The Must-Know E-Learning Trends of 2021

INTRODUCTION

Getting back on track

Every business had ambitious plans at the beginning of 2020. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had plans of its own.

With some companies forced to pivot to remote work on the fly, and many more having to make drastic changes to keep employees and customers safe, learning and development (L&D) took an unexpected (but understandable) backseat last year. In a Software Advice survey of small business employees, nearly half (49%) told us they haven't developed any new skills during the pandemic.

Now that an end to the pandemic is finally within reach, 2021 is your chance to get back on track. Companies are eager to play catch-up with L&D: According to Gartner, HR leaders rank building critical skills and competencies as their top priority in the year ahead (full research available to Gartner clients):

Top 5 Priorities for HR Leaders in 2021
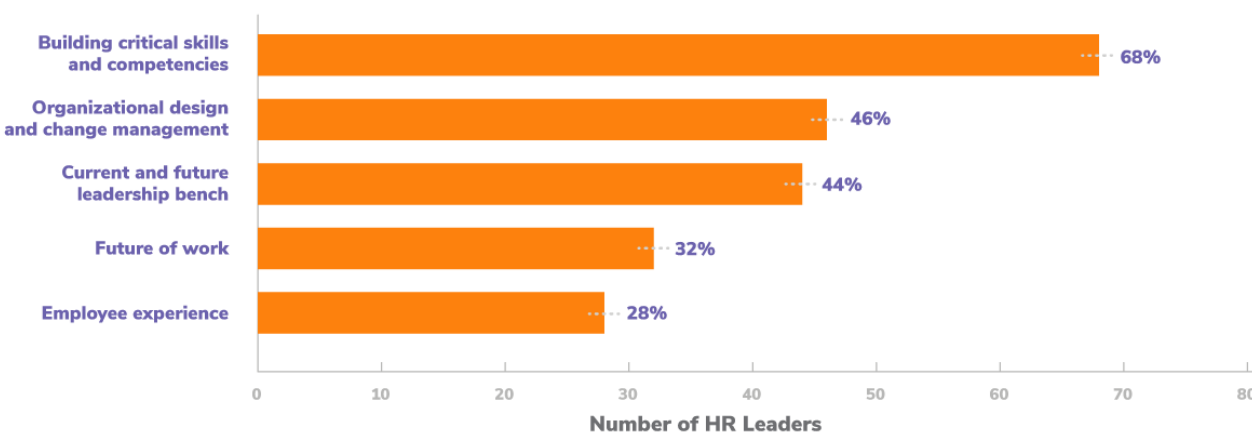
Source: Gartner 2021 HR Priorities Survey
n: 767

If you're reading this, you recognize how important e-learning is to maintain a competitive and engaged workforce. To that end, what are the e-learning trends that we'll all be talking about this year?

In this eBook, we'll look at five e-learning trends we think are the must-know trends of 2021. Backed by Gartner research, we'll explain what these trends are, why they're trending, and—most importantly—how your business can take advantage of them this year.

You can't take advantage of these e-learning trends without the right e-learning software though. Whether you're looking for a small virtual classroom app or a comprehensive learning management system (LMS), at the end we'll explain how Software Advice can help you find the perfect software for your needs.

Learning experience platforms (LEPs) will modernize your LMS

What is it?

Learning experience platforms (LEPs) represent the latest evolution in e-learning technology. Sitting on top of your learning management system (LMS), a LEP uses artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to provide a more seamless and personalized learner experience.

Why it's a trend in 2021

As great as LMSs are for tracking and administering e-learning, the experience of using them as a learner can sometimes be underwhelming. Training content that isn't assigned directly to an employee can be hard to find in a disorganized content library, and the LMS often has little to no functionality to personalize the content a learner sees to their needs and preferences. All of these flaws can cause your employees to use your LMS much less than your company would prefer.

LEPs fix these issues using a number of intuitive features:

- LEPs can display any format of e-learning content (podcasts, videos, articles, etc.) alongside fully-built e-learning courses in a Netflix-like interface that's easy for browsing.

- Content can be tagged and filtered by skills, career paths, or a variety of other ways. Learners also have the option to create their own tags and methods of organization.

- AI can recommend the best e-learning content to learners based on the content they've consumed before, or what's been rated highly by similar users.

As businesses aim to close employee skills gaps in 2021, LEPs will be critical in aligning content with skills needs and giving workers an improved learner experience. According to Gartner, while only 46% of L&D professionals are currently using LEPs, a further 31% said they were planning to adopt LEPs in the near future—making it the learning channel with by far the greatest expected future use (full research available to Gartner clients).

