



Is Organizational Training Enabling or Withholding Employee Upskilling?

A Study on Evolving Employee Perspectives on Training Needs, Implementation and Evaluation

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Abstract

The pandemic propelled organizations to rely on digital learning methods, encompassing self-paced modules and live virtual sessions. This study focused on understanding whether the preferences of today's workforce for learning align with the training methodology employed by organizations. Through the purposive sampling technique, we identified participants working with early-stage startups to established multinational corporations in various sectors such as IT/ITES, BFSI, Martech, Telecom, Consulting, and Healthtech. Our sample size of 24 included employees in the age group of 21 to 30 years, with total work experience spanning between 11 months and 8.5 years. We conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews followed by narrative analysis methodology to analyze the responses and employee perspectives. Our key findings highlighted the importance of choosing the right trainer to ensure an optimum level of engagement, customization of training content for the audience and spacing out training timelines to avoid information overload. Additionally, participants preferred experiential learning through real-life case studies and group discussions on relevant topics for better applicability. Respondents favored case-study-based evaluations, conducted after a set period following the training, over the conventional methods of training evaluation. Notably, there was a preference for follow-up tests to assess learning retention. This study highlighted a misalignment between current training designs and the preference of the new generational workforce. Based on our insights, we emphasized the value of in-person training over self-paced options, even in the digital era. We have suggested ways for crafting more effective, robust and dynamic training programs which will aid organizations align with the ever-changing preferences of the current generation of workforce.

Keywords: digital learning, instructor-led, new generational workforce, self-paced, training effectiveness

Chapter 1: Introduction

Digital learning includes teaching methods wherein technologies are used to improve quality of education and have greater involvement of students in the educational process. Web-based video, augmented reality and gamifications are some tools of digital learning methodology whereas videoconferencing, eLearning and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are considered to be the support systems. These tools act as facilitators of the learning process and the support systems provide infrastructure to manage the learning process (Sousa et al., 2017).

With the development of these newer technologies for training, this study analyzes the interaction of digital learning with employees and their preferences in the form of organizational training.

1.1 Digital Learning and its advantages

Digital learning methodologies started gaining popularity with technological advancements but were the preferred solution to educational needs during the pandemic and post-pandemic (Nur et al., 2023; Mahsusi et al., 2023; Scully et al., 2021). As educational institutions adopted digital or online learning methodologies, organizations upgraded their training programs to include online learning such as e-learning systems and MOOCs. The Learning and Development (L&D) departments of organizations worked out significant transformations in the delivery of training to meet developmental goals of employees (Shahriar et al., 2023).

Easier accessibility of learning modules through the internet is not the only advantage of digital learning. Research shows that digital learning has positive effects on learning motivation and learning outcome than traditional teaching (Lin et al., 2017). It enables personalized competency development and deeper learning (Sousa et al., 2017). However, there is a need to understand these positive outcomes of the new age digital learning methodologies in a corporate setting where considerable time and resources are employed in training and development of employees. Studies have found that organizational training has the potential of increasing operational costs which in turn can reduce gross profits of organizations (Owoyemi et al., 2011). However, the costs outweigh the impact of organization training. Many countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Spain and United Kingdom have reported a positive influence of organizational training on employee performance and competitive advantage (Falola et al., 2014; Mdhlalose, 2020; Quartey, 2012; Ubeda-Garcia et al., 2013; Garavan et al., 2020). The organizational training referred to in this literature pertains to traditional training methods and limits applicability of these findings to the new age digital learning methodology. There is also limited scope of generalization based on studies for organizational training as they present findings in specific industries, restricting newer approaches to be adapted on a large scale.

Hence, the shift from traditional teaching methods to digital learning needs to be studied in detail to verify if organization training yields results in employee performance and professional development. The focus of this study will enable L&D to design effective organizational training programs despite being a resource-intensive task.

1.2 Organizational Training

The term ‘organizational training’ encompasses a wide range of training which focuses on skills or behaviors necessary for an employee to undertake all responsibilities of their job fully.

It is seen as a means to learn and acquire information on concepts and apply them in the context of their work (Kim, 2009). These training programs largely look at manual, technical, managerial, interpersonal skills as well as skills and behaviors related to organizational procedures and ethics (Dermol & Cater, 2013).

