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Escaping the activity trap: Creating enduring value with L&D

Learning & Development teams have talked about being a source of strategic business value for a long time. Despite this, L&D is still very much an activity-focused industry, concentrating on the design and delivery of courses, when a focus on impact and outcomes is what was always required. A difficult economy, with enduring pressure on budgets, is challenging the status quo and sharpening stakeholder questions about the case for L&D investment and the evidence that the case is being met. AI-enabled efficiency is exposing historic weaknesses and traditional L&D output based delivery model is under greater threat.

The shift to a value-based model for L&D is a challenging imperative, however. It needs more than reorganising metrics and accurate reporting of activity in redesigned dashboards. It needs a reinvention of the purpose of learning investment and a new planning framework to align relevant business evidence, resulting from L&D solutions, to address strategic priorities and achieve concrete business goals.

For many learning teams, this calls for new capabilities and fresh ways of working, with a new infrastructure that supports these different approaches. Data and data management are critical foundations, along with systems that enable value to be realised and monitored – not just counting learning activity. Perhaps most important, are the relationships needed throughout the organisation to identify the business value L&D can contribute and frame it more directly for stakeholders who are looking for clear signals of value.

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In association with





Why is this important?

Focusing on value is an L&D imperative

For many years, L&D has talked about the need to focus on the value of learning - not just the amount of training delivered. The current economic climate makes this an imperative. Budgets continue to tighten, decision making cycles are longer and scrutiny on L&D investment from more senior decision makers is tighter than ever. In 2025, Fosway's Digital Learning Realities research showed that budgets are under increasing pressure with 21% of L&D professionals expecting their budgets to decline¹. In 2022 41% were planning on budgets to grow, that is now well under 30%. In the current business environment, a stronger case is needed to maintain L&D budgets, let alone grow them and having a clear way to demonstrate real impact is paramount. Course and content delivery metrics have always been poor measures for L&D to justify its value. Stakeholders want clear evidence of business outcomes and L&D leaders need relevant and meaningful data to provide that evidence. Identifying, measuring and monitoring business impact should always have been higher up on L&D's proof of value; now it is unavoidable.

Traditional L&D was built for delivery

The heritage of L&D as a corporate training function is a troubling legacy for modern learning leaders trying to establish a position of strategic partnership with their business. The budgets allocated for training and the organisational operating model it creates tend strongly towards a reactive delivery function aligned to historic (business as usual) problems rather than a proactive dynamic value-driving service. Our research shows only 14% of L&D professionals believe they are 'advanced' at mobilising around strategic priorities². It is therefore unsurprising that barely over 2% think they are advanced at measuring the impact and value they deliver too. Whilst 43% are confident that their compliance and regulatory training is effective, that drops to only 19% for business improvement and 15% for business transformation. The operational delivery of learning remains necessary, but it is a weak foundation for L&D to be a future key source of strategic value for business stakeholders and workers.

¹ Fosway Digital Learning Realities, 2025

² Fosway Digital Learning Realities, 2025



L&D remains trapped in an activity paradigm

L&D is increasingly challenged for this focus on activity rather than outcomes. A balanced view recognises that reporting activity rather than impact is what it has traditionally been expected to do, whilst the trend for business stakeholders to seek a more strategic perspective is clear. Despite this, L&D has a ‘habit of delivery’, often fixating on commissioning and running courses when in the classroom training era, and now of delivering courses and resources in the digital era. A focus on bookings, attendance and evaluation sheets has morphed into course assignments, completions, time spent and satisfaction scores in a digital context. The preoccupation with delivery is longstanding. This chart from Digital Learning Realities research in 2025³ describes the problem.

How do you measure and monitor the value of your learning solutions?

