eBOOK

The Learning Ecosystem

What a Learning Ecosystem is, its parts, and its impact on organizations.

...not everyone will be familiar with it yet.

Why an eBook on Learning Ecosystems?
(And who is this eBook for?)

The term "learning ecosystem" is a trendy one in learning and development (L&D) circles. It's an important idea; understanding it helps organizations and their leaders think strategically about their learning and training - and helps them achieve the goals they set for themselves.

That said, you may not be familiar with it. There may even be some misunderstandings surrounding it.

The purpose of this eBook is to familiarize you with the concept of learning ecosystems. We'll define what they are, look at the parts that make them up, and pay close attention to the relationships and interactions of those parts.

By doing so, we hope to help organizations understand how they can create and sustain learning ecosystems that promote learning, foster retention, support high-potential employees, align wih organziational values, and help achieve long-term business strategies.

Given that scope, we think this eBook would be useful not only to L&D professionals but also to senior management (often responsible for the tone and atmosphere of an organization). We've had questions about learning ecosystems from CEOs, COOs, Directors of HR, VPs of Sales, and more; it only made sense that we create a resource for them, too.
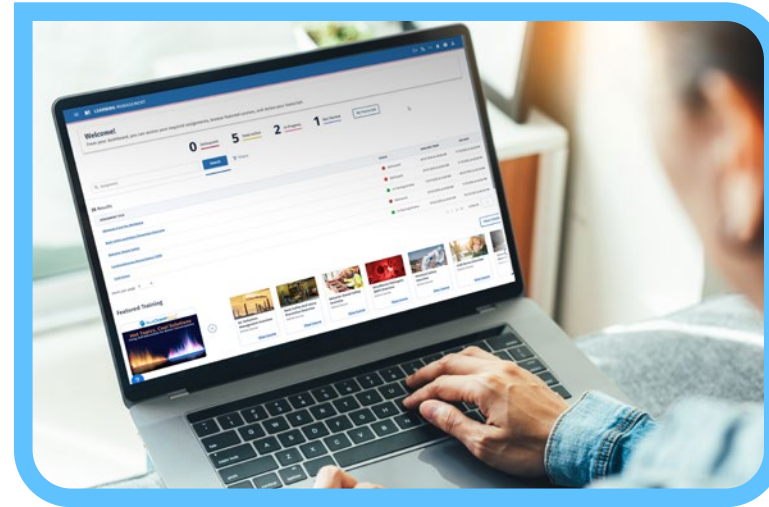
What is a Learning Ecosystem?
(Definition)

A learning ecosystem is a system of people, content, technology, culture, and strategy, existing within and outside an organziation, all of which has an impact on both the formal and informal learning that goes on in that organization.

All of these have been discussed within the eLearning industry for some time. So what do we gain by using this term? Thinking of learning in an organziation as a learning ecosystem means taking a more holistic approach to learning and development.

The word "ecosystem" is not here just to sound fancy or scientific. It helps us focus on the holistic nature of learning in any organized system.

The Ecosystem Metaphor

A learning ecosystem is the L&D equivalent of an ecosystem out in the wild. Just as a living ecosystem has many interacting species, environments, and the complex relationships among them, a learning ecosystem has many people and pieces of content, in different roles and learning contexts, and complex relationships. Just like a living ecosystem, a learning ecosystem can be healthy or sick, nurtured or threatened, self-sustaining or endangered.

Achieving your development goals, then, requires an organization to be aware of its own ecosystem, including its parts and the internal and external forces that shape them. Corporate training has something of a mixed track record.

In ecosystems we see in nature, small changes can have dramatic effects. In Yellowstone National Park, the reintroduction of a few wolves led to a blossoming of plant life. In Austrailia, the introduction of a single invasive species led to the disruption of entire environments.

The same goes for a learning ecosystem. A good manager can make your training flourish; a single invasive bit of content can disrupt the practices your employees learn; and a shift in attitudes toward training content and development can alter the entire talent pipeline for your organziation.