Armstrong (2009) outlines organizational training to include on-the-job training, off-the-job training and experiential learning. On-the job training employs a subject matter expert in the teaching process. It is majorly preferred to develop technical, manual and administrative skills. Off-the-job training includes workshops, group discussions, role playing and simulations in the teaching process for team building and interpersonal skills training. Experiential learning through induction, coaching, mentoring, personal development, planned experience and e-learning are methodologies to enhance workplace learning. Induction training is given to freshers to give them an understanding of their role and the skills they would need to acquire to fulfill the responsibilities of their role. Coaching is a personal approach through one-to-one discussions to improve performance and advance skills and knowledge. In contrast, mentoring provides guidance and advice to a group of individuals to support the workplace learning process. Personal development approach starts with designing a personal development plan through conversations with line managers to identify skills that the individual will start working towards in the future. Planned experience highlights the importance of having a logical sequence of teaching concepts to enable the workforce to achieve maximum learning from a training programme. E-learning, as discussed above, is a methodology which involves the use of technology to provide learning programmes.

For the purpose of this study, induction, e-learning, planned experience, on-the-job and off-the-job training programmes were the main focus to understand participants' training experiences. These training types could be used to impart technical, behavioral, managerial, interpersonal skills along with knowledge from onboarding training wherein practices, policies and ethics of an organization are conveyed to employees.

1.3 Shift of Generations in the Workforce

This study discussed the transition of organizational training from in-person to digital learning. Apart from the change in mode of learning, there has been a major change in the workforce demographics. A new generation of workforce, namely Gen-Z, have entered the workforce while the millennials have started moving up in the organization's hierarchy. Gen-Z or Generation-Z are individuals born between 1997-2012 and millennials are individuals born between 1981-1996. Many studies discuss the importance of developing and adapting organizational strategies focusing on recruitment, career development and retention of the Gen-Z population as they are more digitally literate, and have unique perspectives on workplace norms (Smith & Strawser, 2022; Aggarwal et al., 2020). Millennials, on the other hand, are technologically savvy due to early exposure and are team-oriented. They are more inclined towards peer learning and knowledge sharing through collaboration and networking (Rather, 2018).

Hence, these distinct professional attributes result in different learning needs of the two generations. Millennials have independent learning preferences compared to previous generations of the workforce where immediate feedback and shorter attention span becomes the crux of the learning approach. In contrast, Gen-Z's learning preference leans towards Internet-based teaching tools which offer easier accessibility with minimal efforts (Mantha et al., 2024).

Pandita et al. (2023) discuss how organizations need to adapt their training programs to keep them sustainable for the new generation of the workforce as interpretation of knowledge and competency development differs from generation to generation. Pueschel et al. (2020) recommend taking a generational approach to learning as they identify the differences of learning patterns in each generation. Hence, the focus of this study was to understand millennial and Gen-Z employee perspectives and efficiency of these digital organizational learning programs for organizations to make an informed choice for developing training methodologies.

The main purpose of this study is to identify gaps in the learning needs of newer employees as organizations adapt to digital learning methodologies. The learning gaps include delivery of training as well as evaluation and retention of knowledge. It will enable organizations to design effective training modules consistent with the goals of the organization and make them relevant to the new workforce. The findings of this study including the specific interest in employee learning needs will add to the growing research on new generational learning trends.

Chapter 2: Methodology

2.1 Participants

Participants of this study included employees working in early-age startups and multinational corporations based in India. They worked at entry-level roles such as Executive and Analyst, mid-level roles such as Growth Consultant and HRBP, and managerial level roles such as Associate Manager and Manager. The years of experience of these participants range from 11 months to 8.5 years. The sample can be considered diverse as it includes male and female employees working across various fields and industries like Telecom, IT/ITES, BFSI, Manufacturing, Health Tech and NGO/Social Sector. There were no restrictions placed on age, location or any other demographic factors.

The method of purposive sampling was employed. The benefit of purposive sampling in qualitative research is that researchers can focus on particular characteristics of a population which will best enable the researchers to answer research questions (Rai & Thapa, 2015). The criteria to choose participants was set to include people who were freshers with no prior work experience and experienced individuals where they could reflect on their experiences from one or more organizations. It was found that individuals had more anecdotes to provide if they had worked in more than one organization. Entry-level employees were included as they focussed more on their preferences for training programs. Hence, the participants chosen were based on the kind of insights they could provide and the willingness to participate in the research.

As there is no specific number set for sample sizes in qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018), data was collected from 24 individuals as data saturation was perceived at the 22nd participant through initial analysis for similar themes and anecdotal concepts. Further insights were taken from the 23rd and 24th participants to validate data saturation. It was found that participants underwent identical training methodology due to which their experiences were similar to the rest of the sample, thus confirming achievement of data saturation in the final interviews. According to a systematic review of studies of narrative data analysis, Guetterman (2015) reports that some researchers have included sample sizes of 1-24 based on the nature of information required. Since this study wanted to understand employee experiences and perspectives, more participants were engaged in data collection to bring out varied experiences of individuals in different industries.

