SHAPING THE FUTURE:

How Learning Helps Us Embrace Unprecedented Change

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Foreword
Melbourne Business School

Learning is core to who we are. It shapes how we develop as humans and can help us not just adapt to changing times but thrive.

At Melbourne Business School, we are and always have been a learning institution, and we are deeply proud of that. When done well, learning makes organisations and leaders better for employees and customers. However, like AHRI, we are acutely aware that epochs like we are now living through present unique learning challenges and opportunities. With severe Covid disruption, rapid technological and AI advancements and broader economic issues around productivity and skills shortages, having future-ready learning strategies, methods and systems in place has never been more important.

We are proud to collaborate with AHRI to present this joint perspective on the future of learning. We worked with AHRI's Future of Work Advisory Panel to identify five key insights around how learning is evolving. From these insights, which you will find in this report, we put together a map of what learning could look like as you take your organisations into the future. We hope that you can draw on these often-provocative insights when having important discussions about learning in your organisation to help you develop appropriate learning strategies and plans.

We commend this report to business, HR and learning leaders who want to match their organisation's capabilities, skills and learning agility to its strategic priorities in response to an ever-changing environment.

Prof Jenny George
Dean
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Foreword
Australian HR Institute

At the Australian HR Institute (AHRI) we are committed to enhancing HR practice for the benefit of people and businesses, and fostering a future where learning is integral to both organisational success and individual growth.

This report, supported by AHRI's Future of Work Advisory Panel, offers actionable insights for HR and learning professionals navigating a rapidly changing external environment, ever-changing workplaces and fast-moving technological advancements. With a focus on five key themes, this report aims to empower HR and learning professionals to align learning with their strategic objectives, ensuring that it contributes meaningfully to both individual development and business outcomes.

This is more than a research report — it's a practical guide to help professionals steer learning initiatives towards a future that is as human-centered as it is innovative. We hope this report will serve as a valuable resource, inspiring HR and learning professionals to craft learning environments that are adaptable, effective and responsive to the needs of people and business.

Let's reposition the value of learning and its role in both organisational and individual growth. Let's work together to create workplaces where continuous learning drives growth, adaptability and resilience. And let's focus on and reposition learning and development as an investment, not an overhead, to help organisations and their people stay future-fit.

Sarah McCann-Bartlett
CEO
Australian HR Institute

Ben Hamer
AHRI Board Director
Chair of AHRI's Future of Work
Advisory Panel

Introduction

The future has arrived. Just about every organisation that demonstrated resilience, a capacity to upskill or reskill rapidly and a readiness to change during several years of pandemic hoped to move into a quieter, more stable period as the emergency ended and life returned to "normal".

And yet, the pandemic's passing has been supplanted by unprecedented advances in technology, including AI, plunging us into a rollercoaster ride of possibility, excitement, hype and fear.

From an organisational skill and learning perspective, keeping up with technological advances and translating new trends into capabilities and learning methods has become a complex challenge.

Learning professionals are juggling the demands of almost impossibly rapid shifts in skill and capability needed for new and unchartered areas, while maintaining the requisite training rhythms to remain compliance-safe organisations – all at a time when budgets are under pressure as many organisations adjust to economic uncertainty and reduced discretionary spending by consumers.

Such complex and competing demands can be confusing and paralysing.

The purpose of this report is to cut through this complexity and confusion to show what is changing in the world of learning and the role of the learning professional. The report provides a window into how experts in the future of work and learning are making sense of rapid change. It offers practical insights for embracing change and adapting learning practices in your organisation. Instead of waiting for external forces to dictate the future, the contributors suggest how to sculpt it.

Our report highlights that learning, both as a solution and as a profession, is undergoing rapid evolution, influenced by the changing landscape and technological advancements. Learners, learning professionals and businesses have an active role to play in adapting and evolving to these shifts.

Report Objectives

This report intends to support and guide decision makers and learning professionals in five ways:

1. **Supercharge conversations between learning and development experts and business leaders:** Enable professionals to effectively engage with leaders and stakeholders, fostering the adaptation and refinement of the organisation's learning purpose and value.

2. **Drive strategic alignment:** Establish clear links between your organisation's system and learning system and demonstrate how learning can directly link to business and economic imperatives.

3. **Offer future-ready insight:** Provide a deep understanding of current learning shifts and future signals, indicating where re-thinking learning for today's and tomorrow's challenges is required. We suggest critical questions and possible steps to take you forward.

4. **Apply knowledge to your context:** Offer insights for professionals to tailor current and future learning environments, initiatives and insights to their specific organisational contexts, identifying key levers for progress and impact.

5. **Highlight new perspectives and agency:** Deliver new perspectives and practical guidance from the AHRI Future of Work Advisory Panel's perspective, empowering professionals to take actionable steps towards reshaping and enhancing their organisation's learning functions.

Contributors

In this report, we have assembled thought-provoking insights and the expertise of AHRI's Future of Work Advisory Panel.

With thanks specifically to the following Advisory Panel members that contributed their time and insights.

NAME	ROLE
Dr Ben Hamer CPHR	Chair, Future of Work Advisory Panel and AHRI Board Director
Peter Williams	Practice Leader, Centre for the Edge, Deloitte
Reanna Browne	Founder, Work Futures
Dom Price	Work Futurist, Atlassian
Dr Sean Gallagher	Founder, Humanova
Peter Burow	CEO, NeuroPower Institute
Sarah McCann-Bartlett MAHRI	CEO and Managing Director, AHRI
Tiffany Blight CPHR	First Assistant Secretary, People and Culture, Department of Home Affairs

Methodology

By working through the written contributions, meeting notes, structured interviews and trend reports from these experts, we have distilled their insights in a way that speaks to you directly.

In the interviews, AHRI's Future of Work Advisory Panel members were asked a series of questions and provocations to draw out their vision for the future of learning, current and future shifts and signals, the role of learning as a profession and AI moving forward. All data sources were subjected to a thematic analysis. Quotes from the interviews are provided in each narrative section to add more depth and contextual reality to this report.

We hope to equip you, as business leaders, HR and learning professionals with the insights and signals needed to navigate and reshape learning within your organisation and its context for today and tomorrow.

Report Findings

In distilling the insights and data provided by AHRI's Future of Work experts, we have identified **five core themes** that encapsulate their thinking about the current challenges and shifts in learning and provide a window onto the future.