Seeing your organization as a learning ecosystem means paying attention to both the details and the overall strategy. When a training program pays attention to one part and not the others, the result can be wasted efforts that produce no results - or worse, opposite results.

8 Stats That Will Change Your Views
About Learning Ecosystems

This is because training, by itself, is often expensive but lacking in results. Creating a strategy by looking at the whole learning ecosystem - including its people, content, technology, and learning culture - can effect much more dramatic transformation.

1 It is a common myth that only 10% of organizational training translates to on-the-job changes in behavior. The real rate of transfer may as high as 62%.

2 51% of employees feel that they have not reached their full potential due to a lack of learning and development opportunities.

3 57% of employees say they had learned something new in the past 30 days that they could apply to their job.

4 Organizations where L&D align their KPIs with senior management are 92% more likely to report increased revenue and 93% more likely to see positive changes in employee behavior.

5 "Knowledge management" has long been identified as a key mediator in determining business performance, accounting for more than 33% of the variation in business performance.
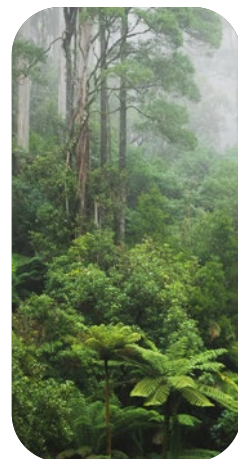
6 When provided with free access to relevant content, 59% of employees will access that content right at the point of need.

7 54% of organizations are not creating learning strategies that take into account changes in technology.

8 Companies with high-impact learning cultures are 92% more likely to be first to market with an innovative product or service, have a better track record for delivering quality products and maintain an overall 56% better response rate to customer needs.

People

Content

Culture

Strategy

Technology

Parts of a Learning Ecosystem?

(What is it made of?)

You likely already know the parts of your organization's learning ecosystem. You might even work with them. It's still surprising when you step back to consider all of these different parts. The parts you aren't looking at might even be having an effect on the ones you see on a daily basis.

People

Your learners are, of course, people in your learning ecosystem; they are the ones you want to develop. But think, too, about the people your employees and volunteers are learning from:

- Formal instructors for your in-person training courses
- Managers and team leaders
- Internal SMEs and veteran employees
- Third-party SMEs external to your organization
- The internet
- Friends and family

These are in rough order of the degree of control you have over what gets learned. You have the greatest control over what your internal instructors convey in formal contexts - but folks learn a lot informally, too, from SMEs, other employees, friends, and family. You also have more control when the content comes from within your organization than when it comes from outside.

Management is a key component here as well. **Not only do employees learn from managers and team leaders, but these people also set the tone for the learning culture, set goals, and provide mentorship.** If management is not on board with the way you train people, attitudes toward training will not be conducive to learning.

Content

Content for training and development is often where L&D professionals spend a lot of their time and attention. Specifically, they spend a lot of time creating (or evaluating, buying, and tweaking) content to be used in formal training sessions: classroom training, assigned video courses, manuals and reference guides, and so on. Formal training content also includes materials used to reinforce training - quizzes, exams, reminder videos, etc.

A lot of training content is informal in nature, too. Conversations with managers, knowledge handed down through mentorship relationships, and other tribal knowledge are all content, as well.

This does not mean the content your employees are exposed to resides solely within your organization. There are external equivalents of all the above. For example, your people might participate in off-campus training workshops, take classes from a local college, read books, or watch videos on YouTube. Much of what they learn might come from outside your organization, especially when it comes to topics like leadership.

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For L&D professionals, technology allows for greater degree of blended learning, **letting them be more creative and more effective in their roles.**

Technology

New tecnologies continue to create both opportunities and challenges when it comes to designing and delivering content. For learners, mobile technologies, modern LMS systems, and new social tools offer unprecedented access to knowledge and skills, as well as the opportunity to interact with peers virtually in learning contexts. For L&D professionals, technology allows for greater degree of blended learning, letting them be more creative and more effective in their roles.

