

Samuel A. Malone

# White paper: Learning Content Strategy

SAMUEL A MALONE

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# WHITE PAPER: LEARNING CONTENT STRATEGY

Times of immense change require a total uprooting of everything we thought we knew. This is particularly true when it comes to learning content strategy.

The Coronavirus Pandemic has drastically changed the needs of the modern learner. It is essential we adjust learning strategies to meet these new needs.

Following the key steps in this whitepaper will ensure the success of your learning content strategy both during and following the pandemic.

White paper: Learning Content Strategy

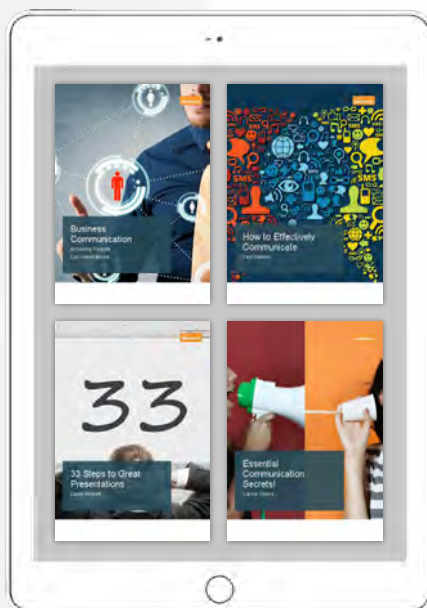
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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

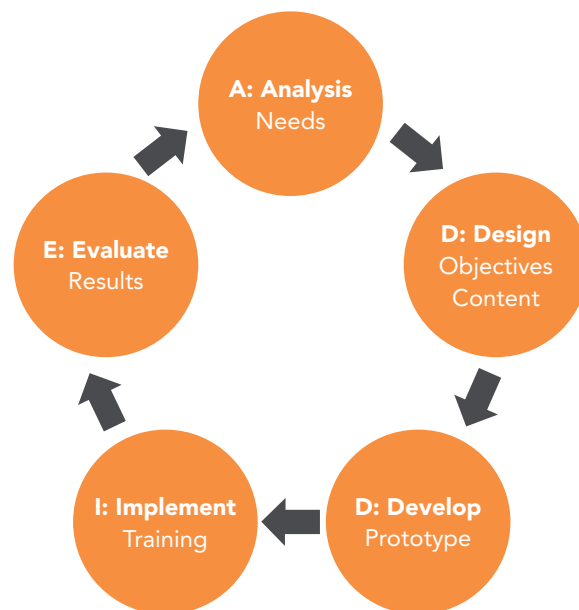
Samuel A Malone is a self-employed training consultant, lecturer, moderator, examiner and author. He has published numerous journal articles in the fields of learning, study skills, personal development, motivation and management. He is the author of 21 books published in Ireland, the UK and worldwide on learning, personal development, study skills and business management. Some of his books have been translated into foreign languages including Russian, Spanish, Danish and Norwegian, and gone into second editions. His most recent book (2014) is titled *Awaken the Genius Within – A Guide to Lifelong Learning Skills* (Glasnevin Publishing, Dublin). He has a M.Ed. with distinction (in training and development) from the University of Sheffield and is a qualified Chartered Management Accountant (ACMA), Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA) and a Chartered Secretary (ACIS) and a member of the Irish Institute of Industrial Engineers. He is a Fellow of the Irish Institute of Training and Development (FIITD).

Previous books published by the author include *Why Some People Succeed and Others Fail* (Glasnevin Publishing, Dublin), *Learning about Learning* (CIPD, London), *A Practical Guide to Learning in the Workplace* (The Liffey Press, Dublin), *Better Exam Results* (Elsevier/CIMA, London) and *Mind Skills for Managers* (Gower, Aldershot, UK) and *How to Set Up and Manage a Corporate Learning Centre* (Gower, Aldershot, UK). The last two books become best sellers for Gower in their training and business categories. *Better Exam Results* proved to be a best seller for Elsevier/CIMA and is still in print 30 years after its earliest incarnation. Most of his books are available online from Amazon.co.uk.

The author's latest books have been published online by bookboon.com in 2018 namely:

- The Role of the Brain in Learning
- How Adults Learn
- Learning Models and Styles
- Experiential Learning
- Learning with Technology
- The Ultimate Success Factor
- Series of Books on People Skills for Managers
- Series of Books on Creativity Skills for Managers
- Series of Books on Training Models for learning facilitators