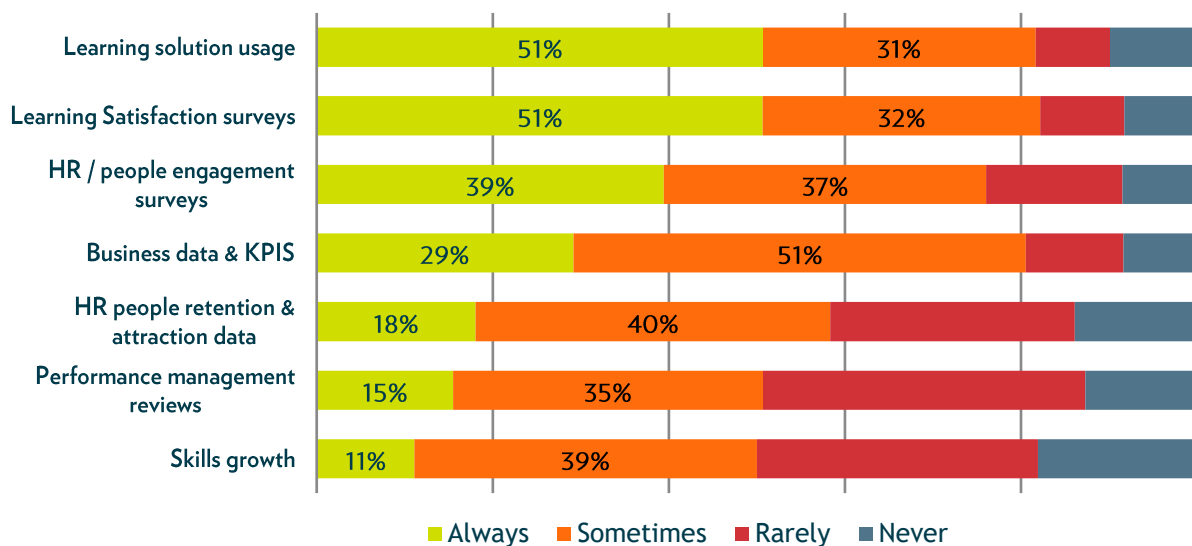


Figure 1 – How do you measure and monitor the value of learning

Half of learning professionals routinely gather data on platform and content usage, along with satisfaction surveys. Yet only 29% always gather and report on business data and KPIs. Even worse, only 11% are consistently focused on skills growth - despite upskilling and reskilling being the top priority for 56% of organisations over the coming year (the highest ranked priority overall).

Tracking activity might be easier, but it will not take L&D where it needs to go.

³ Digital Learning Realities 2025



Stakeholders need L&D to solve valuable problems

As business stakeholders plan future budgets, their priority is on the solution of real problems and how to increase business performance, not on delivery resources and processes. Tougher economic conditions make this even more critical. Now, the arrival of AI has started to undermine traditional economics of learning production within L&D too⁴. As AI models grow in capability, more of the design and delivery of learning will be able to be automated, in whole or in part. In 2026, 68% of L&D leaders expect investment in AI content authoring to grow, and confidence in the quality of output is growing as hands-on experience of media and authoring tools powered by AI becomes more mainstream. Against this backdrop, L&D leaders must evolve their role to secure a sustainable position and future. Progressive L&D teams are focusing on the identification and solution of business strategy and performance problems, so being able to demonstrate the value they delivered is becoming a core competence. This does not mean abandoning operational process excellence but managing it in the context of more strategic goals and evidence.

The shift to value is a complex but vital challenge

As with all valuable outcomes, there are no shortcuts in this shift to realising value. It requires long-term effort across the business and within learning teams. Across Fosway's corporate network, we see leaders struggling to change siloed HR or L&D functions with weak relationships and influence on business functions and teams. The historical view of learning data encourages a focus on internal metrics as we have seen above, but it also creates a fragmented data infrastructure where systems operate poorly together. Understanding what is a correlation or a cause of an outcome is rarely simple, particularly when analysing from a range of data sources is a historic weakness. For complex and high-value learning investments, the time needed to move from identifying the need, to development, to deployment is often considerable. Measuring the success of these investments is even harder, and every L&D function is busy with a day job too. Change is hard, and it is necessary to properly understand business context and desired outcomes before being clear on what the most significant evidence is that proves success.

⁴ Fosway 9-Grid™ for Digital Learning, 2026



What should you do?

Shift your measurement focus to the CORE

A genuine shift to measuring and monitoring value and rising above the preoccupation with activity metrics needs more than a focus on data alone. It should reflect the business environment and priorities, articulate a clear picture of what success looks like, along with the blueprint for an effective solution. From this, the strongest set of evidence can be specified. Fosway has a model to describe this; we call it CORE.