2.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was the main form of data collection for this study. A study by Friberg & Rosenvinge (2013) stated that open-ended questions provided in-depth information but quality of data was questionable due to missing data and less freedom in responses. This was countered by the advantages of semi-structured interviews as they guide conversation and give participants the ability to express their opinions freely (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Hence, a semi-structured interview format consisting of open-ended questions was employed to bring out the best possible responses from participants.

The interview questions were not shared with the participants prior to the interview to avoid any bias in responses. Interviews were conducted through telephonic calls and audio calls through online conferencing platforms. The researchers took verbal consent for participation and made detailed notes of responses to the interview questions. The interview duration was 30-45 minutes depending on details divulged about the training experiences.

The interview questions were developed to understand types of training programs attended by participants in their organizations, content and training methodology, impact and relevance of training in their personal and/or professional life. Researchers also included questions on the best training programs and mediocre training programs experienced by participants wherein they were asked to focus on the details of what made the experience good or bad. The participants were also given an opportunity to discuss an ideal training program for themselves. The researchers guided this conversation to bring out ideal training design including type of content, delivery method of the content, evaluation and overall methodology that they would like to have in the training program they attend in the future.

2.3 Data Analysis

Post data collection, it was observed that participants in their responses narrated anecdotes through stories and descriptions of their experiences of training programs. Kaluza (2023) stated the main goal of narrative analysis is to convert and organize individual narratives as data to understand the impact of events on participants. Hence, narrative analysis was deemed to be a suitable data analysis methodology for this qualitative study.

Since the aim of this study was to understand training experiences of various participants, a categorical-content approach (Lieblich et al., 1998) guided the narrative analysis technique. Categorical approach is preferred when all insights to a selected phenomenon are compared. For this study, training experiences of multiple individuals were compared to form insights into employee perspectives. The focus of narrative analysis was content (Earthy & Cronin, 2008) of the anecdotes as they shed light into the participants' emotions, reactions, ideas when undergoing a specific training program. While the approach was categorical-content, data was analyzed according to the narrative analysis steps outlined by Limpaecher (2020) guided by the thematic model of narrative analysis (Riessman, 2005). The data analysis started with coding and grouping of responses into narratives for similar events by each participant. The codes were based on the interview questions where participants talked of specific training programs, for example best, mediocre and ideal training experience, etc. The narrative was backed with perceptions of the training experience, thereby creating a story structure. Similarities and differences in these narratives were included in the story structure to compare experiences. Insights were formed by delving into the story structure to understand what made a training experience good or bad and what could be done to provide a better experience to employees and increase relevance of training

to personal/professional lives.

Chapter 3: Results

The findings gathered from in-depth interviews aimed at understanding the current workforce's perspectives on training needs, implementation and evaluation are highlighted in this section. The personal stories and lived experiences of participants gave a deeper understanding of their expectations from organizations regarding training programs and their evaluation through narrative analysis.

Some examples of questions included in the interviews are:

- What have been some of your best training experiences so far?
- Can you share some of your not so good training experiences?
- Imagine yourself to be the trainer or the one in charge of the training program, what would you do to make the training experience great?
- Do you feel the training programs have impacted your work life? Or personal life?
- What according to you is the ideal way of training evaluation?

Despite the participants working in different sectors with their individual experiences, there was a pattern in responses after completion of the 22nd interview. Through careful examination of the narratives, five main themes emerged from the data. The following subsections elaborate on these themes, providing a detailed analysis of each narrative thread, supported by rich participant quotes that illustrate the depth and nuance of their experiences.

Theme One: Trainer: The role of trainers has been the subject of many academic debates and discussions. Each classification tends to throw light on some aspects of the trainer's job and ignores others. In most cases, the emphasis has been placed on the role of the trainer in an organizational context, thus assessing their relationship, whether political, social, or powerbased, with other members of the immediate work-setting or the workplace at large (Analoui, 1994).

90% of the participants mentioned the importance of the trainer's role affecting their training experience. Instead of a generic training delivery method, participants highlighted that the trainers need to be aware of the organisation's needs and training objectives. For example, one participant recounted, "I attended a training program where the trainer used a storytelling approach and shared anecdotes to explain the topics. The trainer's stories showcased both good and bad aspects. They shared their failures as well which made the story relatable and easier to remember."

