Transformation at the RCOG. “One of our biggest challenges has been our fragmented infrastructure. A significant part of our digital transformation process has been understanding our legacy systems and how we can create a more solid infrastructure—underpinned by our customer relationship management system and LMS—on which to build.”

Robyn believes that digital transformation is about more than technology, however. “I always think about our journey in terms of people, processes and technology,” she says. “In many ways, the tech is the easy part. It’s getting everything and everyone to work together to maximise the potential of the technology that’s more difficult.”

Andrew agrees that it’s about people taking the time to understand what’s possible. “You wouldn’t hesitate to spend time with a new staff member to make sure they’re performing to their potential,” he says. “The technology that you’ve invested in should be afforded the same respect.”



An environment where everyone feels heard

The same principle applies to how associations work with their authors. Association content producers are leaders in their field, but they are typically more familiar with drafting long-form written material or delivering in-person training than thinking about how to productise content. Our contributors agreed that it is therefore the responsibility of the technology and commercial teams to consider how learning materials are delivered, with authors involved from the outset—to understand how and where their content is being engaged with by members.

That’s why evaluation and analytics have become so important, enabling associations to respond to feedback, tailor content and share those insights internally and with content producers.

“At every touchpoint, I want people to immediately know that they’re looking at RCPsych content. Brand consistency is absolutely key—regardless of the learning content that you’re engaging with.”

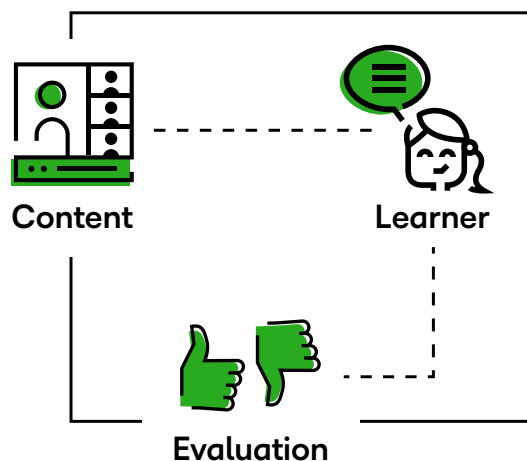
- Katie Hughes, Head of eLearning,
Royal College of Psychiatrists



The ability to monitor engagement and completion rates is becoming key to product design. Many associations have set up content steering committees to evaluate the quality of their learning material, how it is being used and where the gaps or opportunities are.

Better evaluation relies on better analytics and insight, however, and associations are mindful of both the challenges and opportunities here.

“We need to learn from the experience of our own learners,” says Katie. “We are using feedback to make continuous improvements, creating an environment where everyone feels heard and where we’re positively embracing new ways of working.”



Data insight is also key for the RCOG. “Fragmentation in legacy systems can hinder personalisation and automation, and lead to a lack of clear data and insight,” adds Robyn. “We’re spending a lot of time understanding what ‘as is’ looks like today—so we can accurately predict what ‘could be’ might look like. We’re also putting in incremental steps to get there.”

Both the RCOG Education Team and RCPsych monitor engagement and completion rates, as well as conduct user feedback surveys at the end of each course. Most associations also undergo a thorough evaluation of all content every two to three years, to ensure that learning materials reflect the latest thinking and are meeting mandatory and extended educational objectives.

“The challenge for us is to develop more mechanisms for monitoring how content is being used and to make improvements based on that,” adds Andrew. “We need better insight to analyse what we’ve got, how it’s being used and how we can present it to people in the best, most engaging way.”

An opportunity for growth

Associations see huge opportunities to increase revenues and diversify their product offerings through learning content.

Primarily, this is through their ability to productise and sell individual content or e-learning modules—driving subscribers and members towards content far beyond their mandatory training or CPD materials.

Blended learning also presents opportunity for increasing the reach of content. “We are working more closely with our events team, for example, to maximise access to content from our face-to-face conferences,” says Katie at RCPsych. “For our annual International Congress, for example, we make the content available for those who attended to catch up on sessions. Additionally, however, we have the opportunity to package this content to sell as a subscription or as individual sessions online, for people who were unable to attend the conference in person.”

Packaging individual modules in this way also allows associations to reach new learners, perhaps those with a keen interest in the sector, even if they aren’t a practitioner.

Andrew at BSLM sees huge potential here. “We offer core accreditation in Lifestyle Medicine, which is 60 hours of learning, but we see there’s an opportunity to repurpose some of this content and make it more relevant and digestible for a number of audiences.”

“I want to understand the end to end journey of our audiences. From a teenager who’s thinking about becoming a doctor to our fellowship members, how are they engaging with us and what can we do to present them with the content and learning that best suits their interests?”