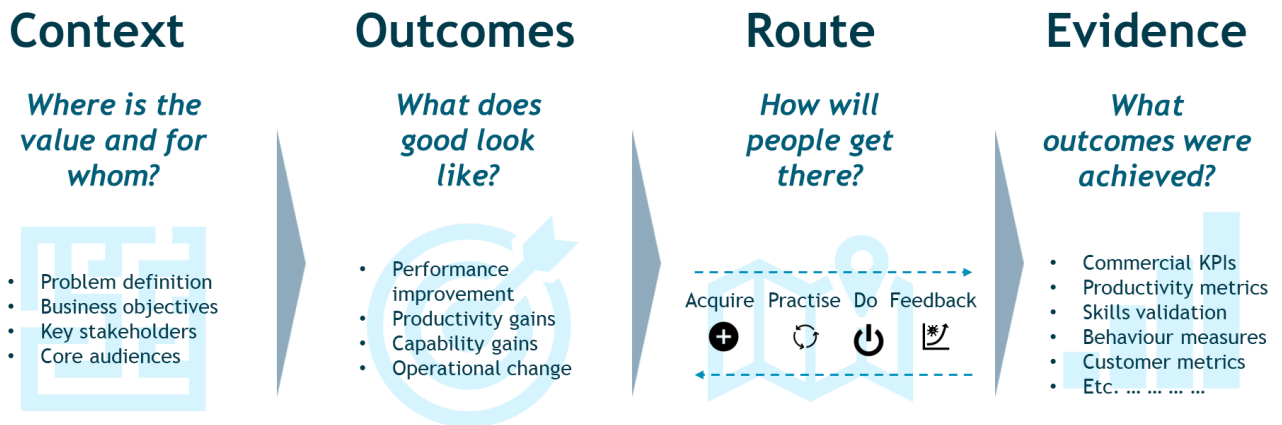


Figure 2: The components of the CORE framework

The CORE framework below lays out the key elements of the approach. It encourages the discipline of starting with business context and outcome definition before deciding what evidence is worth gathering. As the framework model describes, generating evidence of value should frame interventions in the context of business priorities and a clear goal from which the route of a solution can be planned. This then also frames the data and specific metrics for the most compelling evidence of value. Data gathering, analysis and reporting is only one step, albeit a vital one.

The table on the next page summarises the most important considerations in each stage of the framework.



CORE Step	Key considerations
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear articulation of the business problem, in the language of the business • Understanding of how this problem impacts business goals and performance • Clarity on which stakeholders are owners of the problem, and which are influential in its resolution • A clear articulation of audience needs and circumstances based on evidence
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting a clear goal – what a successful solution looks like • Understanding that types of measures define the goal – productivity, commercial, efficiency, skills, culture, operational etc. • Clarity on the capabilities that will be in place when the problem is solved or improved upon • Confidence in what changes are required to address the problem – operational, technology, culture, resources, behaviour etc.
Route	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the combination of interventions needed to influence these outcomes – learning and non-learning tools and tactics • Clarity on how the solution design mix impacts on outcomes • Laying out the types of experiences needed to understand and practise the right outcomes • Articulating how the intervention produces trackable evidence – emphasis on practice and application • Being clear on how much time and effort is required, from whom and over what period
Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demanding that evidence needed is specific to the solution and unambiguous • Relating evidence clearly to business context and outcomes • Ensuring that measures have currency in the organisation - recognisable and familiar to senior stakeholders • Checking that evidence is easy to communicate to a wide audience – using a few key metrics only • Monitoring how these metrics move, what contributes to them and why

As an example, an L&D team is asked to provide learning to address issues with increased customer churn in a specific sales team. Investigating the Context with stakeholders reveals a range of potential causes, with lack of responsiveness to customer issues being identified as the real culprit rather, than general sales skills. This enables the team to set a clear target Outcome – consistently accelerating time to issue resolution, from which they determine the best Route to meeting that Outcome, as well as what Evidence would demonstrate specific success. The Route could include learning about processes, policies and procedures, but also case stories of good and poor practice, worked examples in a simulation and feedback from applied practice. Data from these can then be analysed against issue resolution evidence from customer success



teams as the source of Evidence of impact and monitored alongside customer churn rates. The CORE approach forces the team to go beyond “learning outcomes” and focus on the real business issue and design a solution and evidence strategy that aligns to business outcomes.

New capabilities are needed for L&D to sustain value

Following the CORE framework requires a set of capabilities beyond the traditional conception of what L&D offers. In particular, it needs stronger consulting, stakeholder and audience insight together with deeper communication capabilities and excellent design expertise. CORE also positions L&D as a cross-functional team unit, working with a range of decision makers and participants across the full lifecycle of projects – not just a partner to running learning interventions at the end!

The silos and fragmentation common in many organisations need to be recognised and overcome to connect with all stakeholders effectively and work across the business to deliver relevant solutions. Often this requires developing enduring partnerships further from home. In our Digital Learning Realities research in 2025⁵, leadership and management, talent teams, IT departments, customer-facing groups and business operations were all identified as top stakeholder relationships important to L&D in the future. As a comparison, the HR function, a traditionally much closer team for L&D, was ranked eighth.

Audience research and insight is a crucial skill set in understanding employee context, motivations and expectations. It is also central to human-centred design approaches needed in plotting and steering a clear route through solutions. Whilst arguably an obvious addition to these capabilities, communicating well with a full range of stakeholders is also critical. Being an expert in L&D should be a given, not a sales pitch. Using the language of the business, avoiding technical jargon and detail, understanding the value of brevity and focusing on a single core message are all useful guidelines for communicating the purpose and value of what you do more effectively.

