



# Emerging Stronger

## Shifting L&D Perspectives

### Smart BOL<sup>2</sup>D Action to Drive Business Value

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# The Reality of Disruption

*The priorities and plans of organisations around the world were upended in 2020. While the speed of business had been increasing for many years, the rapid change when the pandemic hit was unprecedented. Organisations swiftly cut through barriers to protect their workforce and maintain business continuity. Rapid change provided unique challenges and opportunities for L&D. Almost three years later the reality is that disruption of one form or another is ongoing and the challenges and opportunities are evergreen.*

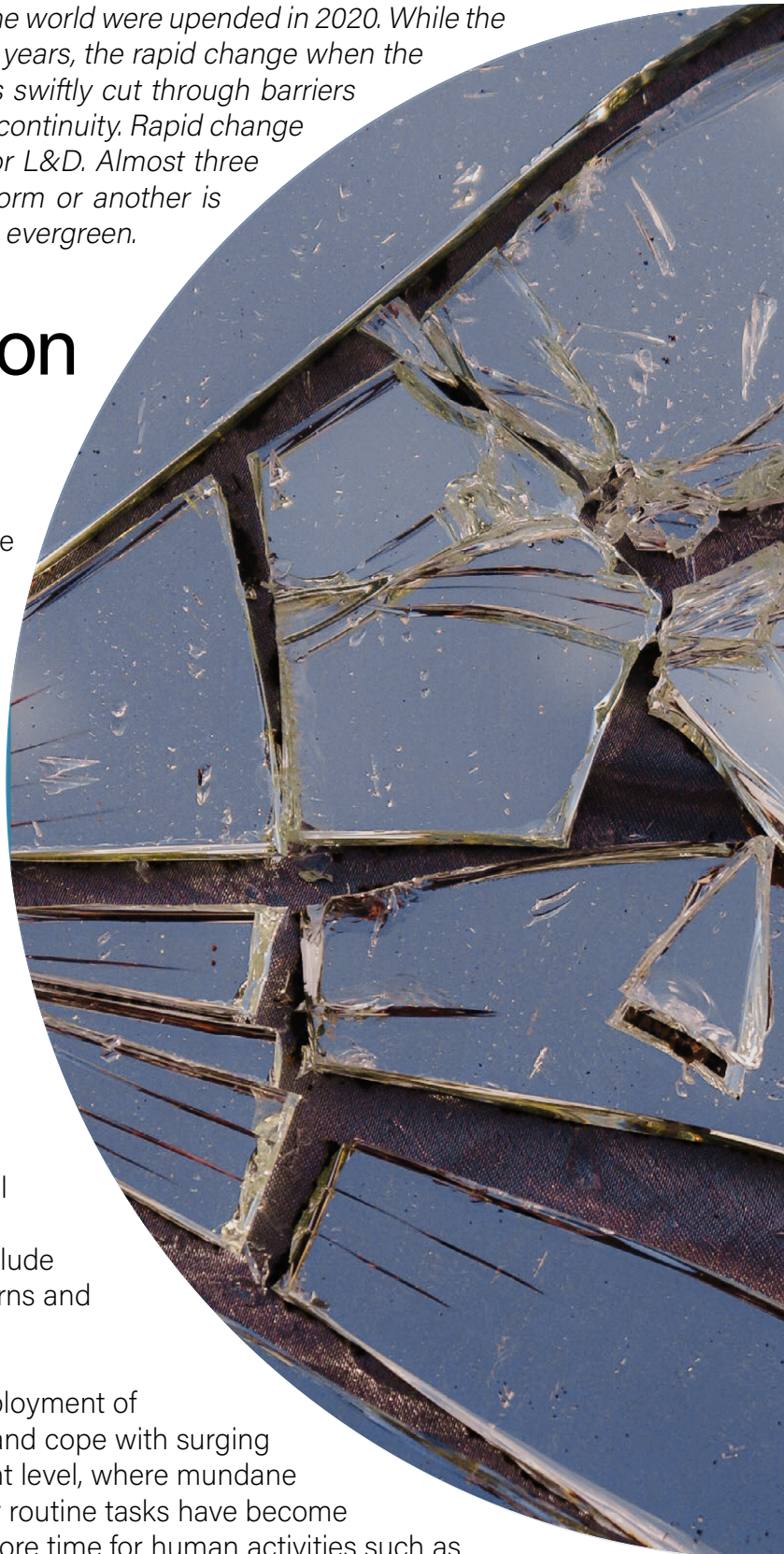
## Workplace Disruption Post Pandemic

During the years of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a significant increase in employees working remotely. What is becoming increasingly apparent is that hybrid and remote work for the knowledge worker is now becoming the norm.

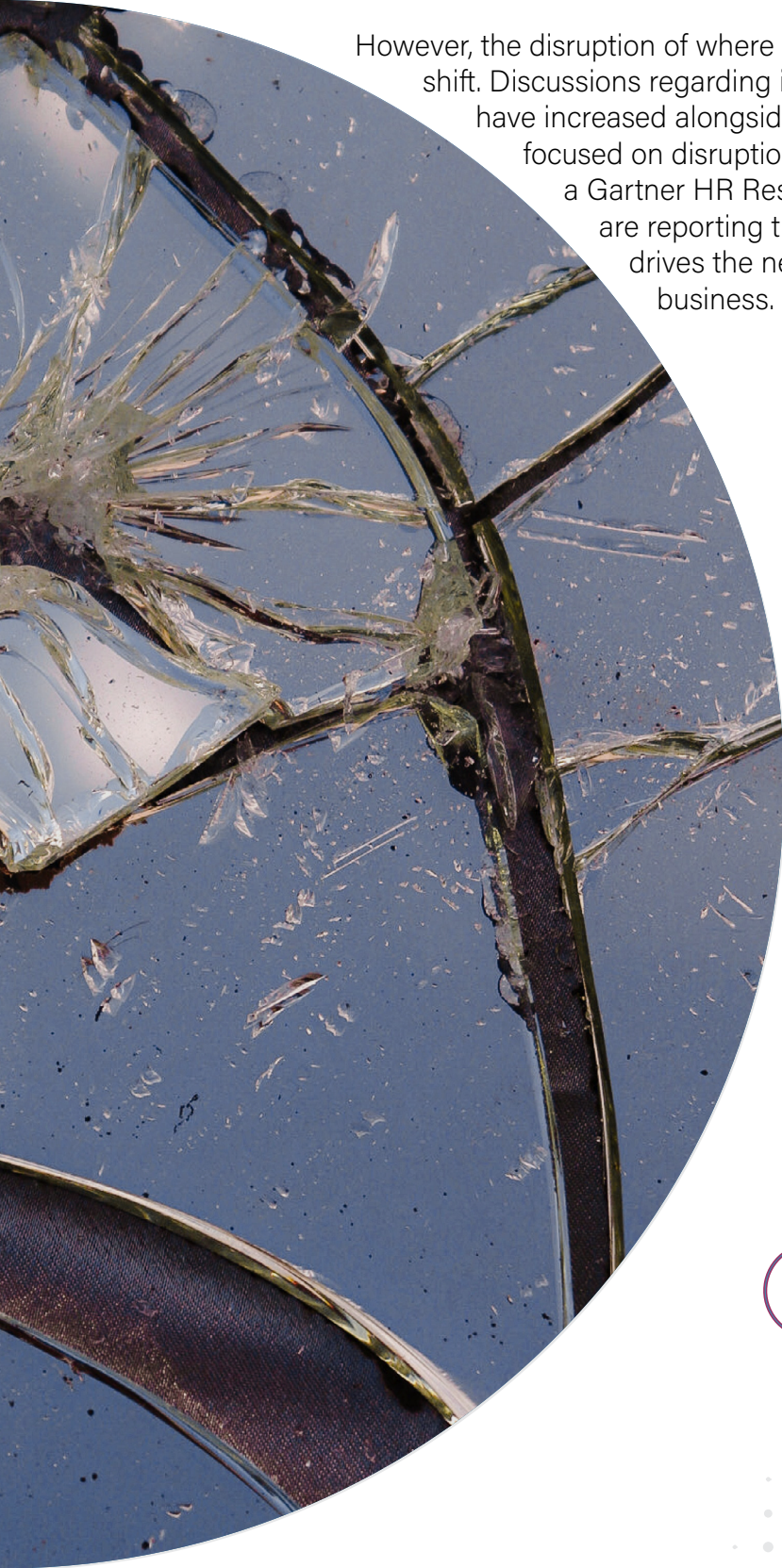
'Looking to the future, 60% of workers with jobs that can be done from home say when the coronavirus outbreak is over, if they have the choice, they'd like to work from home all or most of the time. This is up from 54% who said the same in 2020. Among those who are currently working from home all or most of the time, 78% say they'd like to continue to do so after the pandemic, up from 64% in 2020.'