They are:

#1 Learning has become **disconnected** from its context, purpose and value

#2 **It is time to define** the diverse 'learning customer'

#3 Learning is an organisation's **sensing mechanism**

#4 Learning methods are becoming dynamic and **community driven**

#5 **AI augments learning** and learning practices

Insight #1

Learning has become disconnected from its context, purpose and value

Given the rapidly evolving business and societal landscapes, learning stands at the forefront of addressing complex challenges at multiple levels – economic, business, team and individual. Today's context for learning has dramatically transformed in parallel with shifts in work patterns and environments that are characterised by more dispersed workforces, the rise of gig economy workers, intergenerational complexities and expectations, and diverse learning modalities. To add value in this intricate and changing landscape, it's essential to re-evaluate the purpose of learning. This involves aligning it with the evolving challenges we face and redefining the value learning adds in the short, medium and long term.

Identifying learning's new 'why' in relation to the changing context

"I think it's useful to step away from the present and ask what are the current (and emerging) issues for which learning and development is the answer. What are the deep assumptions underpinning our work, its value and its impact? What assumptions no longer stack up in today's context? And how can these insights guide us in uncovering contextual relevance and valuable pathways from where we are today?" Reanna Browne

In the current landscape, marked by rapid change and the need to address both present and future challenges, business leaders, HR and L&D professionals often find themselves addressing issues that are too immediate and narrow in scope. These responses, driven by immediate business needs, can lead to a perpetual state of catching up. HR and L&D professionals frequently grapple with overwhelming administrative tasks, procurement, scheduling and managing the people and culture calendar. This can result in a primary focus on fundamental, operational training and compliance needs, leaving limited capacity for strategic, continuous lifelong-learning and growth initiatives.

"Let's have a strategic conversation to understand the problem and skills gaps we're trying to solve, now and in the future." Dr Ben Hamer

However, both fundamental training and strategic learning initiatives are crucial. Striking the right balance between these two spectrums is key to maintaining momentum and keeping pace with the constantly evolving external and internal environments. This balance will vary for each organisation and its HR or L&D practice, depending on the specific questions and opportunities they seek to explore through learning. Defining the 'why' of learning means articulating its business case, shifting perceptions about its value and securing a more strategic role in key business discussions.

"Take leadership and change, for example. Simplistic models are equipping leaders to 'manage a change' from beginning to end, ignoring the context of continuous, progressive, multiple change in which most leaders now find themselves. Burning platforms look good on paper but make little sense when the team already feels on fire. Deeper discovery is foundational. Learner by learner, what's their context, where are they already strong, and what targeted scope is going to add value in their crowded mental workspace?" Peter Burow

A balanced portfolio: repositioning the value of learning

If learning budgets, capacity and time are under pressure as businesses seek to achieve more with less, crucial questions emerge: Is the value created by learning visible and acknowledged within the business? Does the current approach to learning garner sufficient value in the eyes of the business? Such queries underscore the need to view learning not merely as a cost but as a strategic investment, yielding tangible returns. This perspective necessitates a frank discussion about the mix of learning initiatives, their investment requirements and the expected payback periods.

The current trend leans towards short-term returns, focusing mainly on immediate and near-future needs. However, it's essential to also consider the longer-term perspectives. Learning portfolios should encompass a diverse range of initiatives, each with short-, medium- and long-term returns, to balance immediate learning needs with future adaptability.

> *"If you play the $10 game, how much would we spend on long-term learning? How much on medium? How much on short? If it's all on short, you must ask yourself why. That is just pure reaction. If it is all on long, wow, you are bold, I want to work there. But it is a risk as there is so much at play."*
> Dom Price

Without a balanced portfolio, learning could continue to be perceived as merely an operating cost, rather than a strategic asset and a necessity for business and economic growth. As learning operates within a dynamic system, its value in the short-, medium- and long-term will continually evolve. Hence, it is crucial to keep adapting the learning portfolio, to align it with the changing context, purpose and opportunities, and to support adjusted investment and returns.

Insights to action

- Start by gathering data from various sources, such as employee feedback, business strategies, performance metrics and industry trends to identify the broader opportunity spaces and critical challenges that learning could help solve.
- Categorise this data as strategic or fundamental to ensure the right balance for your organisation is achieved.
- Evaluate what learning initiative would be best placed to solve each challenge, and whether it is a short-, mid- or long-term intervention and impact.
- If existing, re-align the purpose of that initiative to meet the new context.
- If new, convey the value proposition of that initiative in relation to the context, purpose and challenge it will solve.
- Reframing the 'why' and the value of learning — in the context of current and evolving opportunities or challenges that learning can support solving — is a vital step for the learning profession within modern organisations.

Questions for reflection

- How well does your current learning strategy align with your organisation's current challenges and strategic goals?
- What mechanisms can be put in place to regularly assess the relevance and impact of learning initiatives against organisational goals?
- How can you ensure that learning is flexible and adaptable to the rapidly changing business environment and context?

Insight # 2

It's time to define the diverse set of 'learning customers'

> *"Considering the diversity in our workforce, we need to pause and ask who are we designing these learning initiatives for and what outcomes do we need. How are we aligning these efforts to drive tangible business impact and deliver on the organisational strategy? This reflection challenges us to craft learning experiences that not only build meaningful relationships but also actively contribute to the advancement and innovation of our organisation and its people"* Sarah McCann-Bartlett

In the current workforce, characterised by intergenerational diversity and evolving work-life dynamics, the importance of understanding our learning customers cannot be overstated. With the workforce comprising five distinct generations, adopting a uniform approach to learning is no longer feasible. Diversity necessitates a tailored approach to learning, considering the varied preferences and needs of different age groups and external learning customers, including partners and clients.

Decentralising learning ownership – giving agency to the learning customer

There is often an expectation that employers should decide the learning process, outlining what should be learned, and how learning should occur. However, the variety and complexity of learning customers necessitates a decentralised learning model, leading to a shared responsibility that extends beyond traditional learning and development functions. Learning customers today should have just as much of a role in the learning system as the organisation or HR and learning professionals. This model is not just about catering to the learning preferences of internal staff but also involves understanding the learning needs of external customers and how they interact with the organisation.

This change in perspective of the learning customer, involves a shift from a top-down imposition of learning to a more collaborative, co-designed approach, where learning customers are actively involved in shaping the learning agenda. It recognises that learners bring their context to learning, while learning professionals help orchestrate the environment for learning to occur.

Practically, this means involving learners in the design of the learning purpose and portfolio and soliciting their commitment and ownership of learning initiatives.

