



Is it harder to engage the modern learner?

Strategies for L&D professionals to maximize learner engagement in 2024

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Executive summary

Increasing investments in L&D

As Learning and Development (L&D) professionals, you understand how a training program's effectiveness can be determined by its level of learner engagement.

These programs are often supported by robust funding, with 2021-2022 total U.S. training expenditures reaching an unprecedented cost of over \$100 billion, according to Training magazine's Training Industry Report. This growth is expected at a global level as well. Total training market expenditures of over \$383 billion in 2023 are anticipated to reach over \$460 billion by 2027. The return on this multi-billion-dollar investment has the potential to be extremely advantageous – with the right engagement strategies.

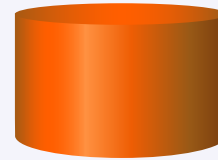
But successfully engaging the modern learner requires some tactical rethinking.

Global Corporate Training Market

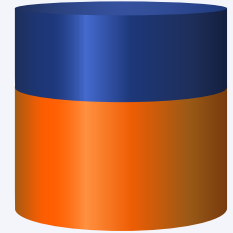
Market forecast to grow at CAGR of 4.8%

USD 383.14 billion

USD 460.04 billion



2023



2027

The global corporate training market's expected growth from 2023 to 2027.

Is a new approach to engagement necessary?

Modern technology has made it extremely convenient for users to discover new content of all genres, from informational to entertaining. With information this accessible and infinite, it's easy to become addicted to the highly stimulatory environment of phones, computers, and TVs. In fact, globally, one person alone averages just under seven hours of screen time each day.

The increase in highly stimulating content has affected the workplace. Roughly half of corporate training and development programs fail – a consequence of many factors, including disengaged and uninterested learners.

How learners consume information has arguably changed the way they now focus and engage. With this comes the need for new engagement tactics.

A good strategy can help

To determine the best strategies for high learner engagement, let's look at how we've adapted to learning new information in our modern age of technology.

The quick delivery of highly stimulating content has accustomed our brains to learning differently – arguably shortening our attention span, limiting our capacity to process large amounts of information at a time, and weakening our retention of new information.

When creating new training programs, taking these neurological changes into account can help you choose the best strategies that spark and maintain your learners' attention. Some popular strategies include video-based learning, gamification, and microlearning.

Ultimately, the engagement strategy you choose should reflect the unique objectives of your training.

What's causing recent trends in disengagement?

Maintaining a high level of engagement is necessary for successful learning outcomes. While your training may include all of the necessary information to meet the learning objectives, lacking sufficient engagement means a lot of this information may be going in one ear and out the other.

In 2020, LinkedIn Learning asked global L&D professionals for their three greatest challenges of the year. Results showed that 36% of respondents agreed that driving employee engagement in learning was one of their biggest challenges.

The reason may stem from a deep, cognitive level...

Psychology professionals have voiced concern for the future of learning – worried by the effects of the digitally advanced world on our ability to focus and engage.

Our devices deliver endless amounts of information, spiking dopamine levels in our brain and giving us a rush that can become addictive.

A 2023 survey by Reviews.org asked Americans about their cell phone habits, and found that those 18 years and older check their phones about 144 times in 24 hours – that's at least six times every hour.

Frequent and constant stimulation from the information we encounter on a daily basis can be argued as one of the primary contributors to our modern engagement habits.

That said, how exactly has our cognitive ability to engage changed?



Common causes of low engagement...

Learners may be struggling to engage with your training program because it is:

- **Too long.** Lengthy trainings can hinder motivation and lead to early disengagement
- **Too complex.** Confusing navigation or unnecessary detail may cause frustration
- **Not relevant.** Learners may disconnect from the material if they feel it does not apply to them
- **Not accessible.** Training that is incompatible with learners' needs can render it useless
- **Too passive.** Too much passive content can make learners feel uninvolved and lethargic
- **Not fun.** If the tone of the training is too serious, learners may become overwhelmed or bored

Keeping these points in mind can help you to avoid common mistakes that could cause you to lose the attention of your learners.

