



The Learning Content Dilemma

L&D as enabler, not controller,
of learning content creation

By Heather Gilmartin Adams



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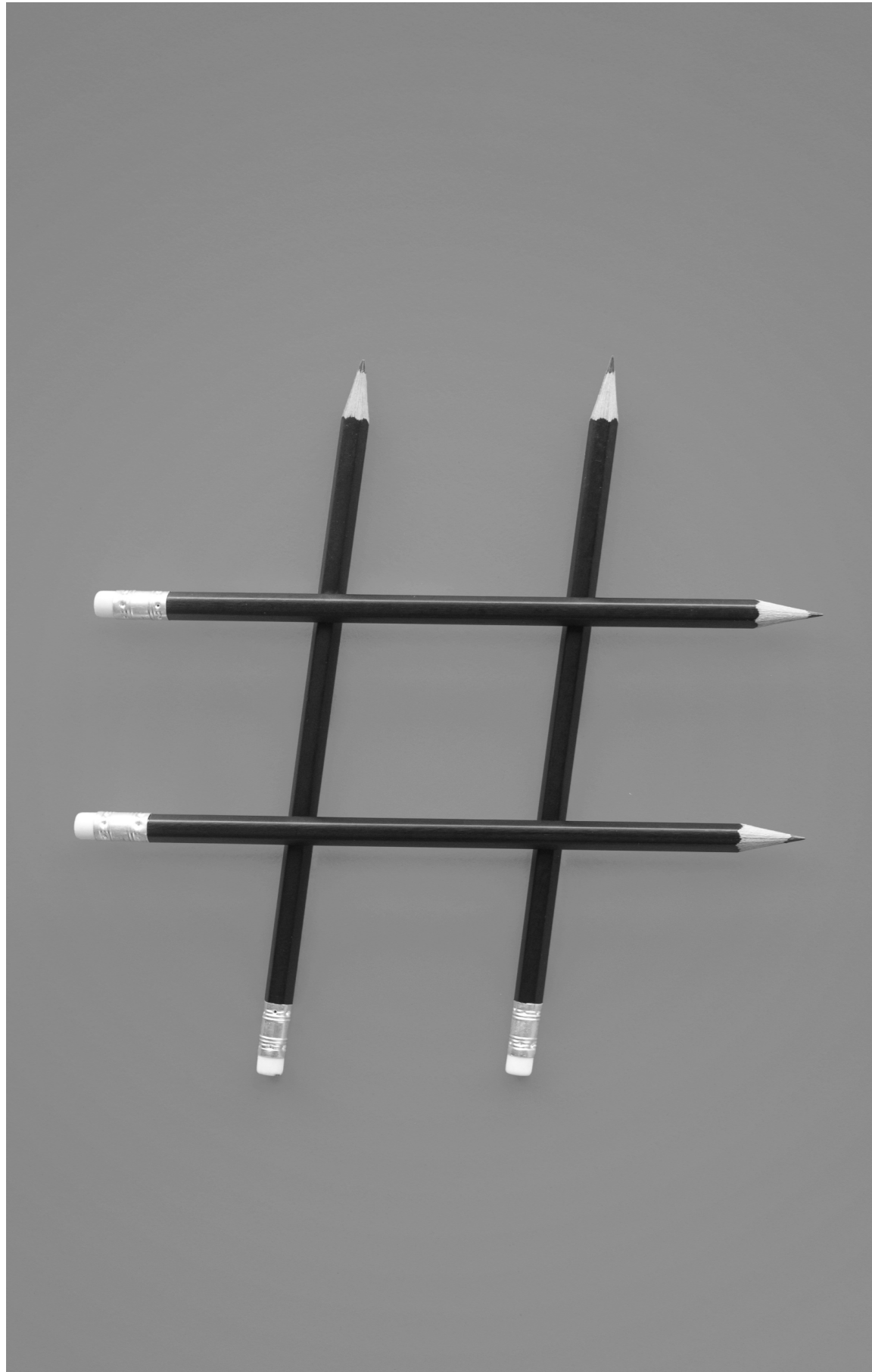
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Key takeaways

- 1 | **Forward-thinking L&D functions make the chaos of managing learning content work for their organizations.** Being overwhelmed by the surging quantities, types, and sources of learning content is yesterday's news—but still today's problem. Learning leaders are embracing the chaos and moving from providing content to enabling it, with an eye toward making highly relevant, impactful content available to all employees.
- 2 | **We have developed a model for learning content.** From our conversations with forward-thinking learning leaders, we identified a model that breaks learning content into 4 categories (defined by the 2 dimensions of specificity and durability). This model can form the foundation of a learning content strategy that's clear on priorities, roles and responsibilities, and areas of focus.
- 3 | **Centralizing L&D content creation risks a single point of failure.** L&D understands the risk of chaos from unregulated content creation—but puts itself at risk when attempting to become the sole source of organization-specific content.
- 4 | **With guard rails, companies can safely enable learning content creation at scale.** Relaxing L&D's grip on content creation and deputizing the organization—enabling employees across the organization to create some learning content, with L&D taking a guiding and consulting role—will help L&D practitioners remove bottlenecks. This will also clear the road for learning content scalability and sustainability.