⁵ Digital Learning Realities 2025



Data is the foundation for future relevance

Data analytics has long been an Achilles' heel of the learning industry, even throughout the transition to digital. In the age of AI, it is an even more acute challenge. Gathering meaningful business data, managing it and deriving and communicating evidence from it are all fundamental to escaping the activity trap. The most powerful data comes, of course, from sources beyond L&D; it is these sources that will define and capture the progress towards the outcomes the business needs most. Good working relationships with the owners of business data will not only make it easier to engage with that data and build confidence in using it as evidence in the people development story. But be careful, dashboards are only a tool to use in presenting and communicating data, not the data itself, or the story that needs to be told about it.

As an aide, many digital learning vendors are acutely aware of this data challenge and understand the importance of evidence as a key requirement in their roadmap planning to support customer needs. Reporting tools are always under pressure, but they are improving, as is the ability to handle data from a variety of sources to piece together evidence of impact. Building a strong data management capability is, unfortunately for most, a long-term goal though. It is therefore important to focus on what is actually achievable in the early stages and stick to a smaller number of business goals where confidence in the impact of learning interventions is high, testing what is most effective.

Planning systems for the future

In their most traditional form, learning systems have historically been an obstacle to the progress we are describing in this paper. Their focus on course administration, assignment of learning and monitoring of completions has made value-based analysis problematic, and many systems still prioritise counting completions over connecting learning evidence to business value. A preoccupation with SCORM to normalise reporting, particularly for compliance needs, has not helped either. As a result, only 35% of L&D customers believe their learning platform is fit for the modern workforce⁶.

The market is responding however, and corporates should push their vendors to ensure that more sophisticated solutions are available. The best providers are developing systems that can orchestrate the

⁶ Fosway Digital Learning Realities 2025



needed steps, inputs and outcomes rather than just administrate courses and record narrow metrics. The capabilities to support learner behaviour measurement, detailed skills validation data and rich platform usage metrics are raising the bar. Creating a range of experiences in learning design is crucial to the practice, rehearsal and application of skills in realistic simulations scenarios. Integrations with other systems to support the transfer of data into business systems allows organisations to align learning metrics with business goals and act as part of a wider evidence ecosystem in the business. Ultimately, learning systems should enable L&D leaders to have meaningful conversations across the business about the value needed and created not, just learning delivered and activity counted.

Start small to understand value in your context

Managing L&D as a value-added service to the business is a significant change for many L&D teams and can seem like a daunting journey. Starting small and close to home is always sound guidance. Working with stakeholders you know well and are ready to think differently is a good first step - focusing on one discrete challenge in one business area makes it easier to diagnose and describe problems well. Moving to design a solution with existing tools and resources, addressing a particular outcome you can measure with available data will help test what works best in your context.

From this experience, more confident plans can be created with evidence that the different approach increases value. It is as important to understand how ready to change your own function is as it is to gather the evidence to persuade others that the change is needed.



In Summary

Escaping the trap of recording and communicating activity is a significant challenge for L&D but one that must be met. As economic uncertainty reigns, the pressure to add value is higher and there are signs that the rhetoric of value-based corporate learning is giving way to real change. Ultimately, L&D needs to reframe itself as a partner, a consultant, a strategist and a problem-solving designer to avoid the cul-de-sac of being a traditional design and delivery function of the past.

Key actions to move beyond activity-based learning:

- **Apply the CORE framework** to move upstream of learning delivery and select a single business priority, define the value in the goals and the precise evidence needed to evaluate impact
- **Develop strong relationships with owners of key business data** to understand how it is used, how it is managed and can be integrated with learning plans
- **Review the major projects and initiatives you have worked on** over the last year. The extent to which they are focused on clear business goals, demanding sharp evidence of business impact will give a good sense of where to focus
- **Audit and evaluate the business data and KPIs** that you and your team work with and how often and compare this to the business reporting you see across the business
- **Be demanding of learning platform providers** and ensure they have the capabilities and roadmap in place to support a transition to value-based learning



Recommended Fosway reading

For further Fosway analysis relating to this topic, please see the following papers or resources.

- [Fosway Digital Learning Realities, 2025](#)
- [Fosway 9-Grid for Learning Systems, 2026](#)
- [Fosway 9-Grid for Digital Learning, 2026](#)
- [AI Market Assessment for Learning Systems, 2026](#)
- [Learning Technologies Autumn Forum 2025: Beyond the AI Noise](#)

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