Here are a few ways in which our brains have altered due to how we process today's infinite, fast-paced content...

Shortening attention span

According to a study led by Microsoft Canada, the average global attention span has noticeably decreased over the last couple decades – from an estimated 12 seconds in 2000 to just over eight seconds in 2023. That's almost a 25% decrease!

Consuming hours' worth of short videos or text posts at a time slashes our attention span more than most other forms of content. Our brains have been trained to prefer the intake of information in short and quick bursts, making it nearly impossible to sustain prolonged periods of deep focus.

Limited capacity for information

Many popular digital media platforms feature video clips that are only a few seconds to a couple minutes long or text posts that are quick and to-the-point.

Having grown accustomed to intaking brief chunks of information at a time, our brains are programmed to lose interest in activities that require processing anything substantial in size. In fact, users of popular apps report that they are no longer able to focus on longer formats of content anymore – with about half admitting that they find tasks that demand more time and attention “stressful.”



Declining memory and retention

According to Jessica Griffin, PsyD, an Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics, long-term users of popular apps can experience issues with short-term memory.

In another study, the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health took a closer look at the effects of the popular social media app TikTok and found that those who are addicted to popular apps like this display worse memory recall than those who aren't.

Newly learned information tends to leave just as swiftly as it comes, weakening our capacity to retain and recall information.

What does all this mean for engagement?

The modern ways we take in information have had a negative effect on our ability to focus, process, and retain knowledge. Ultimately, our brains have adjusted the way they engage to fit this kind of information consumption.

For those in L&D, it may be essential to incorporate new, evolved strategies into modern training materials. But what are these new strategies and how exactly can they be applied to your training?

Some strategies to foster engagement

Video-based learning



It's likely you've seen this form of learning before – such as when you're being told how to use emergency oxygen masks on an airplane or even just watching a documentary.

Recently, L&D has increased video-based learning strategies. In 2020, about 75% of companies opted to use video platforms as a part of their training programs.

Video-based learning uses a combination of visual elements – images, graphics, on-screen text, and audio – to teach new information or a new skill.

How does it align with modern engagement patterns?

Our brains are pre-programmed to process visuals over text-based content, likely because of their highly stimulating, multi-sensory elements that grab our attention and keep us interested.

As of 2023, video consumption was at an all-time high. It's reported that people watch an average of 17 hours of online videos per week – equaling an average of over two hours of video consumption each day. And an overwhelming portion of these videos are increasingly short, as seen on apps like TikTok and Instagram.

Gamification



Gamification is another great strategy to use to increase learner engagement.

Over recent years, the video game industry has grown tremendously. Since 2015, the global count of video game players has grown between an estimated 100 to 150 million every single year.

Gamification describes the integration of game design elements into training materials, using reward-based motivation to engage learning.

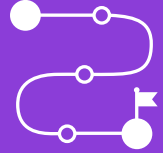
How does it align with modern engagement patterns?

Gamification uses reward reinforcement, similar to entertainment-based video games, to increase motivation and overall attention. The action-reward structure of gamification triggers the production of dopamine in the brain. When a new level is unlocked or a reward is earned, players get a spike of dopamine that motivates them to stay engaged. By tailoring this structure to align with effective teaching techniques, gamification has gained overwhelming popularity over recent years in educational settings.

It's not just about completing levels and winning points – gamification can include scenario-based storytelling, where learners think critically, and choose the best action to reach a desired outcome.

About 85% of employees are shown to be more engaged when gamification elements are applied in their workplace or incorporated into trainings. Additionally, over half of new hires report being highly productive after undergoing a gamified training program. They also showed higher performance in skill assessment tests when compared to those who did not learn through a gamified program.

Microlearning



Microlearning techniques can also be used to help maintain learner engagement.