The learning content dilemma

Consider the plight of the small-town sheriff in the old Wild West. Short on deputies, they are trying to keep the peace and support the boomtown's growth. Then—like tumbleweeds—lawless cowboys ride in and the whole community is suddenly at risk.

Learning and Development (L&D) teams can feel that way sometimes. They are under tremendous pressure to support the organization's healthy development. LinkedIn Learning's [2022 Workplace Learning Report](#) noted that almost half (48%) of L&D functions expected their budgets to increase in 2022. That's a strong indicator that employee development is a top priority in many organizations, especially now, when an unstable economic environment has tightened overall budgets and resources.

At the same time, the same LinkedIn Learning report found that L&D pros are planning to deploy more programs in all 10 of the topic areas the report tracks year-over-year. Even though L&D functions are getting more resources, they're being asked to do much, much, much more. These plans parallel a trend we've been witnessing: a boom in both the appetite for and the availability of learning content—particularly since the onset of the pandemic—that seems unlikely to subside. The amount of content needed to support organizational learning and business strategies has reached unmanageable levels for many L&D practices.

Some of that content is ephemeral. Some of it is durable and lasting. Some is general and can be sourced easily from outside vendors. Much is specific to the organization or its culture.

It is durable, organization-specific information that perhaps presents the biggest challenge for L&D. The resources to meet those needs at scale aren't always there, but it's hard to source the information outside the organization. A lot of leaders are pushing their hats back, scratching their heads, and making very hard choices about what to prioritize and what to push into the backlog.




Trouble is, those needs don't go away just because L&D can't get to them—and the backlog of content needed will never stop growing. Eventually, someone will create a spreadsheet or slide deck to fill the gap, and someone else will share it—no one was looking for a high-stakes dust-up in the saloon, but here we all are.

No wonder L&D practitioners feel like they're sleeping with one eye open. They are facing a serious dilemma: Do they keep trying to make that content themselves, divert resources to wrangle external agencies, or just give up and let chaos stampede on through?

In our study on learning content, we explored the leading practices organizations are using to help employees get the learning content that's right for them, when they need it. In this exploration of learning content, we conducted a lit review of 50+ articles from business, trade, and academic sources. We also conducted a roundtable with 33 learning leaders from a variety of industries and held in-depth, one-to-one interviews with 15 leaders. From that research, we have created a model for various kinds of learning and also offer advice to help L&D teams understand where resources can be best applied to support those needs in a scalable way.

This paper sheds light on one particular aspect of that report, asking: how can the sheriff deputize more of the town? What if we recognize that learning is everyone's job? How can organizations create guard rails to shift that responsibility in a sustainable way?

If that sounds intriguing, we suggest you read on, pardner.



How can the sheriff
deputize more of the town?
**What if we recognize that
learning is everyone's job?**

Trends in learning content

Our research identified 4 trends in learning content that are helping to shape learning content strategies in forward-thinking organizations:

1 | More learning content is out there

Not only are we seeing more learning content appearing in more places—but also more types of content created by a wider variety of authors. Learning content used to be primarily created and controlled by L&D functions. Now, employees have access to the following:

- L&D function-created content
- Learning content created by subject-matter experts (SMEs)
- Company reports, policies, strategy docs, etc.
- Vendor-created learning content (custom or off-the-shelf)
- YouTube and other social media content
- Podcasts
- Conference notes, presentations, and videos
- Trade- or industry-specific content
- Learning content libraries (LinkedIn Learning, Udemy for Business, etc.)
- Subscriptions to learning content aggregators
- The entire internet

And that's not even an exhaustive list.

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This incredible volume of learning content—and L&D's sometimes limited control over it—complicates things for learning leaders and employees.

Our research has found that savvy learning leaders aren't even trying to control the volume of content (because that's not gonna happen). Instead, they are creating systems, processes, and policies that help organizations and employees navigate through the choices to find or create the most relevant, impactful content for them. In an interview for this research, one learning leader noted:

"Learning functions need to recognize we never owned learning content in the first place, and we certainly don't now. We need to embrace the chaos."

— **NICK HALDER**, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF TALENT, SNOW SOFTWARE

2 | More enabling, less pushing


Learning leaders are also thinking about how to enable employees to navigate to the right content themselves, rather than pushing content to employees. This guidance can [create conditions](#) that help employees find and consume learning content when and how they like, in ways that align with their needs and organizational goals.

Learning leaders are thinking about how to enable employees to navigate to the right content themselves, rather than pushing content to employees.