Clearly, businesses that offer this flexibility will see hybrid or remote work offerings as not being a differentiator but as 'business as usual.' Physical workplaces have changed to protect employees who cannot work remotely. Adjustments now include new personal safety protocols, altered shift patterns and changes to workplace layout.

We've also seen many companies accelerate deployment of automation and AI to reduce workplace density and cope with surging demand. This is especially so on the management level, where mundane tasks like scheduling, payroll approvals and other routine tasks have become more automated, therefore allowing managers more time for human activities such as building employee relationships.







However, the disruption of where people sit while working has not been the only shift. Discussions regarding issues such as equity, fairness and inclusion have increased alongside flexible work. While our initial research was focused on disruption from a remote and hybrid work perspective, a Gartner HR Research report<sup>2</sup> indicates that 82% of employees are reporting that their workplaces lack fairness. This further drives the need for a change in how L&D partners within the business.

# Now what? Changing the Rules of Workplace Learning

‘We’re having conversations within our company about how this changes how we want to work. What does work mean? Humanity has an opportunity to have that discussion right now.’

Brandon Carson

Learning and Development often plays a critical role in periods of upheaval, and the pandemic years were no different. In 2020 some L&D leaders saw an opportunity in this disruption: they were ready to scale up to meet demand, or to lean into shifts that they had been advocating for. Rapid digital solutions such as curated content and short live online sessions were deployed to support people to adapt to remote work.<sup>3</sup> By mid-2020 some teams faced new demands at the cutting edge of critical business changes. However, others were ill-equipped to adapt and were increasingly sidelined or scrambling to keep up.

Business is still in a liminal state, reshaping work and workplaces. As we have established, remote and hybrid work will not be decreasing, and other aspects of work and workplaces are shifting. Regardless of where you sit on the spectrum between essential and sidelined, L&D is at a critical juncture. Disruption has changed the rules and relationships, creating opportunities for L&D to reposition services, rebuild credibility, re-think value - and to emerge stronger.

There is good news on the horizon. According to the 2022 *LinkedIn Learning Report* 'nearly three-fourths of L&D leaders agree that L&D has become more influential over the past year.'<sup>4</sup> This means, however, that L&D must take on a different perspective - working more cross-functionally, and becoming more strategic in how they work with others.



# How?

Michelle Ockers (Founder of Learning Uncut), Shannon Tipton (Founder of Learning Rebels) and Laura Overton (Independent Industry analyst) explored this question in ***Emergent***<sup>5</sup> – a *Learning Uncut* podcast series bringing together leading practitioners and experts in a global conversation. Each conversation explored disruption from a fresh perspective. Together they start to show us how to map a way forward.

This paper explores the opportunities and challenges that disruption has created for L&D and offers four lenses informed by the Emergent series that will help L&D to shift perspective and act now to continuously emerge stronger from disruption.

# Recognising the Opportunity

The first step to  
***Emerge Stronger***  
is to be clear about  
the opportunity and  
the risks.

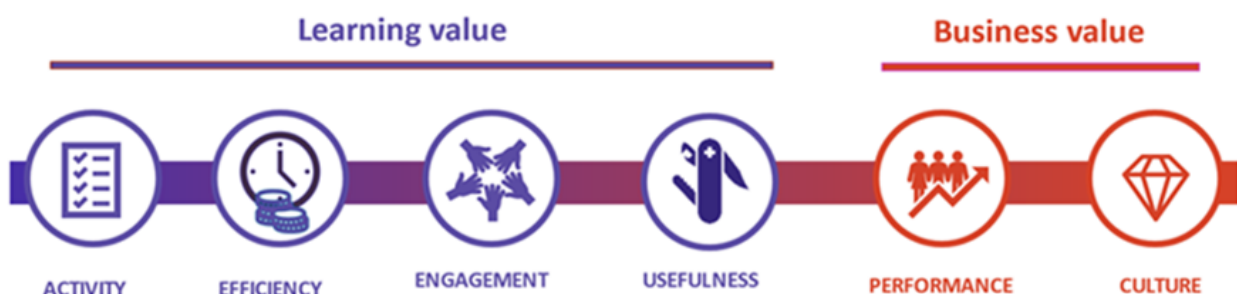
Recent disruptions to the global economy have created a greater opportunity to strongly reposition L&D to contribute to bottom line business value. The historical evidence is clear. In 15 years of research co-author Laura Overton consistently found that high performing L&D teams define their success in terms of what is important to their organisation. And business priorities have never been clearer.


## Understanding Our Biases

How we see and perceive our own value has an impact on our ability to recognise the opportunities around us.

### The L&D Value Spectrum

@LauraOverton

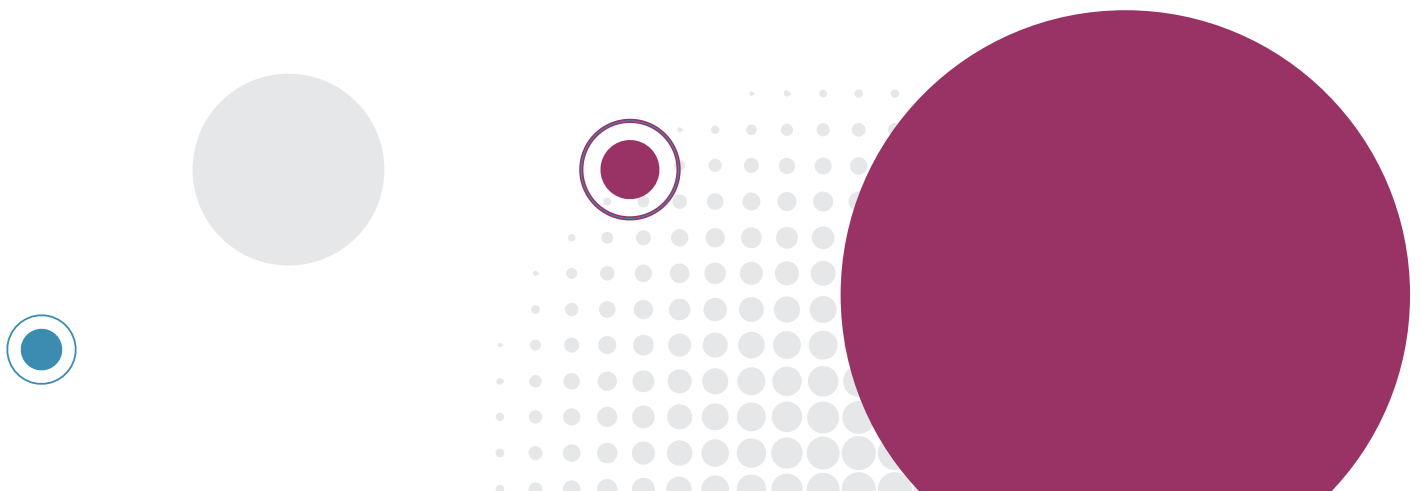




If we naturally operate from the left side of the spectrum, we are more likely to perceive and track our own value in terms of our learning outputs – who has engaged with our programmes, or how efficiently we have used our resources. Operating from this end of the spectrum means we will likely look for opportunities to create more programmes.

Those that operate from the right side of the spectrum are more likely to articulate the value that they add in terms of the business benefits. They will be looking for opportunities to help people, teams and organisations to respond to change. To help them to perform better. To be adaptive and agile.

Where we feel most comfortable on the L&D value spectrum will influence how we perceive opportunities around us.