By deeply understanding our learning customers at all levels, and continuously adapting our approaches based on their feedback, we can create a learning ecosystem that is responsive, inclusive and aligned with the ever-changing needs of the workforce and the business.

> *"As humans move up the value chain of work (with augmented intelligence tools and outsourcing chewing away at standardised, repeatable tasks) the humans you want engaging in your work, increasingly want learning and growth as baseline. Far from having to coax people into learning, top talent want to know, 'What makes you best placed to support my learning, where I need it, when I need it and on my terms?'"* Peter Burow

Feedback loops – deeply listening and understanding learning customers

In this shared and decentralised model, everyone at all levels becomes a learning customer whose needs and feedback are integral to shaping the learning agenda. Integral to this are robust feedback loops for assessing the impact of learning initiatives on both internal and external customers.

Ongoing feedback from learning customers, helps in understanding how various generations and external stakeholders engage with learning, what resonates and what doesn't. Their feedback informs the continuous adaptation and improvement of learning strategies and portfolios, ensuring they remain relevant and effective. Deeply listening to our learning customer and their needs also enables learning professionals and the organisation to discover where learning is occurring and where knowledge sits across an organisation.

"In practice, too much of our learning focus is 'push' oriented. Needs get scoped, content tailored and facilitators briefed to send data out into the organisation. What we miss in this mindset is the rich, deep insight about the organisation and its environment that emerges in the learning moment where the learner engages with content. Good learning design and facilitation captures learner reactions and insights, and feeds that back to shape the organisation's trajectory. How they responded isn't just about asking if they took what we wanted. It's also about asking what we heard back, and what that tells us about how things really are."
Peter Burow

Further, this approach requires rethinking how we view our learning customers. They need to be viewed as an asset, not simply a resource. In this light, the way we design and measure quality learning becomes paramount to achieving meaningful outcomes.

"Our people are our products. So, why aren't we putting as much investment to assure the quality of our products and our people through learning as we do around quality assurance for other areas of compliance across the business?" Dr Ben Hamer

This approach not only enhances the value of learning initiatives but also ensures that they are in sync with the evolving needs of both our internal and external customers.

Insights to action

- Employ a mix of surveys, facilitated unstructured and structured learner-led discussions, focus groups, workshops and data analytics to:

  - Listen to the learning-customer's perspective and ideas around how learning can help solve business challenges

  - Learn about the diversity and mix of your learning customers, their needs and preferences

  - Gather feedback on what is currently working and what is not, where learning is happening organically and the conditions that support that

  - Workshop the reframing of existing learning initiatives, design any new learning initiatives with the learning customer.

- Use this insight to adopt a learner-centric design and delivery approach to learning initiatives, ensuring they resonate more deeply with each learner. This method prioritises the unique needs, preferences and backgrounds of individual learners, recognising the shared responsibility for learning.

Questions for reflection

- How well do you know the diverse learning needs and preferences of your learning customer?
- What steps can you take to decentralise learning ownership and empower employees to take an active role in learning creation, contribution and consumption?
- How can learning initiatives be designed to cater to the diverse needs of a multigenerational workforce?
- How can you create effective feedback loops to continuously adapt learning strategies and initiatives?

Insight # 3

Learning isn't a calendar of events, it's an organisation's sensing mechanism

In the evolving landscape of business and society, the role of learning is undergoing a significant transformation. The traditional 'predict and control' learning paradigm is being reassessed in favour of a more fluid, adaptive and responsive approach. This shift recognises the learning function as a proactive 'sensing machine', integral to navigating skill shortages, industry crises and demographic shifts at the economic level, in line with workforce planning and strategy at the business level.

This new paradigm envisions the learning function, or the data derived from it, as an active mechanism to continuously sense, adapt and respond to the dynamic shifts occurring within the business landscape and the learning system itself. In this reimagined paradigm, learning evolves from being a merely reactive tool to a proactive 'sensing machine' for the organisation.

Learning as a strategic sensing mechanism

This shift in paradigm fundamentally alters the value proposition of learning. It transitions from being considered an optional enhancement to becoming a strategic necessity for businesses. The aim is for organisations to not just keep pace but to excel in their ability to learn, grow and execute more effectively than their competitors. To make this shift viable, it is imperative to cultivate the appropriate capabilities within the learning function and throughout the organisation.

This involves the strategic use of data to identify and interpret signals from both the internal and external environments, in alignment with the business's overarching objectives and the specific value targets set for learning initiatives. Emphasising the interconnected nature of learning with business practices and human resources, this reconfigured approach to learning promotes a continuous cycle of sensing, responding and adapting. It ensures that the rationale or purpose behind learning initiatives, as well as the chosen opportunities and focus areas for problem-solving, are always aligned with the current and evolving needs of the business. It not only caters to immediate requirements but also positions the organisation to proactively anticipate and respond to future challenges.

"The brain is a learning machine. Constantly gathering data and course correcting, but we often starve the brain of high-quality information. What's more, we don't pair learning with what individuals are passionate about – so retention is critically low. What we do know is that stifled learning will lead to irrelevance for any organisation. The only way to learn rapidly is to decentralise it.

It means actively creating 'open learning systems' that are distributed, dynamic and driven by curiosity rather than just compliance. Where individuals and organisations can constantly test and retest assumptions to enable more distributed antifragility."
Peter Burow

Neglecting to reconceptualise the learning paradigm could lead to a stagnation in practices and a reduced capacity to contribute value in an increasingly complex and fluid business world.

"There's an interesting tension when we think about the future of learning. It's often seen as a distant thing, out there somewhere, occurring down the track. But here's the thing. The future never arrives because we're always in the present. We get so caught up in the day-to-day tasks – meetings, calendars, procurement, briefs, etc – that we forget to step back and ask ourselves if what we're doing is adding value in today's world. If we want to stay intrinsically valuable and relevant, we need to find a way to keep the lights on the important work we want to continue into the future, and, at the same time, start to take small actions and experiments to design more viable L&D futures." Reanna Browne

The learning system and its interactions

To view learning as a sensing mechanism is to recognise its interconnectedness and interdependencies with broader organisational and economic systems. At the economic level, AHRI's Future of Work experts highlighted how learning interplays with issues like skill shortages, industry crises, population changes and migration patterns. These elements are crucial in understanding how learning can address broader economic challenges and contribute to societal advancement.