3 | Refocusing on skills

Learning leaders we talked to noted that in the past, learning content has not always been relevant or helpful to employees. They see skills as a potential solution:

Forward-thinking organizations are looking at the skills their workforce has and will need, and making investments in learning content to close those critical skills gaps.



“Without insight into what skills are in demand and what skills people have, L&D tends to focus on the learning content we think people need. **That’s rarely an effective approach.**”

—PARTICIPANT, “NEW TRENDS IN LEARNING CONTENT & CONTENT MANAGEMENT” ROUNDTABLE

4 | More access for all employees

Learning leaders have started taking a much closer look at how accessible learning content really is in their organizations, as part of a wider focus on making all employee development more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. As [research from McKinsey pointed out](#), access to learning content not only helps more employees close skills gaps, it also helps the business stay agile, responsive, and competitive.¹

Learning leaders can improve access in 3 ways:

- **Remove artificial barriers.** Some organizations provide learning content on a “need-to-know” basis, creating unnecessary boundaries that could be removed unless they’re strategically justified.
- **Make learning content more discoverable.** Some great learning content is hidden in pockets or silos within the company. Organizations can create a culture of discovery by removing unnecessary passwords, implementing organizational standards, improving search mechanisms, and encouraging employees to poke around.
- **Make learning content accessible on mobile.** Employees, particularly frontline workers, need access to learning content on their phones. This means rethinking accessibility to LMSs or LXPs, as well as thinking mobile-first when creating new learning content.

Forward-thinking organizations are exploring ways to make learning content transparent, accessible, and appealing to all employees.



A model for learning content

When we examined learning leaders' approaches to learning content, we noticed 2 important and different dimensions of the learning content they work with:

- **Specificity:** How unique the learning content is to their organization.
- **Durability:** The shelf life of the learning content.

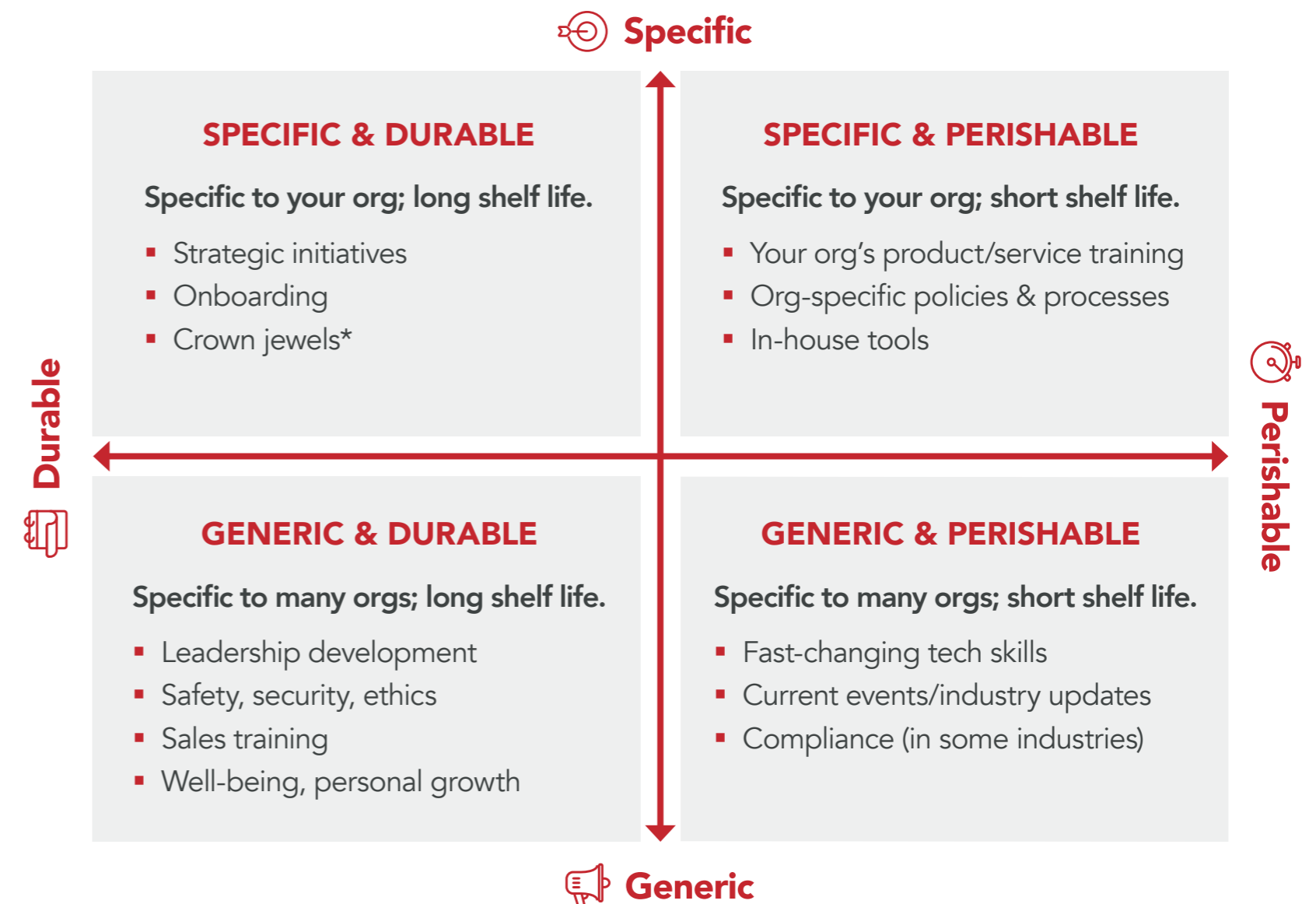
Plotting learning against those 2 dimensions revealed a model of 4 different kinds of content:

1. **Specific & Durable.** Learning content that's unique to one organization and has a long shelf life.
2. **Specific & Perishable.** Learning content that's unique to one organization but changes often.
3. **Generic & Perishable.** Learning content that applies to many organizations and changes often.
4. **Generic & Durable.** Learning content that applies to many organizations and has a long shelf life.

Learning leaders can use this model to clarify focus areas and roles around learning content—and, in particular, to make decisions about what content needs to be controlled or owned by the L&D function and what can be enabled, or deputized, to others in the organization.

In the following sections, we'll look at each of the categories in more detail—along with some of the challenges and opportunities for L&D practitioners.

FIGURE 1 | LEARNING CONTENT MODEL



*Crown jewels refer to intellectual property that's critical to success/competitive advantage as a company.

Specific & Durable

Drive initiatives important to the business



The purpose of Specific & Durable learning content—such as onboarding materials or important intellectual property—is often to shape organizational culture, helping employees understand “this is who we are” and “this is how we act.” Learning leaders reference this content most often in conjunction with organizational initiatives such as culture or change efforts; diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB); and strategic pivots (e.g., adapting to industry upheaval).

L&D’s focus: Drive initiatives important to the business

Learning leaders describe Specific & Durable content as a way of reaching outside of L&D, staying in sync with organizational priorities, and using learning content to support the cultural and strategic initiatives important to the business.

Challenges to address:

Because this links directly to key business initiatives, L&D functions typically face challenges like:

- **Staying aligned with business goals.** How can L&D stay agile in a changing environment?
- **Driving change.** How can learning content move the organization toward its goals?
- **Measuring impact.** How do we know if learning content is moving the needle in ways that align with the organization’s priorities?

Addressing these challenges, particularly around measuring impact, entails intentionally linking learning content to organizational priorities.

SPECIFIC & DURABLE, CONTINUED

For example, Workiva, a global software SaaS company, holds DEIB as a core value and has made it a corporate initiative to become a more inclusive organization. In an April 2021 interview with RedThread, Melissa Lamkin, Senior Manager of Learning & Development, described how she and her team worked closely with the DEI Director, senior leaders, and employee resource group (ERG) leaders to identify specific content that would most strongly impact Workiva's goal of becoming a more diverse and inclusive organization.

L&D should think about how Specific & Durable learning content can help move the needle in areas that are priorities for the business.

In our [research on measuring learning impact](#), we found that average L&D functions tend to triage based on the squeakiest wheel or easiest fix. More forward-thinking L&D functions develop strategies and relationships to continually align and adjust learning content to support organization goals—and to measure success against metrics used by the entire organization, not just the L&D function.

Opportunities for action:

DO NOW:

- Make a plan for staying informed about organizational priorities and goals.
- Audit and align learning content with organizational initiatives.
- Implement marketing practices to increase awareness of content.

WORK ON:

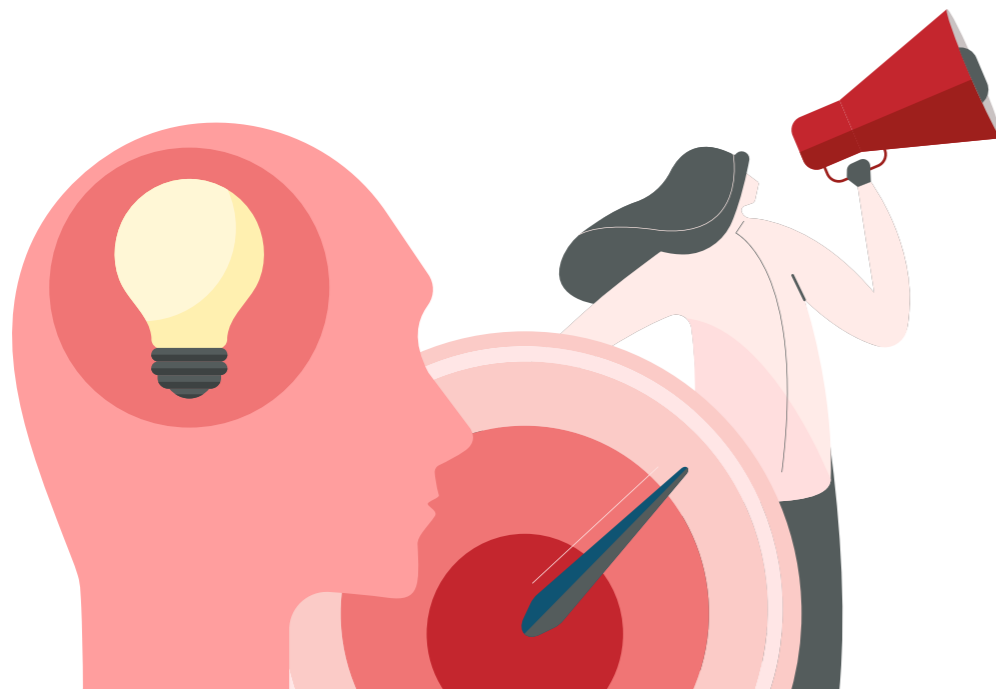
- [Collecting data and creating metrics](#) to measure learning content against organization initiatives over time.
- Using stories and tapping into people's emotions to make content stick.