What you can do to take advantage

In the report "Getting Started With a Learning Experience Platform," Gartner offers tips for how your business should plan ahead to adopt this disruptive e-learning technology:

Survey and segment your learners: Discover your employees' learning needs and preferences, then use that data to group your workers together into distinct learning segments. If you find your employees love podcasts, for example, that can be a content area to focus on for your LEP.

Shortlist LEP vendors based on your current tech stack and skills needs: LEPs can be purchased standalone or bundled with an LMS. If you already have an LMS you like, consider the former; if not, the integrated bundle might be better. Depending on your employees' skills needs, some LEPs may specialize in that area.

Start small: Do a pilot rollout of your LEP with a small, targeted group of learners for six to 12 months. This way, you can smooth out any wrinkles. Monitor the effect of the LEP on learning and business outcomes during this period as well.

TREND #2

Social learning is the affordable training initiative you've been waiting for

What is it?

Social learning uses technology to connect people together and facilitate knowledge sharing outside of formal employee training. Whether it's through mentorships, course discussion forums, or the ability for learners to create user-generated e-learning content of their own, social learning promotes the kind of peer-to-peer interactions that employees crave.

Why it's a trend in 2021

As eager as companies are to get back on track with employee training this year, cost continues to be a major hurdle. Having spent on average $1,111 per learner on training last year, businesses are on the prowl for more cost-effective methods to help workers develop important skills.
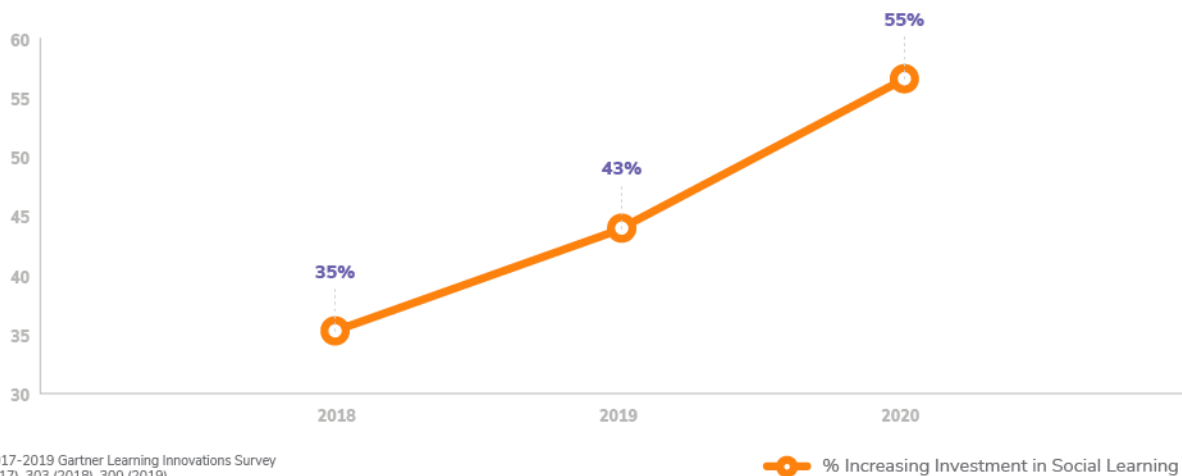
Social learning is the answer. By giving employees with important skills the tools to capture and share what they know, social learning offers an affordable way for companies to round out e-learning needs without having to develop or purchase new content from scratch.

Social learning includes things such as:

- **Mentorship programs:** Managers and corporate trainers can analyze skills gaps and connect employees in mentorship relationships. Mentors can schedule mentorship activities, record notes, and track worker progress toward development goals.

- **Course discussions:** Forums and social media-like feeds accompany e-learning courses to facilitate conversations and knowledge sharing.

- **Content creation tools:** Employees have access to tools to write blogs, create videos, and develop other types of e-learning content to share with their coworkers.

With the percentage of L&D professionals planning to increase their investment in social learning growing by double-digits over the last three years, 2021 promises to see even more companies jump on the social learning bandwagon for their organization (full research available to Gartner clients).

L&D Professionals Planning To Increase Investment in Social Learning (2018-2020)

Source: 2017-2019 Gartner Learning Innovations Survey
n: 305 (2017), 303 (2018), 300 (2019)

—○— % Increasing Investment in Social Learning

What you can do to take advantage

If you currently have e-learning software with social learning features, use them! If your current training systems don't offer social learning features, ask vendors if there is a timeline for them to be implemented. Even non-training platforms, such as collaboration software, can be used for knowledge sharing.