Technology also allows measurement like never before. With a training video library organized within a modern LMS, L&D staff can measure and see what courses are the most popular, how much of a course is viewed, and which courses any given individual has completed. This allows organizations to track not only individual progress, but training effectiveness overall.

One great change that technology has brought is that it has allowed us to collect concrete data on how long a training video should be for maximum engagement - in short, how to do effective microlearning. You can read more about this specific topic in our white paper on The Science of Microlearning.

The same advances that make learning easier within your organization have also made it easier for outside content to come into your organization. Employees are turning more to resources like, Udemy, LinkedIn Learning, Scribd, and so on. This has to be carefully monitored because it's so easy to find information that is out of date, irrelevant, or just plain wrong...and sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

Learning Culture

A learning culture is basically a set of organizational values, processes, and practices that encourage employees, and the organization as a whole, to continually learn and add new skills. When it comes to learning ecosystems, a learning culture is the background, setting the "tone," that tells people what to expect.

Having a good learning culture certainly pays off for an organization. But what is a "good" learning culture? There is no one answer to that question, because there is no single type of learning culture. Just as people have different learning styles, organizations have a wide variety of learning cultures. What is important, then, is fit between learners and learning cultures. (For more on this idea, see our white paper on the The Four Types of Learning Cultures.)

The idea of a learning culture is not a flimsy, oh-this-is-so-hard-to-define one. Exactly the opposite: in the context of a learning ecosystem, it should lead you to ask some hard-hitting questions:

- Does your learning culture support self-directed learning?

- Are employees encouraged to share information?

- Do employees compete in constructive ways, or disruptive (in the negative sense) ways?

- To what degree do you want, or need, to control the learning experience?

- Are you offering only basic skills needed the current roles, or are you developing employees for future roles?

- Do managers allow employees to take the time for training?

Where It All Comes Together:

Where and How Learning Ecosystem Parts Interface

In a natural ecosystem, the individual species and elements do not exist in isolation. Each is affected by, and contributes to, the other parts of the ecosystem. The same is true of a learning ecosystem. The difference is that the organization has some degree of control over this back-and-forth interaction. In fact, we can understand many of the trends in learning and development by looking at where the various parts of the learning ecosystem meet and interact.

People + Content:
Engaging Content and Reinforcement

It's true that people don't necessarily remember everything they are taught. One of the biggest reasons for this is that content is presented in ways that are not interesting or memorable, and that fail to incorporate best practices in adult learning.

When employees are actively engaged with what they learned, they are much more likely to retain (and use) that information, giving you a much better return on your training dollar. It also makes for a better overall learning experience.

How do you improve engagement and reinforcement?

Use content that is fresh and up to date. Make sure your content has elements that have been scientifically proven to be engaging for the adult learners. This should include: presenters on-screen, appropriate use of sound effects and music, relevant graphics, and, of course, the occasional use of humor. This provides an unexpected design that can be entertaining and keep the learner engaged.

Many training courses have relevance not only to our work lives, but personally as well. It's important to have a balance that keeps the learner coming back for more. For topics that are less interesting but necessary think compliance and safety training, it is necessary to find ways to connect the content to their day-to-day jobs.

Look beyond your training. Use reminders and cues to encourage recall of important material in multiple contexts.

Test their retention. Testing not only shows how well learners absorbed the information but also give them the opportunity to rehearse it, moving that information from short-term memory to long-term memory. This helps consolidate skills, and get more out of your training budget.

The right LMS technology will allow you to:

Access needed content. There are lots of ways to properly leverage off-the-shelf content. A good LMS should come with digestible, meaningful content ready to deliver in an easy to find system.

Measure, stategize, and grow. See what content employees are accessing, observe how well they comprehend the material, and track completion. You should be able to generate reports that break down this information by users, groups, courses, and topics.

Personalize needed company-specific content. An LMS should not just be a library of third-party off-the-shelf content, but a system for organizaing all of your content. The best way to do this is to give you your own set of authoring tools so you can seamlessly incorporate your own training data and internal training packages.