# 1 LEARNING CONTENT STRATEGY & THE ADDIE MODEL



**ADDIE Model**

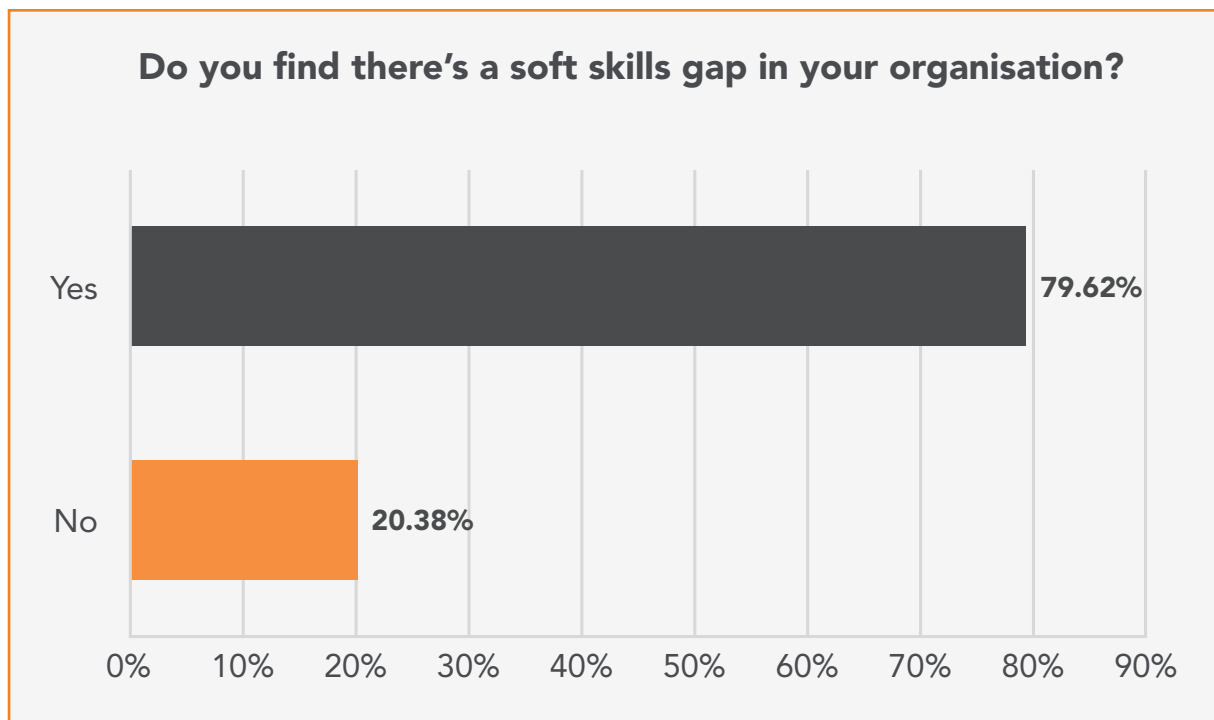
## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The benefits of learning and development are:

- Improved employee and organisational performance resulting in higher productivity and capability of employees and profitability for the organisation with improved customer service and return on investment. This helps the organisation successfully survive in a globalised competitive economy. This is on the assumption that learning and development is tied to the vision, mission and corporate goals of the organisation. It is now accepted that there is a virtuous circle between learning and development and employee and organisation performance.
- Improved expertise operating new technology and handling machines with reduced waste, rejection rates and inefficiency.
- Motivation and retention of employees is improved and tardiness and absenteeism reduced.
- L&D creates a mindset of lifelong learning and continuous improvement – a culture of learning which is needed if the organisation desires to be a learning organisation and survive into the future.
- Showing that the organisation is actively involved in L&D and that its systems, policies and procedures support the activity. There should be an egalitarian and transparent system for learning opportunities. If employees see a clear relationship between effort, career development and promotion it motivates them to learn and work harder. There is nothing more motivational than seeing line managers take an active interest in your learning and development and that promotion is clearly linked to hard work, loyalty and L&D.
- Increased job satisfaction and loyal employees with more competence, confidence, self-reliance and self-esteem. Employees are more innovative, better informed to problem solve and make judicious decisions. This is because they have a better understanding of their organisation, of the role of stakeholders and of the unique culture, products, services and technology of the business.
- Appropriate induction training helps new employees acclimatise more quickly to the culture, rules, regulations, policies and procedures and business of the organisation. This helps new employees get up to speed quickly.
- Through management succession, talent management, professional development and leadership programmes creating home-grown managers from within the organisation rather than totally relying on external recruitment.

Learning and development should be:

- Applicable to the job and applied to work situations. Formal learning accounts for only a small proportion of the total learning taking place with informal learning methods taking a more important role.
- Relevant for the learner involved.
- Tied to business goals, policies and procedures.
- Perceived as practical, useful and important by the learner.
- Actively encouraged and supported by HRM, senior and line managers.
- Supported and reinforced by corporate objectives and HRM policies and procedures.
- Seen as a capital investment and an increase in intellectual capital rather than a cost. Intellectual capital is now seen as an important competitive strength.



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The following trends are taking place in the modern workplace:

- Short shelf life for skills due to rapid technological, short product life cycles and environmental change. Because of this and fierce competition organisations now demand higher performance and better business results from any investment in training. Some commentators have appropriately called the current fast paced, changing and constantly evolving environment as **VUCA** which stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.
- As well as maintaining fluency in technical skills there is an ongoing demand for soft skills such as interpersonal relationship, communication, teamwork, customer service, time management, innovation, and writing skills for managers and employees alike.
- Microlearning: – bite-size digestible learning content including eBooks, blogs, work-based articles and videos on YouTube which can be accessed easily through Learning Management Systems. Learners retain more information when it is presented in short simple chunks as opposed to rambling PowerPoint presentations. Microlearning via eBooks, mobile smartphone and tablets encourages content sharing between peers.
- Just-in-time learning with the right information, at the right time and place which solves immediate work-related problems. As time passes online learning like eBooks supported by Learning Management Systems is playing a more significant role in meeting these needs. Nevertheless, formal classroom learning has still an important role to play in the learning and development of employees.
- Mobile learning through smartphones. About two thirds of the population have mobile phones and so Bring Your Own Device is fast becoming acceptable in the workplace. People are used to using smartphones for all aspects of their lives and so it is only natural that they will want to use them at work.
- Shift towards devolving responsibility for Learning and Development to line managers and learners themselves. Learners now demand that they are part of the learning design and that they are actively engaged in the learning process including content learning strategies. Learners want to take more ownership of their development and become more self-directed proactive learners. This means that the traditional role of T&D professionals as formal course providers has significantly diminished.

- A culture of teamwork, innovation, continuous improvement and lifelong learning. Most organisations are now team based and so need team management and leadership skills.
- Facilitating time during the week for employees to engage in learning. A frequent complaint of employees is that they haven't time to devote to learning activities.
- Learning and Development needs to shift from preparing employees to solve known problems and deal with existing jobs, to preparing employees to fill jobs that don't exist yet.
- According to the CIPD Learning and Development Annual Survey Report in 2015 in-house methods remain most common – on-the-job training, in-house development programmes and coaching and mentoring by line managers remain the most popular development methods. The use of learning technologies is more common in larger organisations with the use of blended learning and eBooks expected to rise significantly. The use of formal external training programmes is more popular with smaller companies.
- According to the 2015 CIPD Report three-fifths expect their use of e-learning courses to grow, over a third see their use of virtual classrooms and webinars rising, and a quarter anticipate an increase in mobile device-based learning. Nevertheless, face-to-face delivery methods will continue to play an important role in L&D.

Florida State University initially developed the ADDIE model in the 1970s to explain 'the processes involved in the formulation of an instructional systems development (ISD) program for military interservice training that will adequately train individuals to do a particular job and which can be applied to any interservice curriculum development activity.' The ADDIE model is widely used by instructional designers and content developers as the standard method to create instructional course material. ADDIE is an acronym for the five phases of course development of analysis, design, develop, implement and evaluate. It is a comprehensive systematic approach to learning and development ensuring that all the relevant stages of learning including training needs analysis, content strategy and evaluation are included and not overlooked. The five stages of the **ADDIE** model in more detail are:

## 1.2 ANALYSIS

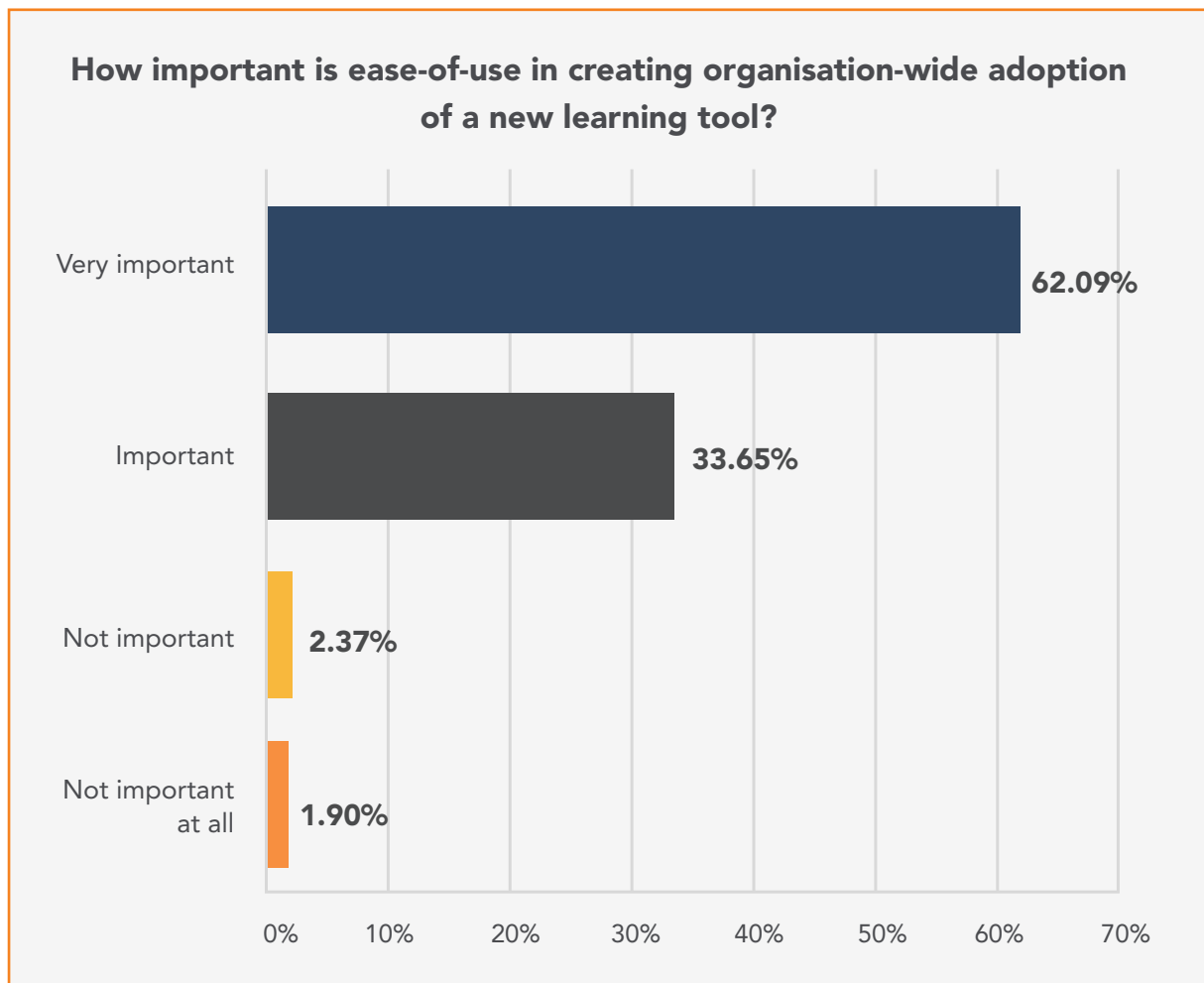
This is about identifying training needs and developing specific instructional goals to meet these. Training needs can be identified through the following or a combination of the following: performance appraisal, personal development plans, continuing professional development, succession needs, employee surveys, an inventory of skills, exit interviews, 360-degree feedback, job requirement analysis, organisational analysis, decentralisation, internal audit, downsizing, reengineering, human resource analysis, empowerment, feedback from customers and meeting the requirements of environmental and technological change. In addition, training needs can arise through internal promotions and transfers, new standards, new regulations, procedures and systems, new products and services, new customers, new equipment, and requests from senior and line managers. These days performance appraisal is no longer a once a year phenomenon but rather a mechanism for continuous feedback and corrective action so that the learner can take ongoing action to improve performance.