Another aspect of this theme that emerged was the inclination towards in-person training sessions instead of self-paced programs. As interviews were conducted with the current generation of workforce, one would imagine they would be comfortable in attending self-paced or virtual training sessions but the participants highlighted the disadvantages of virtual learning. One of the participants quoted, "We know that we can always come back to the content in a self-paced training program. Hence, my attention level is low while attending such a program." In order to complete a virtual or self-paced training program, participants mentioned that they require some kind of motivation. The motivation can range from a certificate or some incentive or the mere fact that training completion is a mandatory task set by the organisation.

Additionally, the most common answer to the participants' ideal training program was an instructor-led training program with a highly interactive trainer. One participant quoted, "I can not see myself sitting through presentations. I loved that my onboarding training occurred through interactions with the functional heads. I started working right from Day 1 and learnt on the go." This captures the fact that participants want training experience to be on the job and more experiential, instead of conventional classroom or virtual training programs.

Theme Two: Customization of Training Content: The participants focussed on the importance of training content and the need to tailor and customize it according to the audience. There was a strong dissent for generic and generalised type of content for both, instructor-led and self-paced training programs. Customizing training content for a specific role or function emerged as a strong theme. One participant suggested "The content should differ from role to role or industry to industry wherein you teach how to do things based on the industry that you are working in rather than just giving out generic content." Another participant highlighted that generic training is not constructed keeping all functions in mind and may feel unfamiliar for some employees. They said, "I feel when there is a generic learning plan, it is actually made for the majority of the crowd. Being in HR, I am not in the majority of the crowd. Majority of the training is generic in nature and it would be more useful for developers or testers and not HR people."

The emphasis on tailoring content was not just department wise but also on the audience, specifically keeping in mind the experience level of employees attending the training. A participant's testimony included: "The primary question of 'What needs to be trained' should be based on the participants' profile. For example, calling senior leaders and teaching them something that they already know or something basic is not going to work out. Your content and your participants need to have a match or need to go hand in hand." This theme was further enhanced when another participant noted "I say customising the training based on level of role because a fresher would require in-depth knowledge or understanding of the industry whereas somebody who has been working for 5 or 10 years needs training on things that up his knowledge or skill level. There can't be the same training module for everybody."

This theme also presents the preference towards in-person training since it is easier to tailor content during training design and delivery phase as opposed to self-paced training. According to participants, the content of the training acts as an important factor in engaging them in the whole process of learning. Hence, it is vital to design methodology keeping in mind the target audience to make an engaging learning experience.

Theme Three: Objectives and Expectations Setting: The third theme centers around the insight that participants felt a lack of clarity in training objectives when attending training programs. At times, facilitators fail to set correct expectations with the participants, their managers as well as the trainer. A participant quoted, "We were clubbed with senior level associates in a training program which led to a drop in our interest level and we did not gain much from the training program."

Participants narrated experiences that reflect the way mandatory or onboarding training programs are delivered which forms the second part of this theme. There was a lack of tracking or regular touch points during onboarding leading to participants eventually losing interest in these training programs. A participant noted, "All the onboarding training modules were self paced. It was more of a checklist activity and I hardly remember what I learnt from those

modules.” This theme highlights the importance of setting the right objectives or expectations for the audience when designing training programs.

Theme Four: Working Hours v/s Training Hours: This theme highlights the concern where participants were not able to balance their deliverables at work after long training hours. A number of participants emphasized that longer training programs or the ones that continued for days became tedious. One participant specifically noted, “People like to learn but it’s a time commitment. If you are being given regular work, that will be there at the back of your mind. You have to work over time to complete that work since you were away for training sessions. You worry about your KPIs being affected. Concentration is not there and you end up passively listening.” Their suggestion was to set clear expectations with managers and other stakeholders about training programs and specifically, the required time commitment. This would ensure that participants are completely engaged in the training program. Additionally, the sessions could be broken down into smaller modules spread across 2-3 days, instead of a whole day training program. In case it is not possible to spread it across days, the day can be filled with group activities to break the monotony. This was confirmed when another participant highlighted, “Time duration matters. The best would be an hour or 2 hours and not spending an entire day in training. The training set up matters in this sense.”

Another aspect of this theme came up when participants shared their experiences on the delivery timeline of the training programs. One of the participants quoted, “There is a huge gap between the training delivery month and the time we receive our project. The training sessions should be planned as per the project planning of the teams” while another participant recommended, “The timing of the training is very important along with the evolution of my role. No need to deliver everything at once just because it might be useful in the longer run.” It provides detail on when training programs should be delivered to enhance applicability of concepts and greater retention of learning.