L&D should think about how Specific & Durable learning content can help **move the needle in areas that are priorities** for the business.

Specific & Perishable

Enable content creation



Specific & Perishable learning content is typically unique to the organization and changes often. It includes training on products, policies, or processes. This content comes from all over the organization—via policy and process documents, product release notes, wikis, etc.—making it difficult (if not impossible) for L&D functions to create and update it all.

L&D's focus: Enable content creation

The L&D function's focus for Specific & Perishable learning content should be to enable the creation and curation of learning content within the organization—not to create or control learning content.

Challenges to address:

Because this content needs to be updated frequently and can usually only be updated internally, it comes with 3 major challenges:

- **Learning content becomes stale.** Updating and maintaining all the learning content in an organization can be a monumental challenge, especially for L&D functions trying to do it all on their own. And this challenge only grows as the amount of content available increases.
- **Content is decentralized.** The best learning content exists in lots of different places in the organization. But with decentralization, it's sometimes harder for employees to find the most relevant, impactful content for their needs.
- **Quality and consistency of learning content can vary.** Because it isn't created by the L&D function, things like quality and branding of learning content can be inconsistent. The more content that's created in more places in the organization, the bigger these consistency challenges become.

The L&D function's focus for Specific & Perishable learning content should be to enable the creation and curation of consistent learning content within the organization—not to create or control that learning content.

SPECIFIC & PERISHABLE, CONTINUED**Opportunities for action:**

To address these challenges, learning leaders are adding processes and guidance that enable anyone in the organization to create or curate content with relative ease, consistency, and quality. They are:

- Implementing basic instructional design templates and norms across the organization
- Putting in place tech that standardizes templates, design principles, and formatting
- Tracking content usage and communicating regularly with authors about updates
- Being available as consultants—answering questions and providing advice on effective learning content that meets standards


For example, in an interview for this study we learned about WillowTree, a digital product consultancy, that has only a 2-person L&D team. Because of their small team, they implemented an LXP that allows them to combine learning paths curated by the LXP with content specific to WillowTree, tracking usage and allowing users to rate learning content and create their own learning pathways.

DO NOW:

- Set expiry dates and be aware when content becomes stale.
- Make it easy for employees to create relevant content by putting in place processes, guidance, guard rails, and technology that enables easy collaboration.
- Draw a box around and prioritize what the L&D function will do for Specific & Perishable learning content.

WORK ON:

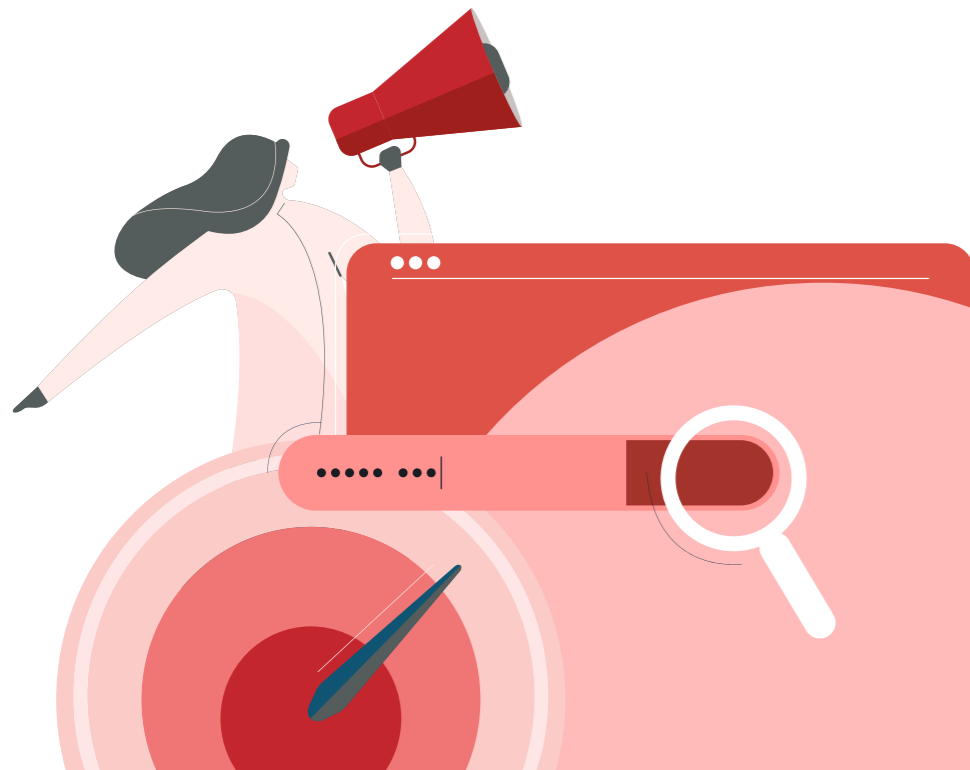
- Improving curation by tracking usage and establishing ratings or rankings.
- Identifying, leveraging, and highlighting single sources of truth.
- Implementing systems and processes to encourage a culture of knowledge-sharing.