Gap analysis is a useful technique for determining training needs. The organisation evaluates what they are doing now and compares this to what they need to do in the future. They then analyse the reasons for the performance gap. Consider the performance gap from a KSA view-point – knowledge, skills and attitudes or behaviour. Then consider the type of training intervention which might bridge the gap and improve performance.

What will our learners be able to do as a result of the training intervention? What are their expectations about the training programme? It is also about finding out the existing level of knowledge, skills and capabilities of course participants before the training is undertaken and building on this. We need to know about any personal obstacles they have to learning such as anxiety, colour blindness, hard of hearing, concentration issues, attitude problems and internet access. These may need to be addressed before the training begins. Have any of your learners acquired learning to learn skills? Learning to learn skills will help learners learn more efficiently and effectively. In order to find out the characteristics of our learners, we need to do surveys, interviews, observations, pre-tests, or pre-assessments of the learners to collect the data about them.

Delivery options will be considered in order to pick the appropriate ones for the particular learning styles and training needs of participants. Consider the timeframe for delivery and what you want your learners to be able to do after

they complete the training and return to the workplace. In addition, consider the trainers and coaches who will provide the training. Are they familiar with learning theory and how adults learn? Will the learners be able to apply the knowledge and skills learned back on-the-job? Does the working environment facilitate the transfer of learning?



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### 1.3 DESIGN OF LEARNING CONTENT

This is about designing the learning environment, learning goals, learning objectives, lesson plans, delivery format, learning and development activities, content, support materials and assessment instruments. Content has been defined as anything that answers a question an employee needs an answer to in order to change attitudes and behaviour, improve performance or solve a problem. It's about getting the right content to the right people, in the right place, at the right time for the right reason.

It is important that learning content is timely, shareable, engaging, entertaining, rewarding, relevant, easy to find and has clear objectives. Most learners appreciate if there are recommendations on how to apply the learning with opportunities for practice. They also like technologies that allow them to network and learn together through communities of practice. Content includes written content, discussion, face to face instruction, eBooks, games or animation, simulations, images and multimedia.