If you don't have software, you can still do things to facilitate social learning in your organization. Here are some tips:

✓ **Do an employee skills gap analysis:** Using data from skills assessments and performance reviews, managers should identify the biggest skills strengths and skills weaknesses on their teams. Company leaders can then use this analysis to pair employees together in mentor-mentee relationships where it can have the greatest impact.

✓ **Set up a social learning protocol:** Just as you navigate your customers to the right webpage or customer support number to fix their issues, so too should you navigate your employees to the right peer or leader in your organization to develop their skills. Upload your protocol to the company intranet, and send out regular reminder emails about this resource.

✓ **Take advantage of current networks:** Your network is perhaps your greatest unused learning tool. Reach out to leaders and other experienced professionals in your work network to see what learning resources they can share. Some may even be open to creating e-learning content or leading a training session with your employees.

Learning + performance will tell you if training is really having an impact

What is it?

Learning + performance is the process of tightly integrating employee training and performance management software systems and data. The benefits of this, when done successfully, are tremendous: Workers can automatically receive personalized e-learning content based on recommended areas of improvement, while managers can more easily see if training investments are actually improving employee performance.

Why it's a trend in 2021

It's no secret that companies have been underwhelmed by their performance management processes for a while now. Inconsistent and unengaging, 82% of HR leaders say performance management is not effective at achieving its primary objective. This has prompted over two-thirds of companies to make performance management changes at their company in any given year, according to Gartner.

At the same time, companies often have to take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to training due to a lack of actionable training data. The result is that e-learning content is created and administered to every employee, regardless of their individual skills needs and performance weaknesses.

So what happens when learning and performance management functions (and their technology) are integrated together? Not only do companies become more efficient (performance goals can automatically be ported over to LMSs, for example), but the data from one process can improve the outcomes of the other. Employees can receive more targeted and personalized training, and leaders can better analyze the impact of L&D on employee and company performance. A true win-win.

More and more businesses are catching on: According to Gartner, 43% of L&D professionals plan to integrate their LMS with their performance management systems—making it the highest planned future adoption rate of any LMS feature (full research available to Gartner clients). Software vendors are catching on too and are increasingly integrating learning and performance features together in one system to provide more value to their clients.

What you can do to take advantage

If you don't already have a talent management suite with tightly integrated learning and performance applications, learning + performance can be a real challenge when attempting to marry two separate systems together. Here are some tips to improve your odds of success:

✓ **Standardize performance ratings:** If different teams are using different scales and methods to evaluate performance, it'll be difficult to translate that data into actionable insights at an organizational level. Work with HR and managers to establish a standard set of performance ratings and the factors that determine them.

✓ **Incorporate 360 feedback:** Managers don't always have the best vantage point to gauge employee performance. Incorporating 360 feedback from other sources can remove bias and deliver better learning outcomes.

✓ **Up your learning analytics game:** If the only learning data you're tracking is course completions and assessment scores, you can't get a clear picture of which e-learning content is actually improving worker performance. Talk to your vendor about your options for tracking things such as engagement rate, time on course, bounce rate, and more.

Learning in the flow of work will deliver training when and where employees need it most

What is it?

How can organizations deliver the right training at the exact moment a worker needs it? That's the question at the heart of learning in the flow of work. Using AI, chatbots, and integrations with other systems, learning in the flow of work aims to automatically send e-learning content about a skill to employees just as they need to use that skill on the job.

Why it's a trend in 2021

Translating what's learned in a classroom or through an e-learning course to actual work has long been one of the top challenges of corporate training. Without a manager or mentor standing over an employee's shoulder to immediately correct an action or offer advice, workers are on their own to take what they remember from training and apply it to their jobs.

Closing the gap between learning and work will be critical in 2021, and that's where learning in the flow of work comes in. By integrating your e-learning content library with a number of other business systems and leveraging AI and chatbots to deliver that content in those systems at the right moment, workers can get the training they need, as soon as they need it.

Here are some examples of learning in the flow of work in action:

- Stressed about an upcoming cold call to a CEO, a sales rep sees e-learning content pop up in their customer relationship management (CRM) system with sales tips for dealing with CEOs.

- While writing a message to customers in their email marketing software, a chatbot tells an employee about a great new e-learning course on email marketing laws and best practices.

- Struggling to sort through mountains of data in their business intelligence tool, a manager sees a pop-up with a list of e-learning courses related to data organization and management.

Gartner found that employees at organizations that are effective at integrating learning into day-to-day work have a 61% higher likelihood of applying virtual learning (full research available to Gartner clients). Learning in the flow of work can ensure that virtual learning is actually used in the right context.