The L&D function's focus for Specific & Perishable learning content should be to **enable the creation and curation of consistent learning content within the organization**—not to create or control that learning content.

Generic & Perishable

Help employees filter



One huge pool of available learning content is generic material with a short shelf life—such as training on fast-changing tech skills, how-to tutorials on common processes, or information on industry events or market conditions. Generic & Perishable learning content changes frequently, meaning the great video someone found last year might be 3 releases out of date this year. Much of this content is available for free online or in learning libraries, on professional or trade publications and websites, or through technology vendors.

L&D's focus: Help employees filter

With Generic & Perishable learning content, L&D should focus on helping employees cut through the noise and self-serve the learning they need. In most organizations, this will mean leveraging some kind of technology—most commonly an LXP or LMS. We've yet to see an organization set up a completely manual process that enables filtering at scale. Most organizations leverage both tech and humans to get the job done.

Challenges to address:

The challenges here arise from high volume and fast churn of materials:

- **There's too much noise.** There's a ton of learning content in this category, but quality and relevance vary. It's difficult to decide what to use.
- **It's hard to find the latest and greatest.** Even if you pinpoint the right content, its shelf life is limited, and employees may have a hard time finding the most updated, relevant stuff.

The L&D function's focus for Specific & Perishable learning content should be to enable the creation and curation of consistent learning content within the organization—not to create or control that learning content.

GENERIC & PERISHABLE, CONTINUED**Opportunities for action:**

Implementing effective search, curation, and recommendation engines can help address these challenges by giving employees direction and a place to start.


DO NOW:

- Decide what content libraries and providers L&D will purchase in your organization.
- Use curation—manual and automatic—to signal priority or relevance, highlight high-priority or high-quality content, and define learning paths on specific topics.

For example, when we interviewed a learning leader in a multinational chemical corporation, he told us the story of the company's implementation of LinkedIn Learning. From the start, the company decided not to pull the entire LinkedIn Learning library into its LMS. Instead, the L&D team asked functional leaders to curate the best learning content in the library related to their fields. They then pulled only that curated content into the LMS. This was specifically to make it simple for employees to find relevant, high-quality learning content on topics that are high-priority for the organization.

WORK ON:

- Enabling easy search through technology solutions.
- Making learning content more accessible by leveraging effective technology platforms.
- Put in place processes to regularly review and cull out content that's not used, relevant, or impactful.



L&D should focus on helping employees **cut through the noise and self-serve** the learning they need.

Generic & Durable

Facilitate consistency & quality



Generic & Durable learning content changes relatively infrequently and applies to many organizations. It includes learning content like safety, security, and ethics; leadership development; skills training; industry information; and support for employee well-being, mindfulness, or personal growth.

Many Generic & Durable learning content vendors offer high-quality learning content on specialty topics that an in-house L&D team may not have the expertise or bandwidth to create.

L&D's focus: Facilitate consistency & quality

For this content, L&D should be setting clear standards for quality and for selecting and evaluating modules and vendors carefully. This way, L&D functions can provide a consistent, organization-wide point of view on cross-cutting topics, like “the way we lead,” “the way we think about safety,” and so on.

Many Generic & Durable learning content vendors offer high-quality learning content on specialty topics that an in-house L&D team may not have the expertise or bandwidth to create.

Challenges to address:

Consistency and quality are the primary challenges for this learning content because it is often specific to different teams or functions. Many commercial sources will feed into this category, creating potential inconsistencies in the content that’s used for a particular subject, including quality, delivery mechanisms, evaluation metrics, or access.

In the lit review we did as part of this research, we saw that creating consistent design, branding, and visual cues—in addition to content quality guidelines—can help employees understand and navigate learning content more easily.