# Be Intentional About Business Value

L&D has the opportunity to help their stakeholders to address immediate business challenges in a period of ongoing disruption, and to prepare for long term business priorities including:

- Reskilling, right skilling and upskilling
- Faster adoption of automation and AI
- Managing and engaging staff across hybrid work environments
- Attracting, retaining and developing the right talent at the right time

If we consider these as an opportunity to drive learning value, we head into the danger zone as we rush in with a training or content solution that may not be fit for purpose.

If we consider these as an opportunity to drive better business value then we are open to explore what's needed from the business and how can we work in partnership to drive value.

Our **Emergent** podcast conversations and Masterclass participants over the past two years have actively challenged themselves to think business first when approaching opportunities in their organisations.

‘L&D should take a deliberate choice and start changing your business model to create sustainable change and business value.’ Jos Arets





Active orientation towards the business value end of the spectrum vs learning value has surfaced many new opportunities. Our Emerging Stronger community has provided many examples of operating from the business value end of the spectrum:

- Customer service ratings
- Sales figures
- Safety outcomes
- New product time to market
- Supply chain efficiency Faster adoption of technology
- Rate of innovation
- Will keep enabling and supporting the shift to remote working
- Driving employee engagement and reducing turnover
- Scaling organisational growth

## Smart BOL<sup>2</sup>D

### Perspectives from Laura Overton

In my years of studying learning maturity, it was clear that high performing learning teams operate from the business value end of the L&D value spectrum. They look to work with others to co-create value. They use data to improve their impact versus proving their worth. They are not the biggest companies with the largest budgets and teams, but they are willing to question and challenge the status quo.

Those emerging stronger from disruption share many of these characteristics. What's more they are teams who are proactive; those who are willing to take bold action make a difference. The boldness that sets these teams apart is smart BOL<sup>2</sup>D action that has four consistent characteristics:

**B**

**Business first.** Creating business value is the North Star

**O**

**Open minded** - willing to consider new angles and perspectives in solving business challenges

**L<sup>2</sup>**

**Leading** through change and experiments and continually **Learning**

**D**

**Deliberate**, evidence informed, risk aware experiments to drive business change



# The Path Ahead

In our Masterclasses it was reported that consciously operating from the business value end of the L&D value spectrum opened opportunities to see things differently. It was also clear from our work over the last few years that we can't shape tomorrow with yesterday's thinking. Our orientation will determine our goals, our success and whether we emerge stronger.

To shift out of the danger zone and emerge stronger, L&D must look beyond their own activity and engagement measures and focus instead on the outcomes that are important to their organisation.

Adopting a business first orientation as your north star keeps your eyes on the road ahead and creates a readiness to adapt and flex. Once we have our destination fixed it is important not to jump to a solution.

## ***The Four Lenses***

that surfaced from our collective work help us to continue to emerge stronger amidst ongoing disruption.

***The Data Lens*** helps us to re-prioritise,  
***the Community Lens*** to re-think,  
***the Technology Lens*** to re-invent and  
***the Experiment Lens*** to re-imagine.

# Exploring Opportunity with New Lenses

*You've spotted opportunities to help people and the organisation to respond to change, and adopted a business first orientation. You know that traditional methods of L&D are no longer enough; in fact disruption rewards new approaches. Emerging stronger requires that you see things differently.*

## The Purpose of a Lens

A lens is a transparent material that concentrates or disperses light rays. It bends light to bring images closer or move them further away. They are used either singly (as in a magnifying glass) or combined with other lenses (as in a telescope).

## How do We Use Lenses?

You can use a lens to:

- Magnify something to help see things, like using a microscope
- Zoom in on a specific aspect rather, like using a telescope
- Share something small with others, like using a projector
- Bring something into sharper focus, like using spectacles

***Different lenses***  
**help to see what is in  
front us differently!**

## Traditional L&D Lenses

Lenses traditionally used in L&D have helped us see programmes, interventions and courses. They might include:

- Training needs analysis - to see training requirements and learning objectives
- Instructional design - to see courses and content
- Competency - to see skills
- Classrooms - to see training events
- Formal qualifications - to see traditional outputs
- Learning evaluation - to see evidence of learning



Whilst serving L&D in the past, these lenses potentially limit our ability to flex and adapt, essentially serving as blinders, closing the view which might allow us to work within uncertainty, ambiguity and disruption to emerge stronger.

## Contemporary L&D Lenses

During **Emergent** we spoke with 30 guests about 15 different challenges. Tapping into their collective wisdom, combined with external evidence and our own experience, we identified four new lenses that enable L&D to explore and harness the opportunities arising from disruption to drive business value and emerge stronger. They are:

1

**Data** - exploring the information around you to make smarter decisions

2

**Community** - leveraging diverse perspectives and skills of others learning

3

**Technology** - used as an enabler to support strategy rather than a saviour of learning

4

**Experimentation** - trying out new ideas, methods, or activities or improve a concept to idea

*Let's explore how each of these lenses helps us to see L&D's role differently.*

# Re-Prioritising with the Data Lens

*The Data Lens means exploring the information around you to make smarter decisions.*

## Defining the Data Lens

The dictionary definition of data is 'factual information used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation.'

When we look at the wider perspective, the Data Lens helps to critically explore information around us to make smarter decisions.

Historically the L&D Data Lens has been constrained specifically to L&D activity. Its use has been focussed on reporting learning activity or to explore engagement behaviour with digital assets. However, to orient ourselves to business value and rise to the opportunity to help our organisations to address ongoing strategic challenges we also need to explore business data.

## Why do we need the Data Lens?

The Data Lens helps us to re-prioritise because it helps us to:

- Set priorities
- Inform solution design
- Reduce risk
- Improve impact
- Influence change



## The challenge with Data

When we know where to look, we see that we have access to facts and information from a wide range of sources: quantitative data (from our learning and business management systems); qualitative data (from the stories that people tell, the observations and reflections that they make); external evidence (from scientific research, benchmarks and case studies) and data from our own experiments.

**'Data is not just the L&D story – L&D is part of solving the bigger story.'**<sup>6</sup> Kevin M Yates

The challenge with data is as follows:

- Each individual data point is meaningless unless we understand the context
- Humans struggle with information overload
- Data has been taken over by technology - our mobile data plan, big data. Our stories and reflections also count; they are 'data with soul'

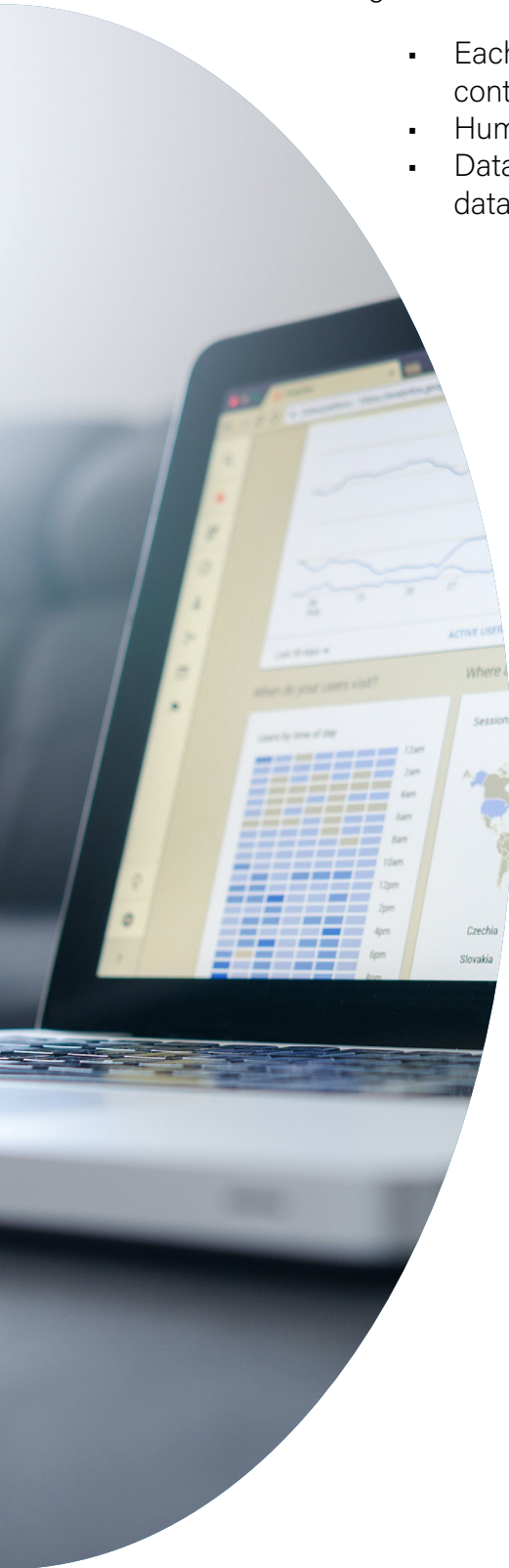
## How the Data Lens Works- The Principles