Theme Five: Training Evaluation Process: The final theme emerged on the participants’ ideal training evaluation process. 80% of the participants suggested a case study based evaluation method. The participants expected to receive problem statements at the end of a training program in order to gauge their understanding of the learning. One participant mentioned, “A project/problem statement should be there to look at the approach and the conclusion. Application based evaluation would be ideal rather than an exam.” They wished to implement their learnings rather than waiting for the right opportunity to get assigned to a project where they may not get a chance to apply their learnings immediately.

60% of participants suggested conducting follow-up tests to retain learning in the case where they are unable to apply the knowledge immediately after training programs. Another participant suggested, “If it is a multiple day program, at the end of each day, we should have an evaluation whose difficulty level should increase every day. It would feel like leveling up each day and in the end we would get a sense of achievement.” The importance of pre-assessment and post-assessment was discussed by a couple of participants. Another interview outlined the assessment flow quoting, “Pre-assessment before the training and post-assessment and giving both those results to the learner so they know where they have made a mistake or where they can make improvements. What were their thought processes then and now. When they see the change, you realise how important that training is and that's when you give it more value and commitment to that learning.” They recommended evaluation to be a multi-level process saying, “Evaluation should happen in phases, not right after the training, especially after a gap to make sure whether it is really helping or not. This makes more sense for behavioral training and the manager should give regular updates about changes or progress.”

Chapter 4: Practical Implications

The themes identified in this study offer actionable insights for learning and development teams of organizations where their workforce includes employees from multiple generations. This research offers significant practical implications not only for learning and development professionals but also key stakeholders involved in talent management of an organization. It will contribute to an upgrade in trainer selection process, cost efficiency, higher employee retention and enhanced organizational culture. In this section, these practical implications derived from the results of this study will be discussed in depth.

Enhancement of ‘train the trainer’ program: For instance, application of the first theme of the trainer selection process can be started by redesigning the “Train the Trainer” program. The insights can be utilized to train internal subject matter experts in organizations on how to inculcate the art of storytelling and impart training sessions in a highly interactive manner. Trainers need to be made aware of the organization’s needs and training objectives. This would eliminate some concerns of the participants such as generic training and lack of training objectives.

Cost efficiency: As noted earlier in this research, training and development is a cost-intensive process for organizations. Utilizing the enhanced skills of internal trainers will reduce operational costs, especially if budget allocation is a constraint from an organization’s perspective. Furthermore, tailoring training content to suit employee needs would resolve the concern raised in the second theme of this study. If the training content is made relevant, training objectives can be met thereby increasing financial yield of training programs.

Enhanced employee performance and retention: Another important practical implication is that employee training can significantly impact employee retention. If an organisation wishes to retain the best talent, training at the right time, utilizing the right content and taking their work priorities into consideration can be beneficial. Based on insights derived from themes three and four, the current generation of workforce prefers to have clarity on attending the training program and its application in the near future. This can enable learning and development professionals to put in extra efforts during the designing phase of the training program to ensure that objectives, outcomes and expectations of the program are laid out clearly. Additionally, the working hours and criticality of the roles of employees need to be considered to ensure that performance is not impeded. This would ensure that employees are not burdened with yet another training program along with their regular deliverables.

Elevated organizational culture: Once there is transformation of the training evaluation method from a single step format into a multi-level format, constant improvement of skills among employees can be tracked. Their knowledge retention ability can be gauged leading to a successful training delivery. It will foster a continuous learning culture in the organization as derived by insights from the fifth theme.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future work

Learning and Development teams need to evolve with changing needs of the workforce. The right expectations should be set with each trainer, all participants and their managers. The

onboarding programs can be designed with a blended learning approach. This would be an amalgamation of self-paced programs and interactive sessions with functional heads who can give a deeper insight into the role and organization. The training evaluation process can be improved by including real life examples and case studies to assess effectiveness of the training program. It is not essential for the problem statement of such case studies to be an ongoing or active problem in the organisation. It can be an archived problem statement which can be used in the post training evaluation process.

The ideal training set-up cannot be accomplished overnight. It has to be achieved by undergoing a trial and error method. The researchers will be collaborating with their own organization's learning and development team to design a robust trainer selection process that includes a sample session to gauge the interaction level. While rest of the aspects of the training programs might take time to redesign and implement, there is an immediate scope in changing the way current training programs are evaluated and delivery of onboarding or mandatory training programs for new joiners in the organization. The researchers aim to continue implementing new ways whilst taking regular and constructive feedback to understand the efficiency of the new process.

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