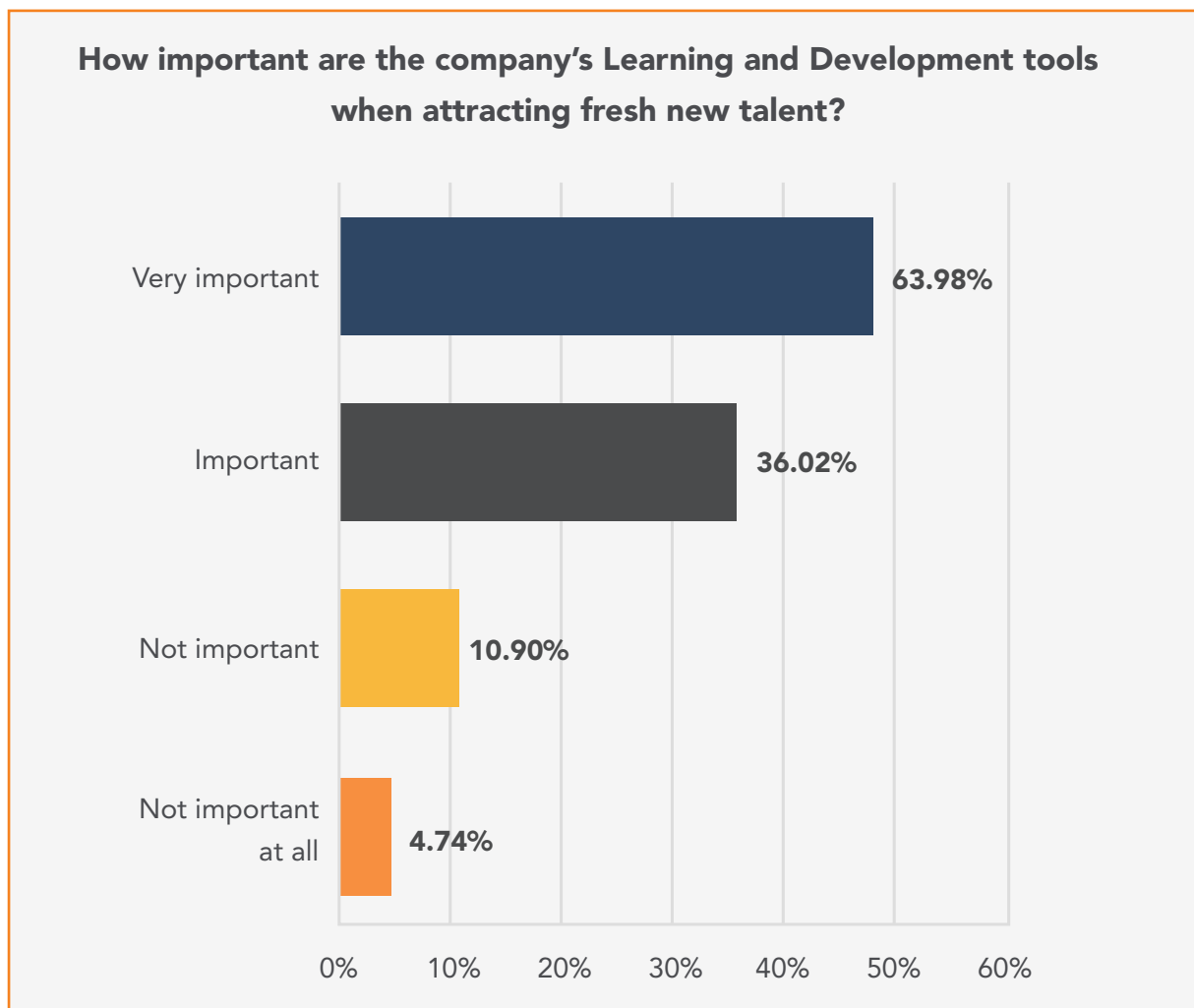
Content can be provided by off-the-job training and on-the-job training. Off-the-job training includes classroom instruction, eBooks, games, simulation, role play, case studies, reading and self-managed learning and further education. Typical off-the-job training programmes include; induction training, product training, customer service, health and safety, compliance, information technology, coping with change, diversity, quality, interpersonal relations and communication and ethics. Ebooks are suitable for all these topics and more.

On-the-job training which is more practical, memorable and effective includes job instruction, coaching, mentoring, peer coaching, job rotation, project work, assignments, deputizing, shadowing, secondment, and interdepartmental transfers. Content can be created in-house or off-the-self and can be computer or internet-based or live instruction. Blended learning occurs where internet-based learning such as eBooks is combined with live instruction or coaching. In-house is more relevant as it is based on the unique products, service, technology, goals or culture of the organisation and learners can see more readily how it can be used in the work context.

Customised content reflected in real-world scenarios remains the gold standard. This should be combined with interactive content to engage learners, increase their attention and increase learning and completion rates. However, it is possible to adapt and curate off-the-self training to meet the unique requirements of the organisation. This means it should be checked by subject matter experts for relevance and reliability. It is important to continually review content and cull outdated and irrelevant material.

In reality content is already being produced socially and informally. Employees are already accessing content when they need it on their mobile devices. To employees it doesn't matter where the content originates provided it is reliable and helps them solve work-based problems. Many organisations are struggling

to cope with this trend because of the control, security and reliability issues that bring your own devices (BYOD) to work creates. Content should be checked by subject matter experts to make sure it is accurate and reliable. Guiding employees to suitable content is already an important role for L&D professionals. In addition, employees with the relevant expertise to solve problems provide peer-based coaching to their colleagues which is immediate and helpful. To employees learning suitable content is anything which helps them at their moment of need. Learning professionals need to adapt to this phenomenon and need to adapt their approach and content strategies accordingly.



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Traditionally content was the sole preserve of the L&D professional and delivered to employees through formal training via classroom instruction or in an online course. One fact that we know about learning is that we learn best in a context that simulates as closely as possible the conditions of the real workplace.

The seventy/twenty/ten model which is generally accepted in L&D circles, states that people learn through a combination of on-the-job training (70%), relationship-based learning or learning from others (20%) and through formal structured learning (10%). This model highlights the importance of on-the-job-training.