In the business context, learning is intricately connected with workforce planning, strategic and scenario planning, workforce demographics and work structures. This level of interaction underscores the importance of aligning learning initiatives with the strategic objectives and operational realities of a business. At the team level, learning engages with dynamics, such as team collaboration, diversity and addressing unforeseen problems. This interaction is vital for fostering a cohesive and adaptable work environment, enhancing team performance and nurturing innovation.

> *"How do we understand and connect the roles of employers, individual learners and the government to create an integrated learning future that drives employers and learners to invest in learning that delivers for them, their organisations and the economy?"* Dr Ben Hamer

On an individual basis, learning interacts with personal relationships, worldviews, traits, experiences and strengths. This highlights the personalised nature of learning and its impact on individual development and contribution within the organisation. These examples represent just a fraction of the elements comprising the learning system. Additional factors, like processes, policies, technology, data, culture, leadership, information, an individual's willingness to learn or collaborate and the balance of resources versus demands, also play significant roles.

Once the learning system is mapped within an organisation, it becomes crucial to understand how interactions occur. These interactions are often complex and interdependent, leading to outcomes that may not be immediately apparent or predictable. Understanding the nuances and conditions of these interactions is as important as recognising the interactions themselves. This understanding facilitates a shift from isolated knowledge to an open, collaborative learning environment, enhancing both individual learning experiences and an organisation's agility and resilience in an ever-changing landscape.

> *"Many organisations put a business case together for a budget this year for a whole lot of courses that they then just blindly deploy whatever happens. I just question the value of that. If we need nimbleness and fluidity, let's build a system that's anti-fragile. Let's build a system that is nimble, that is listening and adapting. It's the very nature of learning. How can we demonstrate learning? By learning ourselves and adapting our own ways."* Dom Price

Insights to action

- Create a structured yet flexible framework that encourages and captures ongoing dialogue where teams discuss emerging trends, challenges and opportunities they observe in their work, or:
  - Have learning ambassadors in various departments identify emerging trends, challenges and opportunities for learning from within their teams. These ambassadors could communicate insights back to the learning function, ensuring that learning initiatives are closely aligned with real-time business needs and employee interests.
- Put in place rhythms to connect across people and culture and the business to check the interdependency of a learning initiative on other workforce initiatives (such as workforce planning) and drivers for business change (such as skills shortages).

Questions for reflection

- How can you integrate learning with real-time business challenges to enhance your organisation's adaptability and responsiveness?
- Who do you need in your network across the organisation to make sure you're able to sense what is needed?

Insight # 4

Learning methods have shifted from linear and structured to dynamic and community driven

Learning methodologies and tools have begun to evolve, with a reassessment of traditional linear models and the exploration of more dynamic, innovative approaches. While there are bright spots, where some organisations demonstrate dynamic and community-driven learning, many experts say this insight has an extended tail, with many organisations still to commence this shift. The value of traditional or formal learning, which imparts knowledge and skills through structured experiences, still holds an important place. However, it is essential to acknowledge that learning often transcends these traditional bounds, occurring in varied ways across different cultures and generations.

> "Learning in the world of innovation and technology is often community-based. You see that in open-source software and gaming communities. It's very much learning in the open and learning together. It's a community activity, based on trust, participants and their interactions. We share what we have learned, find people who have specific expertise, post questions and provide answers. Personal dashboards tell you how many people are looking at what you have shared. When thousands of people have been looking at your answer to a question, you know you are helping many others learn. It is a great feeling." Peter Williams

Community-driven, experiential and applied learning

AHRI's Future of Work experts say many organisations continue to prioritise traditional formal learning methods. In contrast, some businesses take the view that the bulk of learning is experiential, happening primarily on the job. The latter perspective holds a lot of value, however, it currently lacks the recognition or structure needed to unlock its full potential. Indeed, learning can and does occur naturally without stringent frameworks, but within many organisations, both employers and employees still perceive it occurring in a highly structured manner.

> "We need people to recognise that what they're engaging with on the job when they feel challenged, when they feel like they don't know something, and then suddenly they do. That's learning, and it's not associated with having to attend a course." Tiffany Blight

In an ideal state, on-the-job learning includes the formation of micro-communities that can effectively explore and solve unchartered problems together. Learning becomes more self-directed with conditions enabling the learner to seek out the learning opportunities they need, rather than being told what they need and how to learn.

As we navigate toward this state, a certain level of scaffolding or minimal structure remains important to indicate the re-conceptualisation of learning and the shared responsibility. However, regardless of scaffolding, human-to-human interaction, support, collaboration and shared-learning experiences should be at the centre.

This shift from traditional methods, indicates a deeper understanding of how individuals and groups learn in today's context, recognising the diversity in learning styles and the dynamic nature of knowledge acquisition and application. This approach to learning aligns with the move away from a predominantly top-down approach to learning and provides a more inclusive, open and continually evolving practice. However, the transition requires trust and the right environmental conditions for it to flourish and be sustained.

Creating the right conditions

To support the unfolding of a reconceptualised learning system, we need to consider a range of conditions, including, but not limited to, trust, psychological safety, culture and space, for growth and evolution to occur. However, organisations sometimes default to putting in place fixed ways of working or inhibiting new ways of working (such as online, a 4-day work week) because of distrust.

In addition, due to the often closed, siloed and increasing demands of work structures, there is a lack of psychological safety to foster creativity, innovation and self-directed learning. Is this because we fear that people will take advantage if offered the opportunity? If we create the conditions for employees to choose where and how they work, and where and how they learn, with a strong purpose and value – are we fearful of what might happen? Are we stifling our own business evolution if we continue to distrust employees or our learning customers, our people? Are we creating conditions that lead to complacency and reliance on organisations – in turn, creating inefficiency?

"How do we not rely on old systems? And then, how do we empower our learners to own their team and their work and how they work – get them to crowdsource, document it and share it? If we all own how we work and how we evolve that, instead of policies and procedures, we have guardrails that are suggestive not prescriptive. It's suggestive because you've hired fully formed adults who can adapt that guardrail to the environment they're in. Give them the opportunity. Otherwise, if you just want them to follow, you don't need anyone with a brain anymore. This is the challenge we have as we hire more knowledge workers. There is opportunity if you want to trust them innately. But if you don't, you then conflate where work occurs. We conflate the need for more productivity, and use that to drive how we work, which has the exact reverse effect to what we want. You lose the potential velocity of learning." Dom Price

Flipping the mental model to establish an environment that enables individuals to step out of their comfort zones, exploring new ideas and embracing challenges as opportunities for growth, is critical. This flip involves not just allocating resources and time for learning and development but also cultivating a workplace culture that encourages experimentation, curiosity and risk-taking. Such an environment is based on reciprocal trust, psychological safety and positive perceptions around the intentions of employers and employees.