Technology + Content:
The Learning Management System

A learning management system (LMS) is a critical component for bringing together your content library and managing its implementation.

Technology + People:

Blended Learning

According to the originall definition by Stake and Horn, developed at Innosight, blended learning is "a formal education program in which a student learns at least in part throught delivery of content and instruction via digital and online media with some elemet of student control over time, place, path, or pace."

The idea is that eLearning is added to, or combined with, more personal face-to-face instruction. This allows learners to have more control over the eLearning situation, choosing the time and/or place (for example, home versus office or training center); their path (what they learn); and their pace (the rate at which they absorb content).

By definition, both people and technoloy are parts of a blended learning environment, creating a more efficient system overall. Studies have proven that blended learning offers a more personalized training eperience, reduces costs, and improves tracking, all while providing 24/7 access to training. It also provides a much better training environment for instructors, too.

For more, see our eBook on blended learning benefits.

According to Training Magazine's Industry Report, companies reported that **around 43% of training hours were delivered with blended-learning techniques in 2021 - making a significant increase from previous years where the percentage was lower at 23%.**

Social Learning Technologies allow employees to learn more by:

Following others: They can learn by observing what courses others are taking and reading their comments on courses of interest.

Engaging more: Employees are motivated by the actions of their peers. Social activity can encourage an employee to comment, re-read, or even compete.

Competing (in a healthy way): With the right technology, learners can initiate friendly competition with lifetime leaderboards, knowledge sharing, and training reinforcement quizzes.

Sharing more: When people come across good content, their inclination is to share. With the right technology, you can allow learners to recommend courses and even offer their own insights.

Technology + Learning Culture:
Blended Learning

According to Datareportal, as of January 2024 the United States has 239 million social media users. **This equals 70.1% of the total US population.**

Social media has been the culmination of applying technology to people's natural social behaviors. According to the 70-20-10 model we learn twice as much from interacting with others than we do from formal learning events, why not apply this technology to learning ecosystems?

Social learning technologies leverage workplace workplace friendships and connections to enhance the learning experience in an entertaining way.

People + Learning Culture:
Management and Mentorship

Believe it or not, formal training and mentorship are not as much at odds as you might think. The two approaches go together. Just as you can't "learn without doing," you can also can't "do without learning."

Many successful organizations use a mix of mentorship or coaching arrangements along with their formal training. This creates benefits for both those mentored and the mentors themselves!

What is the Benefit?

It keeps mentorship from becoming a crutch. When a wise mentor has ready answers, it can turn mentorship into a crutch. Coupling on-demand training content with a great mentorship program increases autonomy as well as access.

It gives employees a sense of ownership. While mentoring helps sharpen skills already learned and provides advice on how to implement them, strong leaders will want a sense of "ownership" when it comes to their own career development.

Mentorships also promote humility and team focus. Those same strong leaders might struggle with asking for help. A mentorship builds right into the learning culture the expectation that someone will ask questions and seek help.

Mentors need help, too. One (unpublished) study by an employees assessment firm found that the main area where leadership training was most lacking in modern corporations was in coaching and mentoring. New leaders are hungry to learn how to be good mentors, but few organizations are helping them learn how to do that. Again, proper training can help.

People

Content

Technology

Culture

Strategy

Where it All Comes Together
(Strategy)

Learning and development decisions should be made from a strategic point of view, with all the components of the learning ecosystem pointed toward achieving the organization's strategic goals. Without this, L&D quickly becomes an afterthought...one that faces the chopping block when a budget crisis hits.

With this, companies thrive. A worldwide study by Ambient (and reported by HR Review) found that **organziations where L&D departments align their KPIs with senior management are 13x more likely report increased revenue and 50% more likely to see positive changes in staff behavior.** Learning strategy and corporate strategy go hand-in-hand!

44 Questions to Help You Start Thinking About Your Learning Ecosystem

If you want your learning and development programs to be successful, you need to pay attention to your entire learning ecosystem. When you start doing so, you'll discover that investments in learning technology, content, and learning culture are well worth it. In the end, though, they are all strategic investments in your people.