When designing programmes, it is important to know the difference between learning goals and learning objectives. Learning objectives are more specific, describing in more explicit detail what you expect your learners will know and be able to do at the end of the programme. Begin each learning objective with an action verb, something that learners can do at the end of the programme which is capable of being measured or observed. The design should be comprehensible, sequential and logical. Consider how you will get the participants to pay attention during the programme and the various approaches you can use to do so such as eBooks, lectures, demonstrations, discussion groups, humour, storytelling, practice sessions, online over the Internet, reflection and audio/visual approaches. Some of these approaches are more engaging and interesting than others and thus more effective as learning tools.

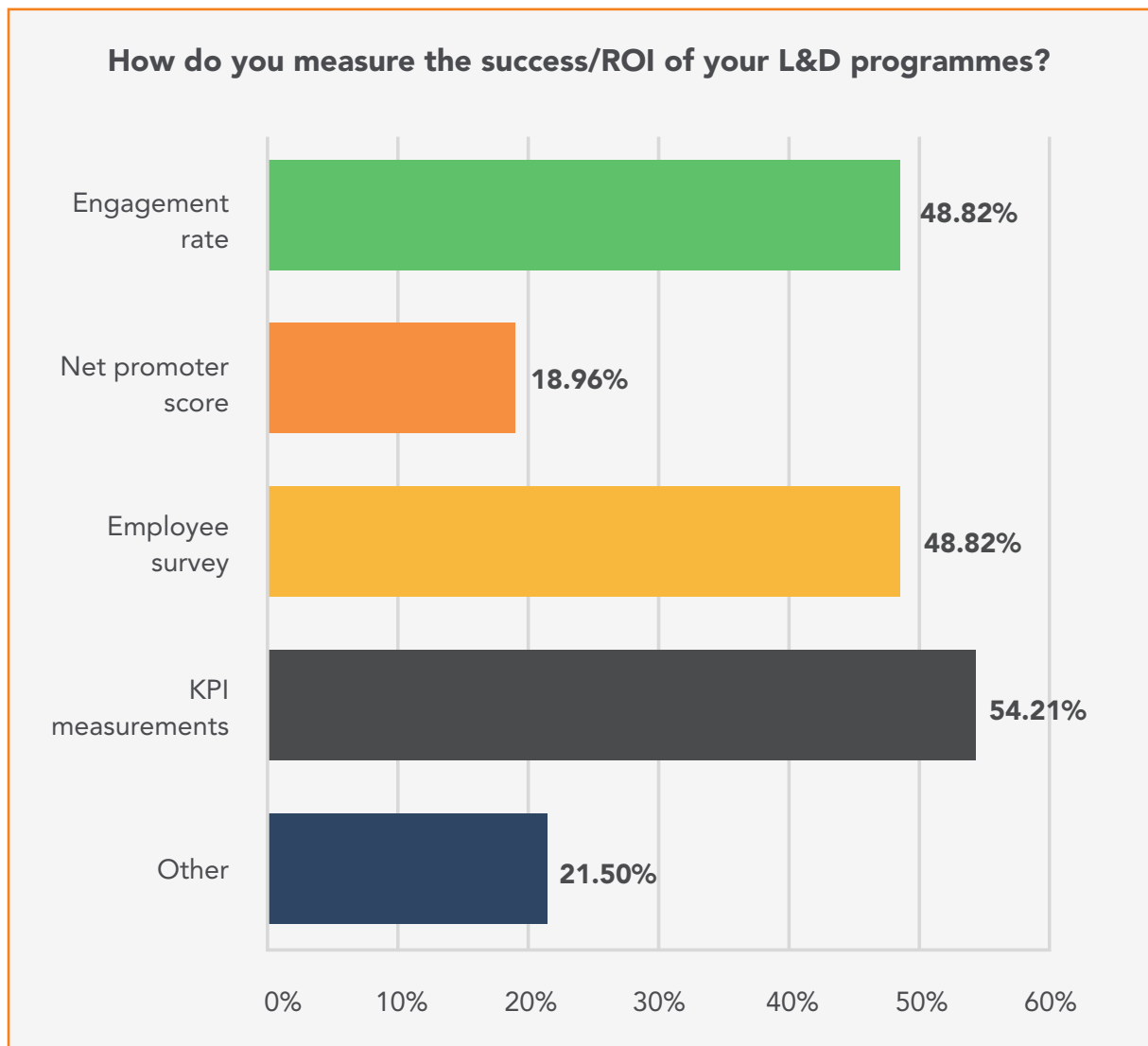
In general, when designing learning programmes keep in mind that adults are self-directed, practical, need to have a purpose for learning (WIIFM – What’s in it for me?), like to use their experience, need to be consulted and respected and want to apply the learning in a practical way to real-life situations and problems.

## **1.4 DEVELOP**

This is about creating a prototype to test out in advance how good and acceptable the programme is likely to be. It is an opportunity to develop and test, course material, handouts, reference material, workshop activities, and assessments, and to correct any glitches or faults and deal with criticisms at an early stage. Make sure that you cater for the various learning styles of participants, such as visual, kinaesthetic and auditory. Most people have a mixture of these styles. Consider what you want your participants to be able to do after they attend the training. Ideally, they should be able to apply their learning to improve their job performance and increase productivity when they return to work.