It is the role of both the organisation and the learner to work together to create the conditions for a positive and conducive-to-growth work environment.

If this environment became the norm across organisations over time, imagine the possibilities for growth. If we do not move toward this type of environment, or create conditions for it, should we hire knowledge workers in the first place? Do we need intelligent humans or compliant drones? How do we put the trust back in the smart people, our assets, we have hired to run our businesses? How do we, instead, step back and, rather than push things at them, create the conditions for them to solve, experiment, learn and grow together? In a world where output and efficiency rule, and time is limited, maybe we have overcomplicated what learning is and the conditions it requires to flourish. The context has changed drastically, and the way learning and organisations were structured does not fit today's environment. We are at a pivotal point, where we need to experiment to forge a different path forward and achieve learning velocity.

Insights to action

Focus on building a learning culture that enables knowledge sharing and performance outcomes for cross-functional teams. This approach turns everyday work into a learning experience, encourages the application of new skills in real contexts and fosters a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement.

To do this:

- Establish a community-driven space where employees can share knowledge, best practices, solve unchartered problems together and learn from each other
- Use community-centric, experimental, shared and safe spaces as principles to guide decisions to create positive learning environments and initiatives
- Re-evaluate any learning initiatives, policies or processes that tell learners what and when to learn, and consider whether an alternative path exists.

Questions for reflection

- In what ways can you encourage and facilitate peer learning and knowledge sharing within and across teams?
- What cultural and structural changes are needed within your organisation to foster an environment where employees feel safe and valued when contributing their knowledge and experiences?
- How can you validate and reward learning that occurs outside traditional training environments, such as on-the-job experiences, peer interactions and self-directed learning initiatives?

- How can we leverage technology to enhance community-driven learning experiences without losing the human touch that fosters deeper engagement and understanding?
- What role can leaders play in supporting a shift towards more dynamic, community-driven learning practices?

Insight # 5

AI doesn't replace the need for learning or learning professionals. It augments our learning practices

The prevalent view of advanced technologies and AI in organisations today was a recurring concern among AHRI's Future of Work experts. Businesses regard AI and advanced technologies as a single, silver bullet, overlooking the crucial human aspect of this equation. All the experts agreed that AI would play a significant role in the future of learning, ranging from personalisation, scaling and accessibility to coaching and augmenting the work of learning professionals and more. However, it's imperative to acknowledge the indispensable role of humans in providing context, driving creation, making judgements, overseeing ethics and governance and possessing the requisite knowledge to leverage these technologies effectively. Humans play an essential role in the elevated and more strategic work tasks. The reliance on advanced technologies and AI without appropriately tailored human input might yield quicker results, but quality could be compromised.

> "AI can help produce more content and at a really fast rate. But is that where we need to focus right now? Probably not. Maybe in a couple of years. We first need to focus on the context. As, without accurate input and context, AI will just produce bad content more quickly." Dom Price

The human factor in AI and technology

The role of technology in the workplace has historically been that of a supporting player, initially taking over manual tasks, then augmenting cognitive functions and potentially, in the near future, even aspects traditionally associated with human emotion and connection. As technologies and AI have evolved, they have predominantly served as tools within a fixed structure of work. However, the advent of advanced technologies and AI is poised to fundamentally reshape the nature and structure of work, potentially transforming projects into mere activities.

> "AI is going to completely change the structure of work in organisations. We need to shift from producing to creating. Particularly in a world where AI is very good at executing. So, the role of the human becomes one of adding more value. Which direction are we going to go? What's our goal? Why are we doing this? Curiosity, judgment and empathy are critical to that." Dr Sean Gallagher

While the focus has often been on the content impact of AI, the profound structural shifts it can induce in the work environment have been less explored. In this context, a crucial but relatively unexamined question arises: What is the role of humans in the evolving work equation? This inquiry transcends the discussion of necessary skills to a more profound contemplation of the optimal utilisation of human potential if the very architecture of work and the nature of tasks undergo significant change. There is a need to transition from viewing individuals as workers – defined by productivity and output – to seeing them as humans – characterised by their creative capacity and deep understanding of and adaptability to their environment.

In this rapidly changing landscape, technology and AI have, in some respects, become the dominant forces, dictating our goals and next steps. However, with robust comprehension of our environment and a clear organisational philosophy regarding advanced technologies and AI, humans can reclaim their position, using these tools to achieve specific goals, rather than being governed by them. The discourse around AI, much like the discussion surrounding the metaverse, is currently a prominent and distinct topic. Yet, in the not-so-distant future, these technologies will seamlessly integrate into our work lives, becoming an indistinguishable part of our everyday routines.

Instead of starting with questions about which technologies or AI systems are needed and how to train people to use them, the conversation should shift. It should focus on helping individuals to understand their environment, the new technologies available, AI options and the organisational philosophy surrounding these innovations, thereby empowering them to make informed decisions and adapt as necessary. The emphasis should be on embedding human strengths – curiosity, empathy, judgement and creativity – into the equation, ensuring that these uniquely human attributes play a central role in how work is approached and executed in an era increasingly dominated by advanced technology and AI.

> *"People ask, 'Don't we need to teach them the tools?' No, you need to teach them to understand their environment, that there's a world of tools out there, and the art of learning is understanding what's the appropriate tool and how to use it, rather than saying that you must learn this tool and apply it."*
> Peter Williams

A symbiotic partnership between AI, learning and learning professionals

In the contemporary intersection of AI, technology and learning, it's imperative to reassess and harness the symbiotic relationship between human ingenuity and AI's capabilities. AI stands on the brink of transforming the learning landscape, promising a revolution in personalised learning that is attuned to the unique journey of each learner. It's envisioned to be a constant companion, discretely woven into the fabric of daily professional life, offering customised coaching and support to enhance technical skills and capabilities. Moreover, AI aims to deliver learning experiences that are deeply contextual, resonating with the individual's specific needs, preferences, background, culture and professional role.