Myths, fads and popular intuitively appealing ideas abound in the L&D industry. Additionally, we tend to look at the world through the perspective of our own expertise and assumptions. This can lead us to focus only on internal L&D data and overlook other sources of data inside and outside of the organisation. The result is often that our decisions about learning and design of learning solutions are based on unfounded beliefs and limited or poor-quality data.

The principles of evidence-based practice can help us to gather and use data more effectively, improving our decisions. 'The basic idea of evidence-based practice is that good-quality decisions should be based on a combination of critical thinking and the best available evidence.'<sup>17</sup>

Key principles outlined by the Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA) are:

- Before making an important decision, look for available evidence from multiple sources
- Take evidence from four sources into account: scientific literature, the organisation, practitioners and stakeholders
- Critically appraise all evidence
- Focus on the 'best available' evidence

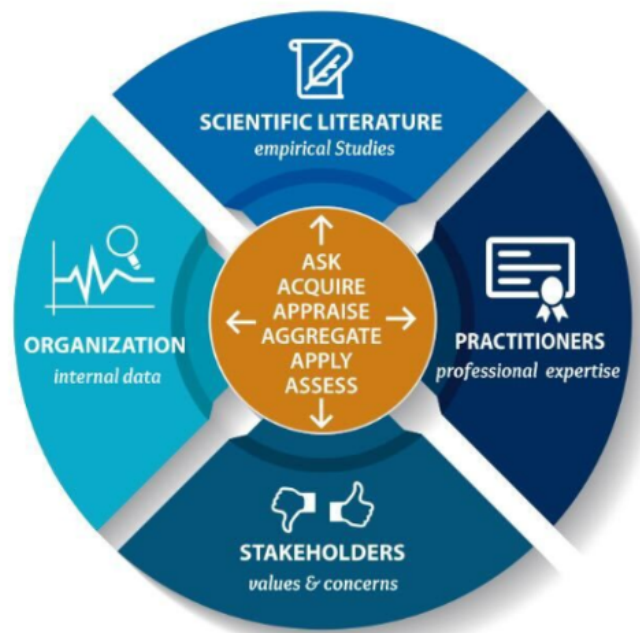


# How the Data Lens Works - The Practice

The power of the Data Lens is released when we understand the context in which the data has been gathered and when we apply multiple sources of data to explore the problem at hand.

In practice key steps in using the Data Lens (adapted from CEBMa) are:

1. **Ask** - frame a business challenge or opportunity into an answerable question
2. **Acquire** - systematically search for and retrieve available data
3. **Appraise** - critically assess the trustworthiness and relevance of data
4. **Aggregate** - pull together the best available evidence and look for patterns
5. **Apply** - incorporate the data into the decision-making process. (Bonus tip: overlay the Community Lens - engage others and draw on diverse perspectives to gain richer insights.)
6. **Assess** - evaluate the outcome of the decision taken



Credit: CEBMa, Center for Evidence-Based Management

‘We need to use data in the service of solving the problems that matter.’<sup>8</sup> Trish Uhl



# Getting Started With The Data Lens

Get started with the Data Lens by asking:

- What useful question can I ask about a business challenge or opportunity?
- What relevant sources of data are available to help answer this question?
- How can I critically assess the available data?
- How can I combine multiple sources of data to gain insight?
- Who can I engage to support me to access and use the data?
- Am I willing to let the emerging evidence challenge my own assumptions?

## Data Lens In Action

Business problem: Developing a shared understanding of what constitutes civil language to improve feelings of respect and psychological safety in the organisation.

How Data Lens was used:

Multiple data sources appraised, aggregated and applied to refine understanding of the business problem and formulate a hypothesis to be tested:

- Engagement survey data
- Complaints handling data - for examples of inappropriate use of language
- Staff turnover and exit interviews
- External research on the impact of workplace civility and campaign resources

*The Data Lens encourages us to explore new insights in the information around us. The Community Lens allows us to engage others in this exploration, leveraging their diverse perspectives and skills to see things differently.*

# Re-Thinking with the Community Lens

*The Community Lens means asking what will I see differently if I draw on the diverse perspectives and skills of others?*

## Defining the Community Lens

The dictionary definition of community is 'an interacting population of various kinds of individuals in a common location.'

The Community Lens is about engaging with groups and people inside and outside of your organisation to leverage diverse perspectives and skills of others in order to create business value.

**'Communities are our primary 'sense-making' entities: we use them to discover new information, share knowledge, and figure out what on earth is happening in the noisy world around us.'** Julian Stodd

The shift in work and workplaces is ongoing. Disruption is here to stay. We need to be able to not only survive change but thrive amidst ongoing change. Sensing and responding to shifts is at the heart of ongoing adaptation. L&D professionals must continuously make sense of what is shifting in and for their organisation, and adapt learning to support this. Breakthrough thinking is required, beyond the blind spots created by cognitive bias and our own expertise and past successes. Having gained clarity we can take action with internal and external partners to create better solutions.

# Why Do We Need the Community Lens?

The Community Lens helps us re-think because it helps us to:

- Sense and adapt to change
- Spot opportunities
- Analyse and diagnose challenges
- Make smarter decisions
- Draw on different skills to get things done
- Create better solutions

## The Challenge with Community

Interest in collaboration rebounded in 2020 as we grappled with how to effectively work together remotely. We recognise the benefits of connecting with others in rapidly changing environments. Yet pressing deadlines and performance targets make it difficult to allocate time and effort to build connection in communities and strengthen partnerships. Community requires a long-term commitment.

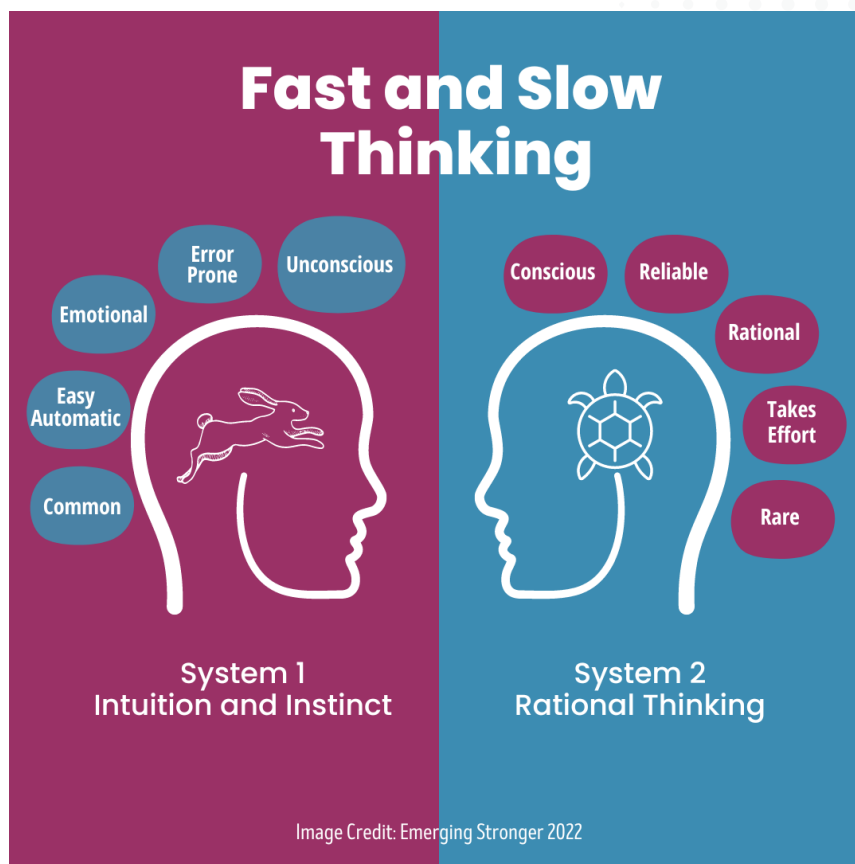
The challenge with community is as follows:

- Humans are drawn to others who are similar rather than diverse
- Building connections and relationships with others is a long-term undertaking that many struggle to prioritise
- When nurturing a community, it is hard to strike a balance between supporting people to engage and controlling interactions



# How the Community Lens Works – The Principles

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman's mental model of Fast and Slow Thinking underpins behavioural economics by explaining how you live most of your life on automatic pilot, are essentially irrational, and prone to cognitive biases. A cognitive bias is an inherent thinking 'blind spot' that impedes critical thinking and rationality. 180 cognitive biases have been codified – and this list is not exhaustive.<sup>10</sup>



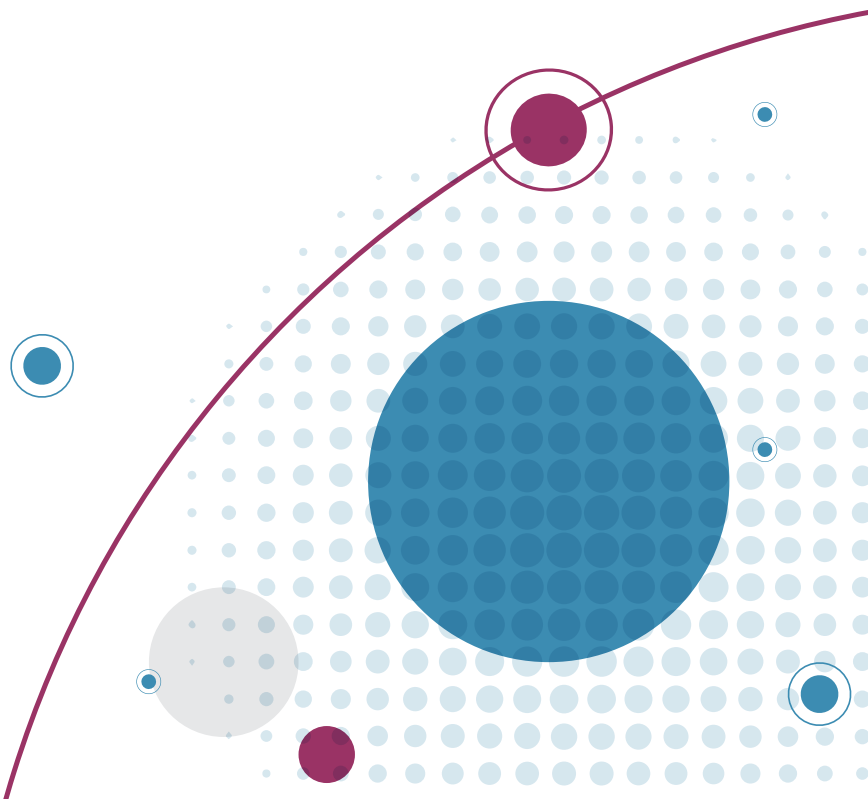
Drawing on the perspectives of others moves us beyond the limitations of our blind spots and assumptions. Kahneman warns that even if we can identify our biases, at an individual level most of us have 'no hope' of avoiding them.<sup>11</sup> However, he offers a way forward. The quality of thinking can be improved in groups with the use of the right processes. Many of these processes work by slowing down thinking or structuring it to consider different aspects separately.



# How the Community Lens Works – The Practice

The power of the Community Lens is released when we consistently seek to build and strengthen relationships with others and build more diverse networks. Tended regularly, your network becomes a valuable resource to help you stay abreast of change and extend your sense-making by exploring your insights and ideas with others.

When faced with ambiguity or complex problems and challenges, actively seek out others with different experiences, expertise or perspectives. Facilitate structured group interactions that slow down thinking and foster inclusion and engagement to generate questions, ideas and insights. Seek to understand the context in which others work and identify groups that you could use to run experiments with to test hypotheses about adaptations and responses that might work. When you are ready to scale solutions, collaborate with others whose experience and skills complement your own to create stronger partnerships.



# Getting Started with the Community Lens

Get started with the Community Lens by asking:

- How can I discover who others follow to stay abreast of change?
- How can I seek out experts and ideas from outside my own domain to gain new ideas?
- How can I adopt a curious mindset to develop a short set of powerful open ended questions?
- What inclusive group facilitation processes can I adopt to uncover more diverse perspectives?
- Who might see this differently?

## Community Lens In Action

Business problem: Organisation is missing potential diversity of thought as not all participants are engaged in discussions when meeting online.

How Community Lens was used:

- Encouraged full participation during online meetings
- Observed participant collaboration in meetings
- Sought feedback from colleagues on best use of platform functionality in online meetings





## Building your network

### Perspectives from Michelle Ockers

Your network consists of people and groups that you are connected to and interact with. It includes present and past colleagues, customers or clients, external partners - as well as people you have met at events or online.

Be systematic to build a diverse network. Draw a map of your network and identify gaps by aspects such as geography, industry, domain/expertise, age, and culture. Find people and groups to fill these gaps by word of mouth or online search e.g. conference speakers, writers, published lists, events, viewing the connections of others. Look for people who are generous with information and knowledge, who energise you, challenge your thinking and bring you fresh perspectives.

Connect or follow people and interact with appropriate intimacy (e.g. like or share their posts, leave comments, as questions, provide advice or support), allowing relationships to deepen naturally.

*Data, and community create an opportunity to explore and shape experiments. The next lens helps us see how to enable our activities with technology, fundamentally changing the way we respond to the insights we gather.*

# Re-Inventing with the Technology Lens

*The Technology Lens means asking what will I see if I use technology as an enabler rather than a saviour?*

## Defining the Technology Lens

The dictionary definition of technology is 'new capabilities through the practical application of knowledge.'

A cursory internet search will bring up numerous ed-tech maps - tools and technologies for managing and creating content, community and experiences.<sup>12</sup> While technology itself can support multiple business needs, technology on its own cannot solve business challenges. There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates that the specific tools that an L&D team uses do not correlate to impact.<sup>13</sup> What matters is how the tools are applied to solve challenges.

'I always challenge our clients to think about what would our strategy be if we have zero budget for technology, what are all things that we want to do? Technology is an enabler and you need it to a certain extent, but the fact is you can do a lot without technology.' Lori Niles-Hoffman

## Why Do We Need the Technology Lens

The Technology Lens helps us to re-invent because it helps us to:

- Enable strategy, being clear on business outcomes to be achieved and creating business value
- Build more effective learning solutions and experiences
- Understand what tools people are already using and the context in which they use them
- Embrace and experiment, rather than fear new technologies
- Treat technology as an enabler rather than a saviour

'L&D folks have this fear (of technology) because they see it as a replacement for what they do. When in actuality, it's just an augmentation to what they do.' Dani Johnson



# The challenge with Technology

Because there is no single technology magic wand, it requires L&D to shift the lens through which we look at technology. Context is critical. L&D must be able to see the current practices and potential barriers to the adoption of technology in their organisation and use this insight to make smarter decisions.

For example, common limitations include the variety of devices, IT or HR policy barriers, and antiquated software. Understanding basic workplace processes, policy limitations, and possible workplace digital divides are necessary first steps.

Additionally, learning technology continues to evolve rapidly and the array of platforms and tools on the market continues to expand. While some L&D professionals find technology attractive and exciting, for many it is overwhelming and even threatening. It's difficult to stay abreast of developments, select appropriate technology, make the business case for investment and effectively implement it.