GENERIC & DURABLE, CONTINUED**Opportunities for action:**

Forward-thinking L&D functions are also considering how they can foster relationships—convening cross-functional groups to align on needs, pooling resources, or negotiating vendor contracts at an organization level, rather than by team.


DO NOW:

- Audit Generic & Durable learning content for quality, consistency, and access.
- Work with other functions to identify and coordinate learning content requirements.

For example, one Fortune 50 multinational tech company we interviewed with a highly federated L&D structure has recently begun convening an L&D council of learning leaders from the largest L&D teams in the enterprise to improve communication, coordinate efforts, and build more consistency across the organization.

WORK ON:

- Help vendors integrate their learning content into the organization's learning ecosystem.
- Build a culture of data-driven experimentation within the L&D function.
- Standardize vendor lists for similar content to simplify processes and ensure consistent messaging on cross-cutting topics.



Many Generic & Durable learning content vendors offer **high-quality learning content on specialty topics** that an in-house L&D team may not have the expertise or bandwidth to create.

Enabling content creation for more sustainable L&D

In this report, we've summarized some of our recent work on recent trends in learning content, including how the explosion in volume and variety of learning content is affecting L&D organizations and employees alike. We've also shared our model for thinking about learning content in 4 categories based on the factors of specificity and durability.

One of the consistent through-lines we have seen in this research is how learning leaders are meeting these challenges by enabling more widespread content creation. Forward-leaning L&D teams are enlisting employees across the organization as more active participants in the consumption, curation, and creation of learning content. L&D's role here is to provide guidance, oversight, and quality assurance. In particular, L&D teams are deputizing creators for the Specific and Durable content that they cannot currently produce at scale.

THE REALITY: Content is coming. Organic content creation is already happening in every organization, whether L&D likes it or not. Making it "legal" allows you to move this activity into the light of day—where L&D can better see, influence, and measure it.

THE RISKS: There is a false choice between bottlenecks and chaos. Most of the risks of deputizing employees to create content are already present in a centralized system. L&D might worry about multiple creators—but as noted, content is already being created behind the scenes. Another risk might be a perceived lack of control over quality. This is where adding guardrails, templates, and standards for consistency will be helpful. Finally, there is a risk that no one will step up to be a content creator. To mitigate this, L&D can use marketing techniques to inspire engagement and leverage technology tools to encourage and facilitate participation.

THE REWARDS: Tap company expertise at scale. Deputizing content creators in your organization establishes new and consistent streams of content from many subject matter experts, making content more effective and timely. Moreover, enabling content creation lets you refocus your L&D resources on what only L&D can do—creating flagship content instead of playing catchup with a backlog. For everything else, you can create guidelines, actively guide employees to create impactful and relevant content, delegate, and maintain oversight, resulting in more and better learning content and dissemination, and building a culture of discovery and knowledge-sharing.

Forward-leaning L&D teams are **enlisting employees as more active participants** in the consumption, curation, and creation of learning content.

How to deputize the organization

Looking at our findings around learning content, we have noted 5 steps that organizations can take to effectively deputize content creators to create relevant, impactful, high-quality learning content.

STEP 1: Build a foundation for collaborative content creation

As with any effective L&D initiative, it will be important to create a strategy and roadmap for sustainable change. This process will be focused around stakeholders and internal experts. Bring leaders on board early; establish buy-in across the organization; identify employee content creators; and articulate clear priorities, roles, responsibilities, and areas of focus.

STEP 2: Remove barriers to access

The best content will be useless if learners are unable to access it. Employees need access to content that helps them both do their immediate jobs better and prepare themselves (and the org) for the future. This means removing artificial barriers and re-assessing “need-to-know” restrictions, making content more discoverable, and adding robust mobile capabilities.

STEP 3: Enable knowledge sharing

Identify your organization’s sources of truth for very important content, and decide how to best draw attention to these sources. Recognize that L&D functions are often not the best decision-makers in determining which content is most appropriate for all situations. Identify the key players—generally business leaders or those most passionate about the subject matter—and tap them to help curate and create content.

STEP 4: Put guardrails into place

Facilitate consistency and quality by establishing quality standards to guide content creation. Communicate L&D’s availability to consult with SMEs interested in creating learning content. Implement common language, format, and configurations for learning content. Encourage employees across the organization to share their knowledge by creating templates, identifying standard learning content creation tools, providing guidelines, and actively setting expectations about the content they create.

Set up approval processes and governance where appropriate—and where it will not add bottlenecks. Prioritize. Some things matter more than others and warrant more oversight. Finally, to ensure content stays fresh and relevant, consider setting up expiry dates, ratings, and rankings.

STEP 5: Lean into technology

Leverage technology partners and platforms to better collaborate and capture your organizational expertise, expand access to learning, and deliver impactful learning at scale. Put in place technology that increases access across the organization and helps employees understand and navigate your learning content easily, such as advanced search, standard templates, design principles, and formatting.