What you can do to take advantage

As it requires an advanced marriage of e-learning content and technology, implementing learning in the flow of work can be a challenging project to take on for any business. Here are some tips to make this initiative go more smoothly:

✓ **Ask vendors about existing e-learning partnerships:** Your current business software vendors may already have partnerships and integrations with e-learning providers to deliver learning in the flow of work related to their area of expertise. Ask before you go about needlessly replacing software.

✓ **Update your e-learning content tags:** Chatbots and other forms of AI need a lot of data to be able to successfully deliver the right e-learning content in the flow of work. Besides topic, content should be tagged for things such as their time range, format, year it was last updated, and anything else that can help AI deliver the best results. Your e-learning vendors can help with this.

✓ **Start with something simple but widely applicable:** Nothing says you have to start this project in your CRM or accounting system. The email system you use or your workplace collaboration tool is a great place to start delivering targeted e-learning content in the flow of work to reach the most employees.

Microcredentials will solve employee upskilling woes

What is it?

Microcredentials offer a more agile way for workers to upskill and earn credentials than typical degree or certification programs. Offered through organizations such as Udacity and edX, employers can leverage microcredentials to gamify training within their organization and give workers resume-boosting accolades that align with their skill needs and career goals.

Why it's a trend in 2021

The traditional routes for employees to upskill and reskill—by earning either a degree or a certification—lack the luster they once had. Besides being expensive and requiring a significant time commitment, the actual work skills that employees learn through these programs can have a very short shelf life, minimizing their effectiveness and return on investment (ROI).

Microcredentials solve all of these issues. Tailored to highly specific skills needs, and taking as little as a few weeks and a couple of dollars to earn, microcredentials offer a more agile and less costly approach to upskilling. Employees love them for these reasons, and the fact that they can add "digital badges" from earning microcredentials to their resume to demonstrate they have a certain skill.

Employers love microcredentials too. Here's why:

- Managers can recommend microcredentials to their employees based on individual skill needs to alleviate company skills gaps.

- Leaderboards can be created to rank employees based on how many microcredentials they've earned in order to gamify learning.

- Companies can weigh microcredentials in hiring and promotion decisions to incentivize further earning of digital badges.

Gartner predicts that by 2025, 30% of global organizations will use microcredentials to calibrate skills and reward upskilling to increase productivity (full research available to Gartner clients). If you haven't been paying attention to this growing field of accreditation, 2021 is the time to do so.

What you can do to take advantage

Unless you're Google or IBM, you probably don't have the resources or clout to offer microcredentials of any merit on your own. That means you'll have to partner with a reputable microcredential provider to offer microcredentials to your employees. Here are some things to keep in mind when researching different provider options:

Look for LMS and LEP integrations: Microcredential providers often partner with certain LMS and LEP vendors to keep everything centralized in one system. If you have an LMS or LEP already, prioritize providers that partner with your system.

Research each provider's reputation in the business world: Microcredentials can be a great recruiting tool, so do some research to see which providers end up on job listings or are most sought out by job seekers. Your provider could help you attract top talent.

Ask about discounts: Instead of paying by the course, talk to providers about corporate subscription options to lower the cost of offering microcredentials significantly.

Get help with your 2021 e-learning needs from Software Advice

Unlike 2020, 2021 promises to be an exciting year for e-learning. Whether it's the emergence of learning experience platforms, the benefits of learning in the flow of work, or the potential of microcredentials, there's something for every business and corporate trainer to sink their teeth into.

The only catch: None of this is possible without the right software. So, if you're in the market to upgrade your e-learning technology stack this year, we can help.

At Software Advice, our e-learning software advisors are standing by. Click here to chat with an advisor and tell them your feature needs and budget. They'll then recommend five top-rated systems that best work for your unique criteria—all free of charge.

The sheer number of e-learning options out there can be overwhelming. With help from Software Advice, you can get the software you need quickly so you can take advantage of these exciting trends.

Survey methodology

The Capterra HR in the New Era Survey 2021 was conducted in January 2021. We surveyed workers at U.S. small businesses with two to 500 employees. The responses are a representative sample (by age and gender) of the U.S. population. We worded the questions to ensure that each respondent fully understood the meaning and the topic at hand.

About
Software Advice

Software Advice™ helps businesses navigate the software buying journey. Industry-specific advisors guide people through the selection process and provide personalized software recommendations. Founded in 2005, Software Advice has helped nearly 800,000 businesses find the right software for their specific needs through 1-on-1 advice, objective research and actionable insights. Software Advice also features over 1,000,000 verified user reviews to ensure people feel confident in their technology decisions.

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