The challenge with technology is as follows:

- Selecting technology to drive the solution rather than enabling it
- Lack of organisational investment in infrastructure, connectivity and bandwidth limitations, or restrictive policies that limit access to technology and interoperability across an organisation
- Gaps in L&D skill and confidence creating missed opportunities to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of solutions

# How the Technology Lens Works – The Principles

Recent years, both during and pre-pandemic, have seen a great evolution in technology. With more people and businesses investing in digital applications and software it would seem essential for L&D to use the latest tools available to connect and engage learners.

However, when it comes to learning, technology doesn't build engagement. Applicable learning content and resources does. It becomes imperative that L&D should drive to be more innovative and develop new ideas to connect learning to context to build relevance, helping learners get excited about what they are learning.

With this in mind, applying learning science is essential to effectively use technology to support learning. The use of technology has become important for today's learners because it offers them an opportunity to learn new skills and acquire new knowledge at a pace, time and place that best aligns with their overall need. Therefore, a balancing act must take place. Technology moves learning forward, but only if sound learning practices are the underpinning foundation.

Potential applications of technology that enable connecting learning to business outcomes:

- Expanding opportunities to learn and practice skills
- Increasing learner engagement through applications that connect learning to job relevance
- Enabling easier access to learning opportunities for hybrid and remote workers
- Supporting learning in workplace communities

# How the Technology Lens Works – The Practice

L&D is closer now than we have ever been to being a credible, productive business partner. Technology is constantly evolving, and L&D can reap a wide range of benefits from effectively using it to enable learning.

As technologies continue to improve, new opportunities for efficiency are created. Many tools are already available to streamline workflows, eliminate wasted time, and make our efforts more efficient, relevant and goal focused.

Applying the Technology Lens helps you to discover what technologies your organisation is using and for what purposes. Investigate how technology empowers, drives productivity, or creates opportunities for improvements for the workforce. For example, by becoming more connected with your IT department, you will learn more about what tools are being used, and therefore prevent redundancies.

By making it a practice to investigate and explore technology uses, the overall ecosystem grows stronger as you discover new ways to apply what is in use, or come upon critical gaps.

Smart use of the Technology Lens helps us to:

- Drive efficiencies, releasing capacity for higher value activities
- Augment our work, bringing the best of our human capabilities to drive value
- Connect people to both content and each other to learn and improve continuously
- Run smart experiments and drive continuous improvement



# Getting Started with the Technology Lens

Get started with the Technology Lens by asking:

- What is the goal of the technology? What gap will it fill?
- Is there current technology that is in place that could be used?  
e.g. Is another department using Asana, and can we get a licence?
- Could current technology be used in a different way?  
e.g. Using Slack for community building, information gathering/sharing, surveys/polls
- What tools are employees using as part of their workday and how are they using them?
- Do all employees have easy access to current technology?
- Is hardware outdated or overly regulated?
- If this is a technology change, how will the change affect the employees?





# Technology Lens In Action

Business problem: Hybrid and remote work makes connecting groups of learners difficult due to different time zones and working preferences.

How the Technology Lens was used:

- Rather than approaching this from a 'Let's add more tech' perspective, this was approached from a 'current employee practice' perspective.
- The question became 'what are employees currently using and doing to communicate and collaborate on projects?'
- This approach led to the discovery that rather than introduce new technology, current technology could be used differently. The benefit was a lower barrier to entry as people were familiar with the technology.

*Data, community and technology create an opportunity to see business challenges in a different light. The next lens helps us see how to take the knowledge gained and apply them through testing and experiments.*



# Re-Imagining with the Experiment Lens

*The Experiment Lens means creating an environment of curiosity, testing and questioning current realities.*

## Defining the Experiment Lens

The dictionary definition of an experiment is 'an operation or procedure carried out under controlled conditions in order to discover an unknown effect or law, to test or establish a hypothesis.'

The concept of experimentation in business is not new. Consider Netflix, Amazon, Adobe, Uber, Apple ... the list goes on. While the results of experimentation are easy to see, the question remains - how do we get there from here?

Wide-ranging experimentation requires breaking out of L&D silos. It builds a culture of psychological safety, helping an organisation to fail fast and fail forward. Through experimentation L&D can work hand in hand across the business to make smarter decisions that drive business value.

**'Having a fail-friendly culture where people can be vulnerable and say, "I don't know this," or, "I'm experimenting with this," or "I screwed up this," and feel open – that's one of the key foundations of both high performance and innovation.' Arun Pradhan**

To shift the view from solving learning problems to addressing business challenges we must attach the lens of experimentation to our mental camera to see how things might be done differently.

# Why Do We Need the Experiment Lens?

The Experiment Lens helps us to re-energise because it helps us to:

- Proactively engage stakeholders
- Challenge traditional thinking and ideas
- Explore quick wins with limited resources
- Move with agility - fail fast and learn!

## The Challenge with Experiments

With all the potential of running small, rapid experiments, experimentation may sound simple, but it isn't always easy. Having a pool of clever ideas is a helpful starting point, but simply having a pool of ideas alone isn't enough.

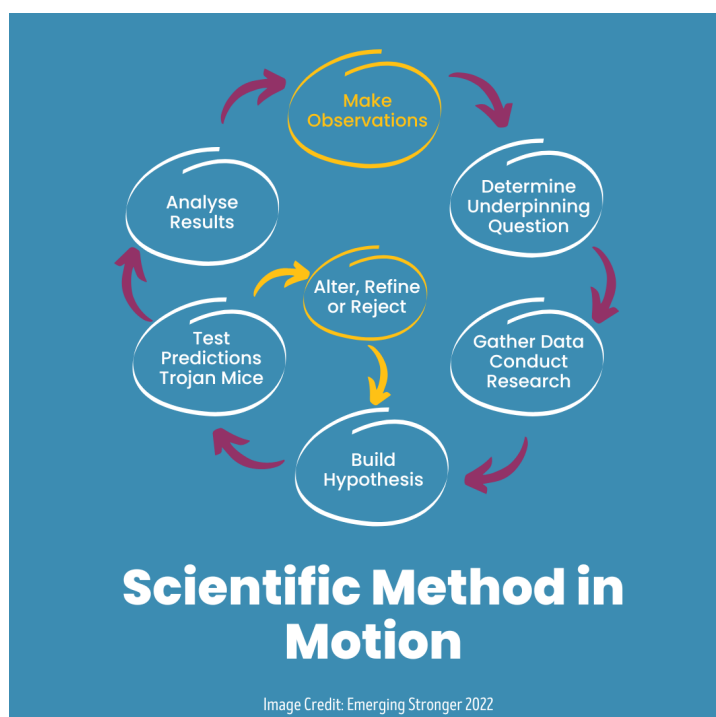
The challenge with experiments is as follows:

- Anchoring experiments to the north star of solving business challenges to ensure that you're not throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks - never a winning process
- Gathering buy-in and champions to help address financial, logistical or cultural constraints
- A tendency to make experiments too large

‘When I was in engineering school we were told to keep a lab book. And in that lab book goes all your successes and all of your failures. And you look at that stuff in that lab book as data.’ Dani Johnson

# How the Experiment Lens Works – The Principles

A deliberate and evidence-driven L&D team does not develop or make major changes to any L&D effort without first running a series of experiments to understand whether proposed solutions will be effective. Though the L&D world searches out big, disruptive ideas, most success is achieved by reviewing data, shifting perspectives, and when appropriate implementing minor improvements.



One way to make risk-taking more palatable for organisations is to run small, light, nimble experiments – tests not built to win wars, but rather to gain intelligence, attack new problems, and inform future decisions. An approach called ‘Trojan Mice’<sup>14</sup> can be used to plan and conduct extra small, very fast experiments, with small groups.

Solid experiments, run using the scientific method, informed by research and data can help you figure out how much money and time to invest in a potential solution.

With this in mind, within the business world, we must take a leaner approach to experimenting, as suggested by Eric Ries in *The Lean Startup*:<sup>15</sup>

‘The Lean Startup methodology has as a premise that every startup is a grand experiment that

attempts to answer a question. The question is not “Can this product be built?” Instead, the questions are “Should this product be built?” and “Can we build a sustainable business around this set of products and services?”’