L&D organizations are starting to recognize the limitations of centralized control of content, and understand that they risk losing “control” simply by not being able to keep up. To better meet business needs, forward-thinking L&D teams are taking the steps above, and leveraging more decentralized practices to enable collaborative content creation. We look forward to seeing how L&D functions continue to move away from controlling content in their organizations and toward enabling its creation.

As always, we welcome feedback and discussion on this topic! Please feel free to reach out to RedThread Research at hello@redthreadresearch.com or www.redthreadresearch.com. We'd love to hear about your experiences.

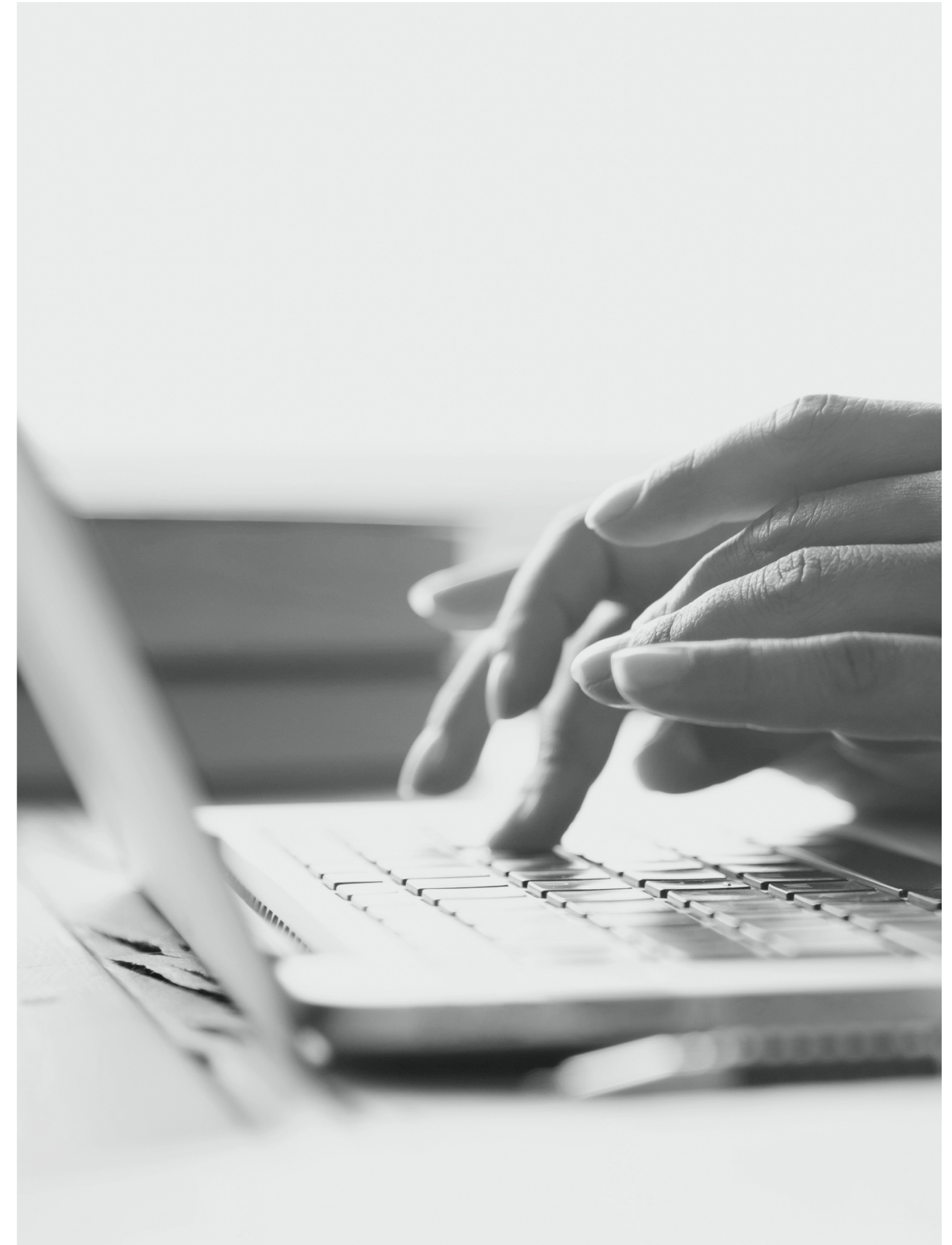
About the author



Heather Gilmartin Adams

Senior Analyst | *Research Areas: Enabling Leaders, Learning & Skills*

Before joining RedThread in 2020, Heather spent 10 years at organizational culture change consultancies and the U.S. Department of the Treasury. She has an MA degree in International Affairs from Columbia and a BA in History from Princeton. Heather has lived in Germany, China, Japan, and India and was, for one summer, a wrangler on a dude ranch in Colorado.





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