If e-learning is involved, programmers develop or integrate technologies to meet the needs of learners. Designers create storyboards and graphics. Learning material designed around stories, graphics, animation and simulation makes it more interesting, impactful, compelling and memorable. Testers debug content,

materials and procedures to see that it actually works in practice. The project will be reviewed and revised in line with feedback. It is important that content is kept up to date and relevant to the needs of the learner and the organisation. This process should be routinized so that content never goes out of date and is always current and useful for the needs of learners.



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## 1.5 IMPLEMENTATION

Without implementation nothing gets achieved. We need to consider three phases at this stage: - training the trainers, preparing the learners and creating the right environment for the learning. Training facilitators may need to be trained in the appropriate techniques, facilitation, presentation skills and technologies for running the programme. This would include delivering the



learning to the smartphones and tablets of the learners so that they can access the information quickly and easily when and where they need it. For classroom instruction it is about running the actual training programme and having the right tools, techniques, equipment, and learning materials in place. This would include the curriculum, learning outcomes, method of delivery, handouts and testing procedures.

The learning facilitator prepares the learners by explaining the purpose of the training and how it fits into learners' role and responsibilities and how it contributes to the business goals of the organisation. If you demonstrate a skill give the learners an opportunity to apply, practice and reflect on the knowledge they were taught. During the implementation it is a good idea to keep a record of the good and bad things about the process so that you can improve on it in subsequent presentations. Live classroom learning is best achieved in a non-threatening, stress-free, enjoyable, collaborative environment. It is important that the learning facilitator engages the attention and interests of the learners as otherwise the whole process will be a waste of time.

## **1.6 EVALUATE**

Evaluation is the final stage of the ADDIE process. This is finding out if the course programme has been successful in meeting its objectives and delivered the anticipated behaviour change, knowledge, skills and results. This may be done at two stages – during the process of delivery and at the end of the programme. After the course, it is important to ascertain if the knowledge and skills acquired during the programme have been transferred to the workplace and that the anticipated business needs in the form of improved performance have been met. After all this is what training and development is all about – improved job performance and productivity. Get the feedback of learners and line managers to ascertain this is the case. With this in mind ask yourself 'How can I improve the next learning and development programme.'

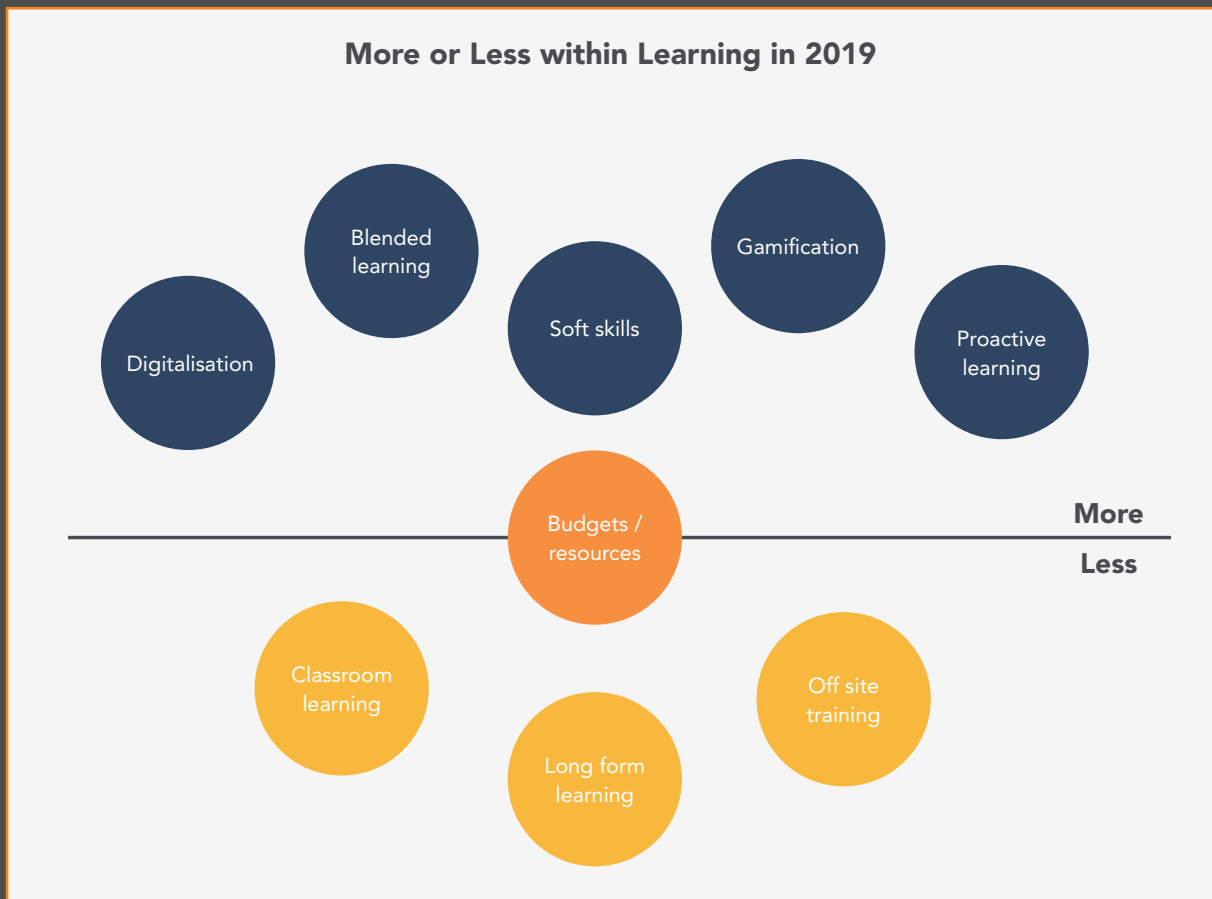
In practice, most organisations limit their evaluations to participant satisfaction because of the difficulties and cost posed by more sophisticated methods. However, where L&D is aligned with business strategy evaluations tend to be more in depth and the data collected more widely used.