- Robyn North, Director of Digital Transformation,
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists



Royal College of
Obstetricians &
Gynaecologists

MAXIMISE ACCESS TO CONTENT FROM FACE-TO-FACE CONFERENCES



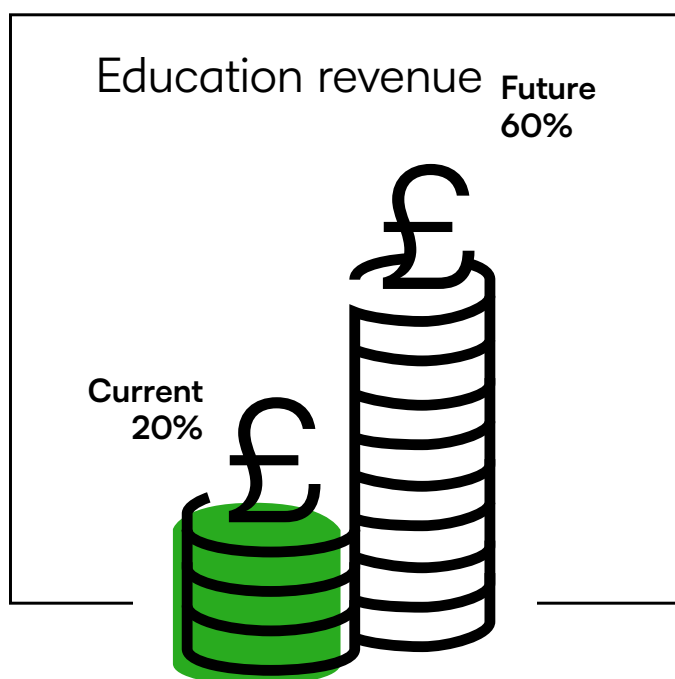
“Whatever the profession, knowledge can become outdated after a couple of years. Associations need to be able to re-skill and up-skill their members.”

- Riley Cerven,
Director, Corporate Learning, EMEA, D2L

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He suggests this could include content around gut microbiomes, for example, an introduction to the Mediterranean diet or courses around coaching, for individuals who are thinking about moving into Lifestyle Medicine.

“It’s early days, but we have already increased revenue from education spend by 20% and we expect learning to constitute 60% of our total revenue in the near future,” he adds.



Business-to-business sales are also on the radar. The BSLM is seeing interest from large corporate employers that are looking to provide educational resources and practical support for all six pillars of Lifestyle Medicine; recognising that a holistic approach to health is more valuable than concentrating on one aspect. “Worker wellbeing is an exciting new space for us,” says Andrew. “And as we continue to personalise our content and make it relevant to multiple audiences, we can also look to work with schools and other educational settings. It’s all part of our vision to bring Lifestyle Medicine into the mainstream.”

The RCOG has its sights set on international growth. “We see international non-members as a focus for expansion,” says Robyn. “We’re in the privileged position of already enjoying 97% retention rates for our members, so our focus is on improving the quality and relevance of our training and content, and on reaching new international audiences.”



With a more flexible and productised content offering, associations are also embracing reseller opportunities and institutional subscriptions. For RCPsych, that's about working with larger institutions to reach new learners. "We can amplify the reach of our learning resources to many more people through institutional subscriptions," says Katie. "We feel confident that we can provide a high quality content and learner experience, with opportunities emerging to explore more bespoke packages tailored to individual needs."

Technology is transformational

With such a wealth of opportunity, many associations are finding it hard to prioritise—limited by the resources and skills they have available and their content production capabilities. But they all agree that this is a nice problem to have and that technology has made anything possible.

"Technology is transformational for us," says Andrew. "I am positive we would have got to where we are now eventually, but it wouldn't have been as fast and it certainly wouldn't have opened up as many opportunities."

"Time and resources are the biggest challenges for us now," adds Katie. "We know that there's so much we can do, but we need to make sure we do it well. We also need to carefully measure what the impact will be and whether it's working—everything we do has to benefit our members and learners, and be revenue generating so that we can continue to produce high-quality and evidence-based materials to support the psychiatric profession."

"It's a work in progress, but we're excited about the future," she continues. "We presumed we'd go back to business as usual after we re-platformed our LMS. The reality is, there is no business as usual anymore, because there are just so many opportunities available to us. It's helping to keep both staff and members engaged."



Robyn at RCOG also believes that with a strong strategic vision and buy-in from the very top of an organisation, there's a lot that can be achieved. "The first step on the journey is gaining the support of the leadership team," she says. "That means investing in people as well as technology. Our entire organisation is committed to improving the personal experience of our members and customers, regardless of where people are on their learning journey, or where they are in the world."

We want to engage with every single person in the right way and at the right time, across all channels."

The industries in which professional associations work have almost certainly changed beyond recognition due to digital transformation. Their practitioners—who are at various stages in their careers, span generations and are from a diverse range of backgrounds—expect their associations to keep pace with these changes and to understand what, where and how they want to learn. The conversations that have informed this paper suggest they are doing just that.

Set the standard for people to follow


Every organisation is on its own transformation journey. But, regardless of their heritage or the industry they represent, there is an overwhelming desire among associations to secure their future by providing exceptional learning experiences to their members.

"There has to be urgency from the very top to embrace digital transformation. It often requires significant investment into technology and people, but the consequences of not embracing change are much higher."

- Stewart Watts,
Managing Director, EMEA, D2L

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A photograph of three people (two men and one woman) sitting on a grey couch in a modern office setting, laughing and talking. A small white table in front of them holds two mugs and some papers. Large windows and indoor plants are visible in the background.

“Leaders often set the pace for the rest of the pack.”

- Riley Cerven,
Director, Corporate Learning, EMEA, D2L






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ABOUT D2L

D2L is a global learning innovation company, reshaping the future of education and work. We're leading the way into a new era of personalized learning, driven by the belief that everyone deserves access to high-quality education, regardless of their age, ability or location. Our signature technology product—D2L Brightspace—enhances the learning experience for millions of learners at every stage of life, from the earliest days of school to the working world.

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