

# HRD

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CHIEF PEOPLE & TECHNICAL OFFICER  
SAILGP

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ARTICLE BY PAUL BULLER, HEAD OF LEARNING CONTENT & COACHING ADVISOR  
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# ONE MORE CROSSROADS

"NOW THE CROSSROADS IS SIGNPOSTED AI AND FOR THOSE  
STANDING AT THEM, THERE IS A POWERFUL DESIRE FOR CLARITY, IS THIS  
REALLY THE MOMENT WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGES?"

*I don't think we have ever reached the end of a year where L&D hasn't been described as "being at a crossroads". Anyone who has spent time in this profession knows too well the familiar tension that comes from balancing aspiration with reality, innovation with impact, possibility with practicality. If there is a constant theme in L&D, it is the belief that the industry is always changing and that we must decide urgently which direction to take, again.*

Over the years, these crossroads have all looked remarkably similar. When social media exploded, many were convinced that social learning would soon replace more structured development entirely. For a time, everything had to be an app, until we realised that people do not want a separate icon on their phone for every skill they might need. There have also been times when we predicted that employees would create their own learning content at scale, inspired by video platforms and online tutorials and plaudits declared that no one would ever again attend in-person workshops. In each case, assumptions outpaced reality and although some approaches worked well in certain contexts, others faded and most settled into the mix, where they belonged. Now the crossroads is signposted AI and for those standing at

them, there is a powerful desire for clarity. But is this really the moment when everything changes? As ever, the truth is far more nuanced than the hype suggests. If we look back over the possible directions offered at the myriad of junctions, previously technology has always supported progress, but humans defined it, because what truly elevates learning has never been the format or the platform. Instead, it's the way organisations understand their people and help them thrive. Unhelpfully, far too many assumptions continue to circulate about who learners are and what they want. We still hear broad statements about generations learning differently or job functions having fixed preferences. These assumptions not only lack evidence, but they also ignore the fundamental truth that every learner is

shaped by their own lived experience and that those experiences constantly change, depending on energy levels, workload, confidence, motivation and environment. A person who is fresh and focused may welcome a detailed article in the morning, while later in the day, after hours of meetings, they may only have the attention for a short audio insight. Someone taking on a new assignment may crave coaching and conversation, while another facing tight deadlines needs just-in-time guidance they can act on immediately. Learning is always personal and always situational. This means L&D must resist the temptation to design for stereotypes. The goal is to treat learners with the respect of acknowledging their individuality. When we do that, we stop asking whether one approach will suit all and instead consider how to give people

options that recognise the reality of how they work and live.

Every learning initiative, no matter how well-designed, is filtered through culture. A culture where managers actively encourage development, share their own learning experiences and make time for reflection will see people practice new skills, collaborate to solve challenges and feel safe enough to experiment. In contrast, a culture where learning is viewed as a distraction from tasks will mean employees focus only on what is required to tick the box. When people wait to be told what to do, they form a parental dynamic that ensures compliance but suppresses curiosity. A learning culture becomes visible in the smallest of moments. For example, managers asking what someone wants to develop next, performance conversations that explore growth alongside delivery or teams discussing what they have learned from setbacks. Culture is the environment leaders choose to maintain every day. When that commitment is missing, even the most exciting content and platforms have minimal impact, because behaviour change never truly begins. In large or global organisations, there is often fear that personalisation is unrealistic without vast resources. Yet, genuine personalisation does not require bespoke assets for every individual. It begins with helping someone understand themselves. When learners start by exploring what they already know and what they could further develop, they feel empowered. A simple, honest self-assessment tells people where they stand and where they could go next. That awareness is motivating, as it turns optional learning into purposeful learning and gives each person a path to follow. This matters particularly with tight budgets and high expectations. L&D teams can still create meaningful experiences by focusing on relevance rather than volume. In a global workforce, consistency is essential, yet connection needs to remain personal. Standardisation may appear efficient, but if learning does not feel relevant to the local context, people will disengage. Small adaptations can transform the experience

and scenarios based on local working practices will help people apply learning more readily. Even something as subtle as the accent of a voiceover can make content feel like it either belongs to the learner or another region. Adjustments do not require a huge investment, just a simple conversation with those who know the environment best. That is why listening needs to happen before design begins. A single hour spent asking a regional team how they work, what their constraints are and what would genuinely help them, is incredibly reassuring and can prevent weeks of rework later.

"WHEN WE LISTEN, WHEN  
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NATURAL PART OF WORKING  
LIFE, WE CREATE CHANGE  
THAT LASTS"

In L&D, AI is already contributing value. For instance, small L&D teams can quickly produce credible first drafts of learning assets, reduce administrative tasks and support compliance activities at scale. AI-powered coaching simulations and guided practice give people more opportunities to build confidence before applying skills in front of others. Analytics are also becoming more insightful and instant and these are real AI advances that deserve recognition. However, AI cannot yet grasp the nuance of organisational life - it does not understand the pressures on a particular team - the informal norms that shape behaviour or the emotional signals that indicate whether someone is ready to learn. A point we need to be really clear about is that without guidance, AI will optimise for efficiency rather than impact. This means it will deliver large amounts of content that can fail to shift performance. The risk is that organisations mistake speed for success and find themselves unpicking ineffective solutions later. To avoid these risks, AI should become the first learner. It must be fed with context,

behaviours, expectations and examples of success. That means collaborating with colleagues across the business who are already exploring AI in different domains and might hold insights that inform L&D use cases. It also means understanding our own frontiers - the boundaries of what AI can help with today and what requires human expertise. Organisations should remember that our role is to make work better for people, not simply faster. HR and L&D sit in a challenging position - needing to convince leaders to prioritise learning - while also persuading employees to participate in it. To secure support, we should present clear connections between development and the outcomes leaders care about. That requires data, both quantitative and qualitative. Performance statistics, engagement spikes, skill progressions and behavioural improvements all help organisations see where learning is making a difference. Having case studies, manager feedback and individual stories brings that data to life. When learning is visibly linked to safety improvements, customer satisfaction, innovation, retention or leadership capability, investment feels less like a cost and more like a contribution to organisational strength. That credibility grows every time L&D demonstrates that impactful delivery. There is no doubt that there will always be another crossroads, AI will not be the last. The industry will continue to predict dramatic change and to search for the next big turning point. But progress rarely comes from the signposted route. It comes from thoughtful decisions made consistently - decisions that respect the employee, empower the manager - and align development with the way the organisation truly functions. Therefore, the future of L&D will not be defined by a single technology, it will be shaped by the ability to understand people, respond to their environment with authenticity and ensuring that learning becomes a lived practice.

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