It's likely you have used or seen examples of microlearning without even knowing it. Microlearning strategies include a wide variety of elements – such as text, images, videos, audio, tests, quizzes, or games. Either applied individually or in combination, these elements are integrated in a short and succinct fashion to help break up larger amounts of content.

Microlearning divides content into bite-sized, digestible chunks of information, usually delivered within a short period of time and in a straightforward fashion.

How does it align with modern engagement patterns?

Although microlearning is not new, the wave of digitalization has amplified the delivery of information in short, easily digestible bursts.

Due to the way endless, convenient information has shortened our processing bandwidth, our brains have changed the way we engage to protect us from “information overload.” Popular apps acknowledge this by funneling short bits of information into separate videos, posts, or “tweets” to prevent our brains from reaching capacity.

Microlearning uses the concept that the brain is more capable of processing new information when it is presented in smaller segments. By permitting learners to focus on single bite-sized pieces at a time, microlearning creates smoother pathways for knowledge transfer and prevents “information overload.”

With all the ways microlearning strategies align to our modern habits of engagement, it's not surprising that it is one of the most popular and effective approaches in the L&D industry.

The do's and don'ts of these engagement strategies

Video-based learning	Gamification	Microlearning
<p>Do...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Cater them to your audience – Personal and relevant videos can more effectively grab and hold attention. ✓ Keep them short – Bite-size videos are easily digestible and easier to focus on. ✓ Use visual aids – Pairing text with visuals leaves a greater impression, improving recall and retention. <p>Don't forget to prepare closed captioning! There are endless benefits to having captions available for your videos - not only for accessibility reasons, but for increased retention as well</p> <p>Don't...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Make it too long – Aim for short segments or divide up a long video into bite-sized clips. ✗ Overlook the audio – Avoid monotone or deflated tones, as these can make the video boring. ✗ Make it irrelevant – Ensure that the video content aligns to the main training objectives. 	<p>Do...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use active participation – Ask learners to perform tasks to create a highly immersive learning experience. ✓ Make it realistic and focused – Short and achievable gamified elements are highly motivating. ✓ Make it fun – Enjoyable training leaves a deeper impression and is more likely to be retained. <p>Don't...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Begin with it – Give learners time to grasp content before applying it. ✗ Get too complicated – Keep the games simple and easy to follow to avoid frustration. ✗ Stray from the goals – Keep the objectives of the game and the training aligned. 	<p>Do...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Use multiple modalities – Switch the format of content to help sustain interest. ✓ Make it focused – Break up complex content into categorized segments to keep learners from disengaging. ✓ Use right-sizing techniques – Allow learners to go at their own pace by making the training content-led rather than time-sensitive. <p>Don't...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ Just divide content – Reevaluate and redesign it in a way that aligns with your objectives. ✗ Restrict to one format – Use multiple formats to help keep learners on their toes and engaged. ✗ Use irrelevant media – Too many visuals could be distracting or cause cognitive overload.

Helpful Tip!

As artificial intelligence (AI) quickly makes its way into all areas of life, it's a good idea to look into how it can help revolutionize your trainings and drive engagement.



The bottom line

The modern waves of digitalization are just the tip of the iceberg. With ever-advancing technology, information will only become more convenient and quicker to consume.

Today, information is delivered rapidly, simply, and intensely. That means our brains are predisposed to better engage with information delivered in this way. As our attention spans shorten, our capacity to process large amounts of information shrinks and our ability to retain and recall complex information weakens.

This means that we must adjust learning strategies to align with these new engagement habits. Without doing so, you risk losing learner engagement and failing to meet the training objectives.



Ultimately, the strategies you choose will depend on the nature of your content and the objectives of your project. We're here to help you determine the best way to meet your training goals.

Who We Are

Octane Learning is an awarding-winning, strategic learning and development organization with offices in Princeton, NJ and Irvine, CA.

We study the best ways to integrate diverse methodologies into our learning and development programs, seamlessly combining adult learning principles with skill-based approaches and change management techniques.

By the way, if you want to look at the research, it's worth reading the original papers.

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