We've covered a lot here, and I don't expect all of this information to sink in overnight. But after years in this business, we here at HSI have discovered that understanding and retention are better when the learner gets some reflection questions after taking a course.

So, here are some items for you to reflect on your learning ecosystem. Enjoy!

Corporate Strategy

What values does your organization hold, and how can your learning ecosystem be aligned with those values?

What are the KPIs for your learning and development department, and do they reflect those organizational goals?

What drives those KPIs?

People

What competencies are needed to implement your corporate strategy, and how well are you training HiPos for those?

What people form a part of your learning ecosystem? (Include all stakeholders.)

Who is responsible for the health of your learning ecosystem? Who drives its success?

Are managers and employees given different content specific to their roles? Why, or why not?

To what extent do you leverage internal SMEs? External SMEs?

Content

To what extent are employees using internet searches to get information relevant to their jobs?

How much of employee training really is informal, versus through formal training?

How much of your content is generated internally, versus off-the-shelf?

How much content needs to be generated internally, verus using quality off-the-shelf alternatives?

How do employees feel about your content, generally? Does it seem fresh? Dated? Simple? Overly complex?

How engaging is your content, overall? How do you measure it?

Technology

To what extent are you using technology to track and measure learning and development?

Which skills and topics are sought after the most by your employees? Are you providing those skills and topics?

In what ways can technology be used to relieve your training staff of some of their more burdensome tasks?

Your LMS

Is your training content accessible 24/7/365, on any platform, anywhere?

Do you feel your organization has a handle on who needs what content, and when?

Does your learning management system give you easy-to-use tools to create your own content? If so, are they being used?

Reinforcement and Retention

How is learning being reinforced throughout your organization?

How is learned content made relevant to individuals in their specific roles?

What kinds of additional resources are made available along with courses?

What kinds of reminders, cues, and signs are being implemented to help with recall?

Learning Culture

What kind of learning cultrue do you have: Traditional, Immersive, Pioneering, or Free-Form?

Does your learning culture encourage mentorship relationships?

Does your learning culture encourage self-directed learning?

Does your learning culture allow for social learning and/or competition?

Blended Learning

What strategic tasks or mentoring relationships could your training staff focus on if class preparation were not a factor?

Do trainers have access to blended learning tools, such as pre-work and post-work content?

What additional expenses are you accruing by having off-campus employee trainings? What about on-site visitors for training?

Management and Mentorship

Do you give your HiPo employees opportunities for self-directed learning?

What kinds of content are your HiPo employees seeking out?

When and where are your HiPo employees accessing addtional content?

Does your organization promote a healthy learning culture by offering mentorship opportunities?

Are HiPo employees encouraged to take additional training at the start of mentorship/coaching relationships?

Are you training your internal mentors themselves? Do they know how to mentor well?

Learning Ecosystem Strategy

What parts of your learning ecosystem need greater scrutiny: People, Content, Technology, Learning Culture, or Strategy?

Where are learners getting "stuck" in your ecosystem?

Are they disengaged from the learning experience?

Having trouble seeing the relevance of what they learn? Failing to apply what they learn?

What, if anything, is currently disrupting your learning ecosystem? How can it be brought back into balance?

What can you do, today, to begin the process of improving your organization's learning ecosystem?

About HSI

HSI is your single-source partner for EHS, Compliance, and Professional Development solutions. HSI provides integrated e-learning content, training solutions, and cloud-based software designed to enable your business to improve safety, operations, and employee development. Across all industries, HSI helps safety managers, and technical employees, human resources, first responders, and operational leaders train and develop their workforce, keep workers safe, and meet regulatory and operational compliance requirements. HSI's focus is on training, software, and services for safety and compliance, workforce development, industrial skills, and emergency care.

HSI is a unique partner that offers a suite of cloud-based software solutions including learning management, safety management, chemical SDS management, and more, integrated with content and training so businesses can not only monitor and manage multiple workflows in one system, but train employees via one partner.

For more information, visit **hsi.com**