To place this into the context of L&D – the question is not, ‘Can this training programme be built?’ but ‘Should this programme be built?’ and ‘Can we build, create, or curate more sustainable learning delivery methods?’

The goal with the Experiment Lens is to determine the right thing to build for the right people at the right time; be it a course, a community, a job aid, or a resource site. Additionally, it’s about finding the thing the business needs to support priority goals, as quickly as possible.

Once we have done this, L&D needs to look at the development process for innovative learning approaches to emphasise fast iteration, people feedback, and exploration all at the same time.

‘The Scientific Method relies on the ability for tests to be replicated and the same results to be achieved by other similar experiments.’<sup>16</sup>



# How the Experiment Lens Works – The Practice

The power of the Experiment Lens is released when L&D seeks to test commonly held assumptions or parameters to make the best possible evidence-informed decision. A variety of experiments run on a small scale across departments/teams will generate actionable information, even if conclusions lead to a negative result. Failing fast can lead to greater, faster success.

Ultimately, the results of your experiments will arm you with data that points out potential pain points and success pathways.

Find data in small experiments that are grounded in unlikely areas:

- Exploration with the team – uncovering ideas using a technique such as Crazy 8s<sup>17</sup>
- Off-the-wall ideas – ideas that on the surface may seem a tad bizarre
- Deconstructing previous solutions – are there current success stories that, when taken apart, may produce different results?
- Piggy-backing – is there an idea in progress, perhaps from another department that can be joined to produce desired results?





# Getting Started with the Experiment Lens

Get started with the Experiment Lens by asking:

- What is the question that needs to be answered? (e.g. Why are people struggling with X?)
- How does answering this question help with overall business goals or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)?
- Am I prepared to be curious and step outside of my comfort zone?
- Who can I partner with to gain different ideas to test?
- Are there Trojan Mice ideas to run with?
- Who should be in the testing group?
- What results am I looking for, both positive and negative?
- How will I share the results?

## Experiment Lens In Action

Business Problem: New managers in training, with less than 90 days on the job, are turning over at a higher rate than other positions within the organisation.

How the Experiment Lens was used: Rather than approaching this as a learning problem, it was approached as a retention challenge. The question that needed answering was 'Why are new managers leaving so suddenly?'

Different Trojan Mice ideas were:

- Create regular informal 'check-in chats' to gauge emotional state
- Develop buddy programme with trainee's buddied with recently promoted managers
- Monthly virtual 'AMAs' (Ask me Anything) with experts from different departments
- Give each trainee a real business problem to solve to develop feelings of value
- Give each trainee a reflection day to work on gaining knowledge
- Give each trainee access to special website developed by other trainees to post/answer questions
- Develop a 'New Manager' podcast series that addresses common questions, challenges, and proven-practices



## The importance of curiosity to the success of experimentation

Perspectives from Shannon Tipton

Experimentation helps build a curious mind. Curiosity is such a natural part of who we are and what we do that we can be oblivious to its reach into our lives. The impulse to search and discover is ingrained into every person's DNA.

Curiosity is an L&D superpower. Our natural questioning skills make it apparent that now is the time for L&D to support building curiosity as a business practice to support the exploration of diversity and ideas. This means tightening the relationship between learning and business to build experiment practices into the L&D ecosystem, removing the instinct to prevent failures, and treating curiosity and experimentation as part of doing business.

*These different lenses and the alternative perspectives they offer are necessary as we emerge stronger from past disruption. They help us challenge the status quo and explore fresh thinking, keeping us true to the north star of business value.*

# How the Lenses Work Together

The power of the lenses is in how they enable us to see things differently. The potential of the lenses is released through their application, and enhanced when they start to overlap. The following real-world examples illustrate how the lenses can work together to address a business challenge.

## The Lenses in Reality:

### Business Example #1



**Business Challenge:** To develop a shared understanding of civil language, improving respect, inclusivity and psychological safety.

Data	Community	Technology	Experiment
Information explored:	Groups engaged:	Enabling tech used:	Process:
Engagement survey	People Hub Teams	Open collaboration tools	<b>Hypothesis</b> If people interact with civil language then people will feel more respected, included and safe
Complaints data	Workplace Health and Safety Groups	Online reporting	<b>Experiment 1</b> 1 week respectful workplace challenge with daily nudges based on a TED talk
Diversity Council (external) research	Internal diversity networks	Video resources	<b>Experiment 2</b> Email asking people to watch TED talk and complete a civility test by end of week

## The Lenses in Reality:

## Business Example #2



Business Challenge: To increase information sharing within teams and across business areas.

Data	Community	Technology	Experiment
Information explored:	Groups engaged:	Enabling tech used:	Process:
Employee pulse survey	Observed team meetings	Individual & team tools e.g. MS Teams, OneDrive	<b>Hypothesis</b> If people knew when and how best to share information then they would share information more freely and effectively
Strategic Plan - identify interdependencies	Analysed information sharing in own teams	Organisational tools e.g. Intranet and LMS	<b>Experiment 1</b> Meeting agenda: Add standard agenda item of 'sharing information'
External research on sharing	Targeted small teams for experiments	Collaboration tools e.g. Miro, Trello	<b>Experiment 2</b> Tool: Use of Trello (or similar) alongside experiment #1 to share and capture information



# Emerging Stronger

This much is clear –  
we cannot solve  
today's problems  
with yesterday's  
thinking.

## Bringing this all together

As an industry Learning and Development has evolved dramatically since the pandemic and will continue to change and adapt as organisational priorities and goals shift.

- Still evolving disruptions have changed the rules of business interactions and how we build business relationships.
- All this creates opportunities for L&D to reposition services, rebuild credibility, re-think value - and to emerge stronger.
- L&D now has a unique opportunity to apply its credentials to being a business partner that can add value, not just at the moment but over time.

The stories and experiences captured during the **Emergent**, as well as our independent research has continued to emphasise the power of keeping business value as the L&D north star. This means that L&D needs to be in a position to respond and adapt more quickly than ever before.

The use of the four lenses provides alternative perspectives that help us hone the belief that our efforts and professional contribution can constantly be developed to drive better business value.

Changing perspectives and shaking up norms is not only uncomfortable, it is essential for building and maintaining partnerships with the business.

## Why these lenses?

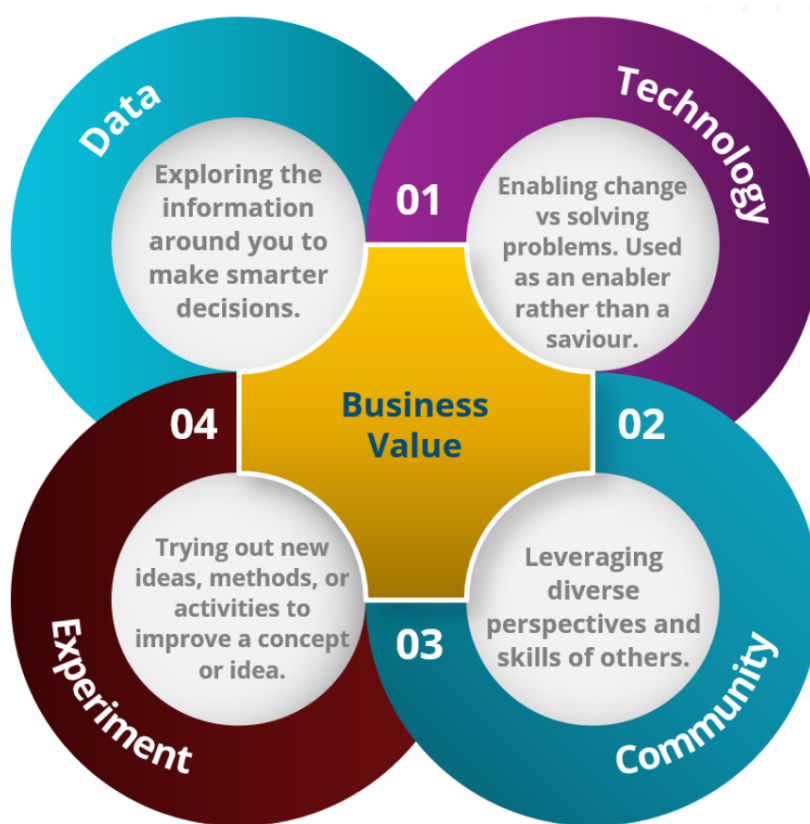
Because most business challenges are viewed through a rearview mirror, we only see past failures and successes. This may be due to L&D only seeing what their siloed perspective allows them to see. Change the perspective, from rearview mirror thinking to forward thinking, and it changes the way that L&D interprets past events for the future.