> *"AI is going to be a personal learning assistant that can be related to a particular individual in terms of understanding their strengths and weaknesses but also the modality in which they learn best. It will support them on that journey. It's not just when they're interacting with it, learning in the moment. AI is going to follow them through everything, and so it's going to be constantly tweaking and supporting. In the not-too-distant future, if the individual has technical strengths or weaknesses, AI is going to be able to verify the level of capability."* Dr Sean Gallagher

This evolution propels the learning profession to a critical crossroads. Should the focus of learning professionals remain on designing experiences, centred around technical skills, or should they pivot, leveraging AI and advanced technologies to manage these domains? This shift would enable them to concentrate on guiding the application, integration and behavioural transformations ensuing from this AI-driven learning model. This strategic consideration transcends mere process optimisation, positioning the learning profession to navigate and lead in an AI-influenced landscape. Embracing AI to impart technical skills permits learning professionals to redirect their energies towards the subtler, more nuanced facets of learning. They can delve deeper into shaping organisational culture, nurturing essential human skills and ensure that learning initiatives are in harmony with both personal and organisational aspirations.

This realignment doesn't diminish the role of learning professionals, rather, it amplifies it, placing them at the helm of fostering an environment ripe for creativity, critical thinking and adaptability – attributes inherently human and beyond AI's reach. This approach doesn't merely keep pace with technological strides, it cultivates a workforce that's robust, adaptable and primed for the complexities of today's work landscape. These technologies are set to aid in a myriad of tasks from data analysis and feedback and summarisation to content creation and audience-specific communication, signalling a profound shift in the capabilities required from learning professionals. They will need to embrace and master skills, such as futures thinking, critical problem-solving, economic analysis and scenario forecasting to name a few.

While there's contemplation about AI potentially becoming the chief architect of learning, the consensus among AHRI's Future of Work experts is clear. AI, despite its prowess, is envisioned as a sophisticated learning analyst, advisor or coach, not as a usurper of the intricate and deeply human art of learning. The profound understanding of learning within the organisational context, enriched by human insights and the capacity for nuanced application, remains an exclusively human domain.

> *"The first question we have to ask ourselves is, 'Why do I need a learning function?' There was a time when, if I needed that thing, I went to the person that was an expert in that thing. If you want to learn, here's my space for learning, it is called a classroom. You come in, I deploy my knowledge, and then I give you a certificate, and off you go. That was the right business model for work then, it just is not any longer. The ability for learning exists 24/7 in perpetuity, with AI and advanced technology and the internet. I no longer need permission from learning functions to learn. So, if we look at this democratised world, where you go, there are 10 sources I can learn from, only one is the learning function. We need to then think about how learning functions support that whole ecosystem of learning?"* Dom Price

Experimenting with AI and technology to augment learning

We must ask ourselves: Do we aim for rapid yet potentially subpar outcomes? To meaningfully integrate AI and advanced technologies into our workplaces, it's essential to first consider the human side of the equation. We must delve into its role in learning and explore, through experimentation, its influence on work and learning processes. This approach ensures that, while we harness the speed and capabilities of advanced technologies, we do so without sacrificing the depth, quality and ethical considerations that are inherently human.

At the organisational level, these experiments are instrumental in defining guidelines, philosophies and standards for the integration and utilisation of AI and advanced technologies. Once these frameworks are established, the focus shifts to the collective force of teams and individuals. Those entrenched in the daily operations are uniquely positioned to spearhead the organisation's evolution by identifying and leveraging the most beneficial applications of diverse AI and advanced technologies. This journey also enables individuals to shape and refine their roles, aligning human capabilities with technological advancements and fostering a symbiotic progression that catalyses both personal and organisational development.

Broadening the perspective from individuals to society and economics, AI and advanced technologies hold immense potential to bridge educational and digital divides. Nonetheless, addressing global and local internet access remains a prerequisite to unlocking the inclusive and equitable benefits of these scalable technologies. As we envision AI and advanced technology levelling the performance field, it prompts a re-evaluation of our learning lifecycle and business practices. If performance uniformity is achieved, what then becomes of the hallmark of recognition? Do we shift our focus toward rewarding sustainable performance or the unique human contributions in this intertwined relationship? These are pivotal questions as we integrate the symbiotic partnership between AI, learning professionals and the broader workforce to shape a future where both human insight and technological prowess are celebrated and leveraged for collective advancement.

> "Workers who do any kind of knowledge work, not just specialist knowledge workers, need to start integrating generative AI into how they work to understand what it takes away and recognise how it can add higher value to what they do in their role. That requires being curious and having empathy and judgment. It starts at the ground level by empowering workers to be able to integrate these tools, so that, as AI agents emerge, they're not naive about what generative AI can do." Dr Sean Gallagher
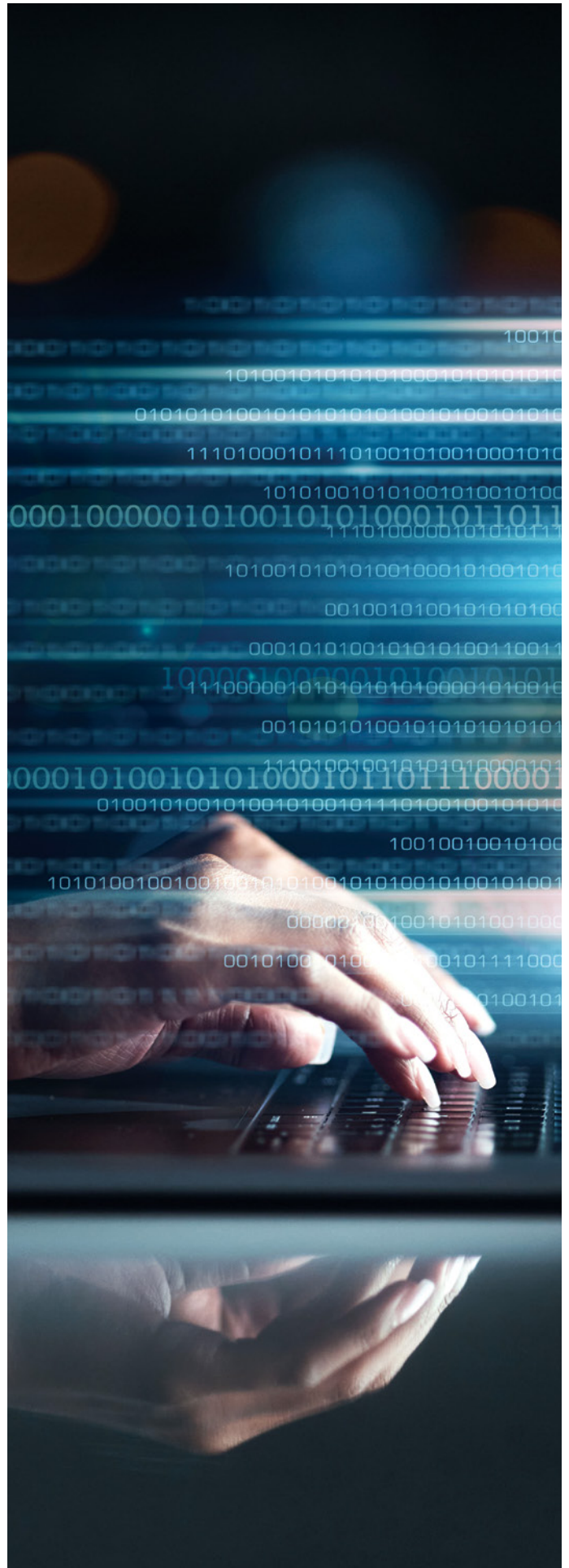
Insights to action

- Offer AI playgrounds where employees can experiment with different AI to understand how they work the potential application to their role and the ethical considerations involved.

