

Getting the most out of lifelong learners

*Some people naturally pursue knowledge as a lifetime vocation, a characteristic that organisations are increasingly valuing in their employees. **Asrif Yusoff** ran a survey to understand the traits of lifelong learners and drew some lessons to guide organisations in their efforts to encourage skill and knowledge development in their teams: content must be relevant, balanced between theory and practice, and delivered in small doses.*

Sarah works as a finance manager and her hours at the office are highly demanding. While most of her tasks are scheduled, the barrage of issues that land on her plate is unplanned. On a good day, she is able to exit the building before sunset. On most days, her duties are dragged long into the night.

Due to her taxing timetable, it has been three years since Sarah last attended any form of training. The earlier she registers for a session, the more likely it becomes that a work matter will surface and stop her from attending. It has come to a point where she doesn't even bother to register anymore.

Despite her limited time, Sarah has got the highest completion rate on her organisation's online learning platform. Out of the 40 topics available, ranging from crisis management to strategic planning, Sarah has completed 38. All during her morning and evening commutes to and from the office.

In search of motivation

Sarah was one of the respondents to a survey we ran to understand the traits of lifelong learners — individuals who pursue knowledge as a lifetime vocation. Fifteen top performers across three organisations were chosen to be assessed on their motivations and challenges in pursuing lifelong learning. We wanted to understand the motivations and challenges of their self-learning journey.

When asked why they invest time into learning, almost 80% of respondents cited 'personal development' while the remaining answered 'work requirement'. This signals their inherent curiosity as the natural driver for learning instead of the obligation to do so in meeting work requirements. Learning is treated as leisure instead of a chore.

We also learned that some organisations impose online learning onto their entire workforce as a measure of ensuring that the platform is optimally utilised. Some facilitate this process by introducing a 'traffic light' system whereby the performance of each staff member is tracked — with yellow being 'delayed' and green being 'on-time'.

As a result, employees end up dividing up modules to be completed and traded answers among themselves. Within a week, everyone was in the green. While learning still occurs, the experience becomes a box-checking exercise whereby completion becomes the main objective instead of self-development.

This is the last thing that companies want to happen when they launch an organisation-wide learning programme. The statistics look great on paper, but the process becomes a means to an end. As a result, it becomes challenging for the true self-driven learners to be identified, and potentially rewarded with opportunities for development or exposure.

Making time

From our survey, almost all of the respondents cited 'time' as the biggest challenge to pursuing their learning objectives. Interestingly, this is also a common reason given by non-active learners as well. As the study is already targeted on self-driven individuals, this finding indicates their desire to do even more despite being above average in terms of independent learning.

As demonstrated by Sarah, lifelong learners make time for learning despite the narrow window that they have. When asked to specify the time of day that is dedicated to the endeavour, the feedback we received were almost equally distributed across early morning, office commute, lunchtime, late evening, and weekends.

The variety in answers that were given reflect the wide-ranging preferences that people have in committing their time. It is also an illustration of how individualistic the experience can be, which highlights the importance of target demography when deploying organisation-wide program. A pitfall that companies can fall into is assuming that flexible learning is the ultimate answer.

With the surge of online learning solutions available in the market today, it becomes easy to believe that learning engagements will also increase in tandem with the added flexibility. In a [2019 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#), the five-year average completion rate of massive open online courses (MOOC) is only about 4%.

With knowledge becoming more accessible than ever — and in the case of MOOCs — offered by the world's best institutions, why aren't people taking advantage? This observation further separates lifelong learners in terms of their desire to continuously change and improve, giving the imperative for companies to unearth more of them within their organisations.

Creating the right environment

From the findings of our study, we offer three considerations in identifying and getting the most out of the lifelong learners in your organisation:

1. **Relevance:** The number one reason why high performers choose to spend time on learning platforms is the relevance of the content to their work and life. Some respondents cited being able to immediately apply the concepts and theories at work as the primary reason they keep on seeking for more. The thrill in experimenting creates a sense of excitement and achievement.
2. **Size:** All of the respondents to our survey appreciate the bite-sized segmentation of the content that they consume across the various learning platforms. Given the general attention span today, smaller-sized content can enable learners to digest, ponder, and reflect. MOOC provider [edX argues that the optimal video length](#) for best learner engagement is six minutes.
3. **Curation:** Another recurring point from our survey responses is the content delivery. This point alludes to the importance of balance in the combination of theory and practice in the design of how topics are presented to the audience. While online learning has matured over the past decade, sustaining learner engagement remains a challenge for most.

As organisations aspire to become agile across their operations and management, the case for a self-driven learning culture is becoming increasingly clear. The options for one-size-fits-all solutions are aplenty in the market, but learning is not a numbers game. The investments that organisations make on it shouldn't be either.



Notes:

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