Importantly, changing perspectives can help challenge bias. When presented with a mass of detailed data, L&D tends to pick out and focus on facts that confirm their prior perceptions (confirmation bias) and to disregard or perhaps misinterpret those that call their perceptions into question.

The power of the lenses is in how they train and encourage us to see things differently. The potential of the lenses is released through their application, and enhanced when they start to overlap.

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The power of the lenses is in how they train and encourage us to see things differently. The potential of the lenses is released through their application and enhanced when they start to overlap.



When using the lenses to change perspective, L&D makes business value decisions that are more relevant, effective and impactful. But how do we get there from here?

## Mapping a path through disruption

In the midst of the disruption many are still experiencing, bouncing back to 'normal' isn't an option.

However, we would argue that the phrase 'new normal' isn't a good fit either. The term 'new normal' would suggest what was 'normal' in the past was working when in fact large scale change was in the making. What we can do now is embrace the new path and take things from this time in history to be stronger, more productive, and better partners to the business.

To do so, we start with four key question points that will keep us from falling into the rear view mirror trap:

- 1 What is a key organisational pain point?
- 2 What is my perspective on this pain point?
- 3 What do I see when I apply each lens filter?
- 4 What breakthrough moments can be discovered?

Changing perspectives and shaking up current norms is not only uncomfortable, it is essential for building and maintaining partnerships with the business.

***It's time to see things differently!***



# Appendix 1:

# Our Methodology

## Emerging Stronger Research Approach

The Emerging Stronger initiative started with a single question in the middle of the pandemic:

'How can L&D emerge stronger from disruption?'

We understood that in a complex, unknown environment the success factors for surviving and thriving through disruption would be emergent. The three co-founders came together to explore this question through a series of initial podcasts which were analysed for common themes and patterns.

This podcast series started an ongoing exploration that followed similar research principles to those used in grounded theory, a qualitative research methodology applied in social science.

We dug into the data of those first podcasts, exploring the patterns that were emerging to help us identify the four lenses (outlined in the New Era for L&D paper) and propose a hypothesis that if we use the lenses to explore and address L&D opportunities, then agility and business impact will improve. We explored our hypothesis within our global community through a series of Masterclasses and continued to refine our recommendations.

Data has been collected and ideas tested iteratively through a series of different interventions since June 2020:

- Podcast interviews with 30 practitioners
- Analysed for themes which led us to identify lenses and the first edition of the New Era ebook
- 32 participants across 9 countries joined our first Masterclass from March 2021 and applied the lenses to their own business opportunities in the heart of the pandemic
- A review of observations led to the next round of podcast interviews with a further eight practitioners
- Masterclasses in 2022 - total of 60 participants in 11 countries continued to trial the lenses

Key findings from this process have been shared through our podcasts, writing, creation of new tools and individual stories of courage and influence - here are some of the artefacts of our exploration:

- Learning Uncut **Emergent** podcast episodes
- Individual testimonies of applying the lenses<sup>18</sup>
- Reflections on lessons learned within the process - eight lessons for becoming a smart bold L&D professional<sup>19</sup>

The next phase of our exploration will be in a series of roundtables scheduled in early 2023 - details can be found at the Emerging Stronger website.

# Appendix 2: Endnotes

- 1 PEW Research: [COVID-19 Pandemic Continues to Reshape Work in America](#), Feb 16, 2022
- 2 Gartner, [Best Practices to Create A More Fair Employee Experience 2021](#)
- 3 Josh Bersin Academy, August 2021, [The Big Reset Playbook](#), documents examples. Additionally, Fosway, May 2020, [COVID-19 L&D Research](#) study reports that 71% of respondents experienced an increased demand for digital learning from end users.
- 4 [LinkedIn Workplace Learning Report 2022](#)
- 5 Refer to the [Learning Uncut Emergent series](#) podcast page for access to all episodes.
- 6 Learning Uncut Emergent podcast series: Trish Uhl and Kevin M. Yates - Connecting the dots with data for L&D
- 7 Eric Barends, Denise M. Rousseau, Rob B. Briner (2015), Evidence-Based Practice - The Basic Principles, Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMA)
- 8 Learning Uncut [Emergent podcast series episode 12](#): Trish Uhl and Kevin M. Yates - Connecting the dots with data for L&D
- 9 Julian Stodd (2019), The Community Builder Guidebook, Seasalt Learning
- 10 Terry Heick, [The Cognitive Bias Codex: A Visual of 180+ Cognitive Biases](#)
- 11 Daniel Kahneman: [Putting Your Intuition on Ice](#) [The Knowledge Project Ep. #68]
- 12 EdTech Magazine, [Envisioning the Future of Education Technology](#)
- 13 Emerald Works, [The Transformation Curve. The Journey to Delivery Lasting L&D Impact](#), January 2018
- 14 [Trojan Mice in 900 seconds, Whats the Pont](#)
- 15 [The Scientific Method. Model Thinkers](#)
- 16 [The Lean Startup | Methodology](#)
- 17 [Conceptboard | Crazy 8's template for brainstorming and design sprints](#)
- 18 <https://www.emergingstronger.co/our-stories/>
- 19 <https://www.trainingzone.co.uk/lead/strategy/eight-lessons-for-becoming-a-smart-bold-ld-professional>

# Appendix 3: About Us

## Emerging Stronger

Our mission is to empower L&D professionals to take the BOLD action needed to positively impact business.

We believe Learning and Development is at a unique moment in time where the opportunity is higher than ever to make the radical shift that L&D needs to become more business critical. We have joined forces to support this shift across the industry.

This shift requires L&D to focus on outcomes and creating business value, while also making a tangible difference to the betterment of people. We view learning as an organisational wide activity founded on a symbiotic relationship between the organisation, individuals and their managers.

We encourage L&D to adopt an open, curious mindset, evidence informed, independent thinking and pragmatic approaches to build their impact, relevance and credibility. We will meet practitioners wherever they are in order to inspire, inform and support them to take action to move them forward.



# Appendix 3: About Us



## **Laura Overton**

Laura Overton is an author, facilitator and award winning learning analyst dedicated to uncovering and sharing effective practices in learning innovation that lead to business value. She is known for leading the 15 year global Towards Maturity research programme to uncover and share learning strategies that lead to business success. Laura established #Learningchangemakers and is a co-founder of Emerging Stronger - global initiatives to support the changing world of workplace learning.



## **Shannon Tipton**

As founder of Learning Rebels, and co-founder of Emerging Stronger, Shannon Tipton is a workplace learning expert, learning architect, author and international speaker of 30+ years. She works with organisations to strategically fix training that's broken and develop workplace learning that delivers desired performance results, leverages resources wisely. Learning Rebels™ also known for leading a community of L&D practitioners who are committed to building capabilities across the industry. As a practice, we rebel against status quo thinking, and instead allow curiosity to underpin all the work we do.



## **Michelle Ockers**

As founder of Learning Uncut and co-founder of Emerging Stronger, Michelle Ockers is an organisational learning strategist, facilitator and speaker. She helps organisations build high impact organisational learning strategies and L&D teams. Hallmarks of her work are the use of evidence-informed practices, stakeholder consultation and collaboration. Her contributions to the profession, including as host of the Learning Uncut podcast, have been recognised through industry awards.





# Emerging Stronger

## Join the movement...

Visit the Emerging Stronger resource page to gain assets to further empower you to take the BOLD action needed to impact and add value to business. Use our evidence-informed research and tools to help you build a business-first mindset.

[emergingstronger.co/resources/](https://emergingstronger.co/resources/)

Contact us with your Emerging Stronger questions ●

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