- Work with employees to identify where AI and advanced technologies could support the work that they do and identify how their role could shift to higher-value activities.

- Look at learning roles within the organisation and how AI and advanced technologies could support the work that they do.

- Experiment with and embed AI and advanced technology guidelines, philosophies and standards to ensure that the guardrails for use cases and ethical considerations are clear.

- Introduce AI tools that complement existing learning initiatives. These tools can offer insights into learners' strengths and areas for improvement, making learning more efficient and effective.

- Conduct pilot programs with AI-driven learning initiatives, such as virtual coaches or mentorship programs, to help identify the most effective ways AI can support learning and development within your organisation.

Questions for reflection

- Reflect on the diversity of learning needs within your organisation and how AI can be tailored to meet these requirements.

- What ethical implications do you need to consider, such as data privacy, bias in AI algorithms and transparency, in using AI in the context of learning?

- How can you maintain and enhance the value of human connections in learning experiences, even as AI plays a larger role?

- How can you support the workforce to experiment and adopt AI and advanced technologies in their role and enable the shift toward higher-value activities?

- How can you evolve your role as a learning professional to leverage AI technologies, focusing on strategic areas where human expertise is irreplaceable?

A Framework for the Future of Learning: Six Emerging Tensions

From the interviews with AHRI's Future of Work experts, we identified six important tensions worth understanding as learning evolves under pressure from major economic and technological change.

These tensions reflect the need to balance competing priorities, adapt to rapid changes and integrate advanced technologies and AI, while maintaining the human advantage. This list is not exhaustive but should initiate the dialogue around how to move forward on the learning front.

First tension

The first tension is between *Reactive* and *Adaptive Learning*. Learning, in its traditional reactive or contextually disconnected form, risks being perceived merely as an optional enhancement rather than a vital strategic asset for business and economic advancement. This risk underscores the importance of transitioning learning into an adaptive, context-aware 'sensing machine'. However, such a re-thinking of learning can potentially create divisions within the organisation if it's not underpinned by the right mindset and foundational support for successful implementation.

Second tension

The second tension is between *Fundamental* and *Strategic Learning*. Organisations must balance the need for fundamental, compliance-based training with the pursuit of strategic, forward-thinking learning initiatives that drive innovation and long-term growth. The challenge here lies in not letting immediate, operational needs overshadow the development of strategic learning shifts and investments and the cultivation of a learning culture and system that anticipates and responds to emerging signals.

Third tension

The third tension is between *Efficiency* and *Growth*. While the focus on efficiency is crucial for managing costs and streamlining operations, it risks overshadowing the importance of growth and evolution. Sustainable success requires balancing operational efficiency with nurturing human potential, laying the foundation for the innovation and agility required as the world continues to change rapidly. The challenge lies in striking the right balance between the obsession with productivity and efficiency today and the need to shift toward new measures that capture growth and evolution.

Fourth tension

The fourth tension is between *Content* and *Context*. The balance between the focus on producing learning content (the knowledge and skills imparted) and the importance of understanding the context (relevance and application of learning within the system and enabling a learner to bring their context to the learning) should not be underestimated. This involves a deep examination of the purpose and value of learning, calling for a re-thinking of learning as a paradigm.

Fifth tension

The fifth tension is between *Technology, AI* and the *Human Element*. The integration of AI and advanced technologies in learning raises the potential for the human component of the equation to be forgotten. It's the symbiotic partnership between these two factors that drive the most meaningful outcomes. The challenge is to introduce technology and AI, while elevating the human role to achieve higher-value, creative and strategic tasks.

Sixth tension

The sixth tension is between *Short-term Returns* and *Long-term Value Creation*. Balancing the demand for short-term returns (immediate impact, quick wins) with the necessity for long-term value creation (sustainable growth, future readiness) is a persistent tension. Organisations need to develop a diversified learning portfolio that addresses immediate skill needs, while also investing in initiatives that build capabilities and resilience for the future.

Find your organisation's learning future

These six tensions can be applied to your organisation. In the table below, we have outlined four possible scenarios and mapped them to the six tensions.

Each tension is colour coded to show whether a scenario would lend itself wholly to one side of the tension scale, slightly slanted to one side or be equally weighted. Each scenario presents a unique signal for the future learning profession, emphasising the evolving role of learning in society and the workplace.

These scenarios envision the learning profession as a dynamic and integral part of the organisation's fabric, driving not only the development of its people but also the evolution of its structures, strategies and competitive edge in an increasingly complex business landscape.

As the future of learning unfolds, it will be crucial for organisations to navigate these scenarios thoughtfully, embracing innovation while remaining grounded in ethical considerations and a commitment to fostering inclusive, empowering learning environments.

To reiterate, this framework is a starting point, and it is likely that a combination of these future signals may play out depending on the organisation, its size, the pace of disruption and change it is facing, and its work and workforce needs.

LEARNING TENSIONS		FUTURE SCENARIOS			
LEFT<	>RIGHT	INTEGRATORS	INNOVATORS	SENSORS	ARCHITECTS
Reactive	Adaptive				
Fundamental	Strategic				
Efficiency	Growth				
Content	Context				
Technology	Human				
Short term returns	Long term value creation				

Scenario #1
Integrators

In this scenario, learning professionals emerge as vital connectors, seamlessly weaving learning into the organisation's fabric. They take a holistic approach, making learning a continuous, integral part of every employee's journey, not an isolated event.