One of the best-known and accepted models of evaluation is Kirkpatrick's. He called it the four levels of evaluation - the chain of evidence. At level 1 you get evidence that learners liked the programme; at level 2 that they learned the knowledge, skills and attitudes; at level 3 that they changed their job-related behaviour for the better and level 4 that you are going to get the desired organizational results from the training. A fifth level has been added to consider the need for a return on investment.

The five levels of evaluation in more detail are:

- **Level 1. Reaction.** This refers to participants' feelings or attitudes toward the training intervention, usually collected through surveys and questionnaires. Commonly known as 'happy sheets.' These assess participants' opinions on various aspects of the training intervention such as relevance, content, interest, structure and standard of delivery. They may also assess the competence of the training officer's presentation, and solicit suggestions for the improvement of the overall content. Issues such as relevance, enjoyment, engagement, environment, comfort and practicability may be covered. This is a measure of participant personal satisfaction taken immediately on the conclusion of the training course. At best it provides subjective impressions and should not be considered proof of learning. Nevertheless, it is good to know whether or not people were happy or disappointed with the training and that it held their interest and attention. In addition, the feedback can be used to improve the content of the training expeditiously. Although favourable reactions may provide a positive atmosphere for learning, they do not always lead to learning.
- **Level 2. Learning.** The assessment of learning involves determining how much of the training material participants have absorbed. This includes the principles, theories, facts, techniques, skills, knowledge and attitudes that the training is designed to convey. A variety of techniques, including paper and pencil tests, multiple-choice questions, question and answer sessions, simulations, interviews, and peer evaluations, can be used to test learning. A pre-test and post-test can be carried out so that any change in learning as a result of the training can be identified and quantified. This type of evaluation is highly relevant for technical skills training, regulatory and compliance training, but can be difficult where measurement of attitudes is involved and proof of behaviour change is needed.

- **Level 3. Behaviour.** This level focuses on the use of learned materials in the workplace. Since learning demonstrated in a training course may not be applied on the job, participants' performance following the training intervention indicates to what extent behaviour has actually changed. Observation and interviews may be used and feedback from line managers sought to assess the degree of behaviour change. Participants should be encouraged to draw up action plans for skills learned so that they can transfer them to the job after the training is complete. Skills and knowledge that are not quickly transferred are quickly forgotten so that the benefits of the training are lost. The evaluation of job performance should target aspects of the job related to the training objectives. Behaviour-rating scales are frequently used in this type of evaluation.
- **Level 4. Results.** This category deals with the relationship between the result of the training intervention and organizational goals. Results include outcome measures such as profitability, sales turnover, productivity, achievement of standards, turnover, job satisfaction, morale, accident rates, reject rates, improved teamwork, and grievances. The selection of results measures should be based on the intended outcome of the intervention. External factors such as political, economic, social, legal, demographic and technological forces greatly affect organizational and business performance so that the results attributable to training may be hard to isolate.
- **Level 5. Return on Investment.** This level has been added to Kirkpatrick's model by some academics. It translates the output of the training intervention into financial value for the business. This requires a cost/benefit analysis to determine the return on investment to the organisation. This is very time-consuming and expensive to carry out and consequently is rarely done. Nevertheless, it is the ultimate measure of effectiveness for any organisation and should always be aspirational.



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## 1.7 CONCLUSION

The ADDIE model is a systematic approach to identification of training needs, content design and evaluation which ensures that you take the needs of the learner into account, the goals that drive the instruction, and the objectives learners will follow to ensure that they do what you want them to do. Learning content strategy should be seen as an integrated part of the ADDIE model and not treated in isolation. The focus is on outcomes, using a systems perspective with the intention of adding value. ADDIE is a useful acronym which will help users remember the stages involved in the model including the importance of initially doing a training needs assessment and finally doing evaluation.

It can be used in many environments including online eBook learning, face-to-face classroom instruction, and coaching. One of the attractions of the ADDIE model is its flexibility – it can be used with both individual, classroom and online instruction. In addition, its phases can be modified to suit individual needs.

The disadvantage of the model is that the process can be time-consuming and costly. In addition, it assumes that training is the solution to the problem, whereas the problem may be caused by the conditions in the workplace environment. These include; inefficiency, quality issues, inadequate resources, power and politics, recruitment, corporate culture, poor policies, systems, procedures, job design and equipment, not to mention inferior line management practices such as poor communication, leadership, and a failure to motivate employees. It is best if these issues are rectified first before any training is undertaken as training may not be the solution to the problem.

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