By aligning learning initiatives with business operations, cultural dynamics and strategic objectives, learning reinforces the organisation's mission. As integrators, learning professionals foster collaboration between departments, ensuring that learning is an inclusive, collective effort that supports and is supported by all facets of the organisation.

Integrators specialise in creating synergies, making learning an omnipresent resource accessible to everyone, anytime and in the flow of work. These professionals are not just educators but strategic partners, culture shapers and innovation drivers. They deeply embed learning and development in the organisational DNA, driving performance, innovation and continuous growth.

The Integrators envision a future where learning is a shared responsibility and shared benefit, with every stakeholder actively participating in and contributing to creating a learning-rich, agile and forward-thinking organisational environment.

Scenario #2
Innovators

In this scenario, learning professionals are the innovating trailblazers within their organisations. They are at the forefront of integrating emerging technologies and contemporary educational trends, ensuring the organisation is not just keeping pace but actively leading in the domain of learning innovation.

Innovators are constantly exploring and adopting cutting-edge tools like AI, using them to create immersive, impactful and transformative learning experiences. Their role involves strategic foresight and a deep commitment to fostering a culture where innovation is ingrained, not an afterthought.

As trendsetters, they influence organisational learning strategies and set industry-wide benchmarks. In this scenario, learning professionals are seen as pivotal strategic assets, driving organisational growth and adaptability through a learning approach that's thoroughly integrated with advanced technology.

Their visionary role transcends conventional boundaries, positioning continuous, innovative learning as a fundamental pillar of the organisation's overarching strategy for success in a dynamically evolving business environment.

LEARNING TENSIONS		INTEGRATORS
LEFT<	>RIGHT	
Reactive	Adaptive	
Fundamental	Strategic	
Efficiency	Growth	
Content	Context	
Technology	Human	
Short term returns	Long term value creation	

LEARNING TENSIONS		INNOVATORS
LEFT<	>RIGHT	
Reactive	Adaptive	
Fundamental	Strategic	
Efficiency	Growth	
Content	Context	
Technology	Human	
Short term returns	Long term value creation	

Scenario #3
Sensors

In this scenario, learning professionals become sensors that turn the learning profession into a proactive, data-driven hub within the organisation and central to its evolutionary path. They are adept at sensing and interpreting a myriad of signals, ranging from learner feedback and performance metrics to broader contextual and environmental cues. By leveraging advanced data analytics, AI and machine-learning technologies, they discern patterns, predict trends and uncover insights that inform strategic decisions.

Their key focus is adaptability – constantly fine-tuning learning strategies, guardrails and philosophies to align with the dynamic needs of learners and the organisation. Sensors are not just responsive but anticipatory, using data to foresee and prepare for future challenges and opportunities. They craft a learning portfolio that balances immediate needs with long-term objectives, ensuring learning initiatives drive meaningful and measurable outcomes.

In this future, Sensors are strategic partners, providing vital intelligence to inform organisational strategy, innovation and change management. They foster a culture of continuous learning and adaptation, positioning the organisation to thrive amid uncertainty and change.

Scenario #4
Architects

In this scenario, learning professionals become architects that transform the very blueprint of how learning, work and organisational structures interplay. They are visionaries and strategists, deeply involved in designing not just the learning ecosystem but also the broader framework of human work as technology and AI reshape the landscape.

They push learning beyond traditional boundaries, influencing how roles are defined, work is structured and value is created within the enhanced world of technology and AI. They are instrumental in designing purpose-driven, value-centric learning systems and paradigms that resonate with the organisational ethos and strategic direction.

Their work involves creating rich, immersive learning environments and a portfolio of experiences that foster growth, innovation and adaptability at the individual, team and organisational level. Architects are at the forefront of organisational transformation and key drivers in aligning human potential with technological advancement, ensuring that the organisation not only adapts to but also shapes the future of work. Their strategic input influences policy, culture and operations, making learning an integral, value-adding component of the organisation's DNA.

LEARNING TENSIONS		SENSORS
LEFT<	>RIGHT	
Reactive	Adaptive	
Fundamental	Strategic	
Efficiency	Growth	
Content	Context	
Technology	Human	
Short term returns	Long term value creation	

LEARNING TENSIONS		ARCHITECTS
LEFT<	>RIGHT	
Reactive	Adaptive	
Fundamental	Strategic	
Efficiency	Growth	
Content	Context	
Technology	Human	
Short term returns	Long term value creation	

Conclusion

The insights and the framework shared in this report give rise to several implications about how learning is evolving.

Firstly, there is a critical need for the learning profession to concentrate on working in tandem with the context and system, ensuring that the right questions and pertinent issues are being solved through learning – and that the right conditions and environments are created to enable this to occur. These considerations require a practice of continuous monitoring, improvement and adaptation.

Secondly, there's a call to avoid assuming that the learning profession can continue to exist in its current form. Projecting current conceptions into the future may restrict our imaginative capacity to re-conceptualise what might be necessary and achievable. This is not to suggest that the profession will cease to exist but, rather, to encourage the pursuit of small, safe-to-fail experiments that collectively shape a desirable future today.

Thirdly, there's an emphasis on agency within the learning profession. Instead of waiting for external directives about the future, why not actively collaborate to sculpt it? Every action contributes to the construction of the future; it's an ongoing process, not a distant milestone.

Fourthly, it's crucial to discern what can be relinquished to prevent distractions from the core focus of context alignment, re-conceptualisation and harnessing the capabilities of AI and advanced technologies as smart assistants or partners. It's about shedding tasks that impede our capacity to concentrate on what's pivotal in the current context.

All of these implications come with a shift in capability for the profession. As work structures change, so does the paradigm of learning. Rather than focusing on mere delivery, the learning profession may need to consider transitioning current capability more toward:

- Systems thinking
- Business-case investment and return creation and analysis
- Futures thinking (sense, adapt, respond)
- Data science; experimentation
- Strategic, market and business acumen
- Learning and work architecture.

Learning, both as a solution and as a profession, is already undergoing rapid evolution, influenced by the changing landscape and technological advancements. As learners, members of the learning profession and business entities, we play an active role in adapting and evolving alongside these shifts.

In conclusion, the future of the learning profession is not a distant vision but an unfolding reality. It calls for a mindset that is open to change, a strategy that is adaptable and forward-looking, and a commitment to fostering a learning ecosystem that is as human-centric as it is technologically advanced. By navigating these shifts thoughtfully and strategically, organisations can ensure that their learning functions are not just surviving but thriving, driving meaningful value and paving the way for a future where learning is a continuous journey of growth, innovation and evolution.

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