How to Effectively Apply Design Thinking to Learning & Development

In today’s working environment, it’s more important than ever to continue learning. We need to be up to date with the latest technologies and breakthroughs in our industries and we need to remain educated about the best ways to conduct business. Unfortunately, despite our desire to learn, there’s something preventing us from actually working through our employee learning modules: according to a Towards Maturity report¹, 89% of today’s employers offer e-learning, but 44% of employees are reluctant to use it. Why? For starters: most e-learning modules have been poorly developed, focusing on what employees need to learn rather than how employees can learn best.

To encourage staff to complete their workplace education, it’s imperative that we adopt a user-centric approach. HR’s role needs to evolve from passive (discovering issues as they arise) to active (discovering and preventing potential issues before they occur). That’s where design thinking comes into play. By building learning and development (L&D) programs that focus on the employee experience, rather than strictly emphasizing corporate requirements, staff will be more likely to complete their workplace education—and actually enjoy doing it.

Several of the world’s leading companies already consider design thinking to be an integral part of their HR strategy. Both Pixar and Airbnb, for example, use the term “Employee Experience”² to describe HR roles and strive to design experiences rather than programs. Design thinking requires that we empathize and interact with the end user (in this case, employees) to better understand their individual needs. We work hard to create an optimal experience for our customers, so why shouldn’t we do the same for our staff?

Using a design thinking approach when developing employee training/education systems is essential if you wish to encourage active participation and engagement among learners. The process allows HR and L&D professionals to put themselves in the learners’ shoes and ultimately helps to create an experience that benefits both the employer and employee.

What is Design Thinking?

Design thinking and user experience (UX design and concepts that put the needs and desires of the end-user at the forefront of every strategic decision, work hand-in-hand. To create an optimal user experience, designers must understand the user’s journey; from the initial encounter through to the last step (e.g. logging onto an e-learning platform for the first time and gradually becoming an adept user).

¹ https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-design-thinking-can-do-hr-ld-armin-hopp/
But how, exactly, can you get inside the user’s head—and ultimately create a product that works for them? According to Stanford University’s Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, the design thinking process is divided into five stages:

1. **Empathize**: Gain a better understanding of the user’s needs and pain points through interaction and observation. Approach the problem from the perspective of the user.
2. **Define**: Use data (qualitative and quantitative) to define the problem, but do it from the perspective of the user. Even though you’re incorporating data, you’re still using a human-centered approach.
3. **Ideate**: Brainstorm creative ways to achieve desired results.
4. **Prototype**: Experiment with different solutions to understand what works and what doesn’t.
5. **Test**: Test the final product and adjust as necessary—tests inspire more ideas and prototypes to consider.

Source: [Interaction Design Foundation](https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/5-stages-in-the-design-thinking-process)
There’s a reason why empathizing is the first step of the design thinking process. The user is at the centre of the entire concept—and the ability to see things from his or her perspective determines the outcome. To facilitate the process, UX designers use empathy maps to develop user personas; completing each of the four quadrants (saying, thinking, doing, feeling) helps to get inside the mind of a user.

Source: Nielsen Norman Group

Following the five stages of design thinking—and developing empathy maps⁴—should be an integral part of every L&D plan. Only by empathizing with the user, defining problems and testing (and re-testing) solutions can you truly understand their needs and therefore create a learning process that works best for employees at all skill levels. And this rings true at every stage of your L&D process, from assessing language skills through to implementing learning solutions and gathering feedback.

How Design Thinking Applies to L&D Software

When it comes to understanding the learning experience, it’s important to also consider the software available to the learner. Is your training experience limited to the office, or is it available to everyone whenever and wherever they are?

To apply the design thinking principle of empathy, companies need to understand where their employees are and accommodate their needs by providing the appropriate software and platforms. According to a Speexx study, 46% of millennials are most likely to only consume digital content on their smartphone, which means companies need to come up with creative ways to make their L&D programs accessible and engaging.

⁴ https://www.nngroup.com/articles/empathy-mapping/
But it isn’t just millennials who are preferring digital content. The average time adults in the U.S. spend consuming online video content increased from less than 40 minutes daily in 2012 to more than 70 minutes daily in 2017—and the bulk of those minutes are racked up on mobile devices.

![The Use of Devices Across Time](https://www.statista.com/statistics/420799/daily-digital-video-content-consumption-usa-device/)

Source: Statista

For L&D professionals, this means learning software should adopt a mobile-first mentality to improve the user experience. If trainees are consuming content on mobile devices but the software isn’t optimised for those platforms, it will only hurt the learning process.

**Design Thinking in a Mobile-First Environment**

Mobile-first design differs from mobile-friendly design in that it doesn’t just allow users to digest small amounts of content on mobile—it intends for users to consume most of their content on mobile. As more and more people begin to rely on smartphones and tablets, it makes sense to combine design thinking with mobile-first technology. Of course, this doesn’t mean that the traditional computer-based online experience should be neglected, but it does mean that users should be able to switch seamlessly between devices, and that the experience should always be pleasant, regardless of device.

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Responsive vs. Mobile First Web Design

Responsive Web Design

Mobile First Web Design

Source: Frederic Gonzalo

3 Design Essentials for Successful Mobile-First L&D Programs

Several mobile design elements\(^6\) can be used to optimize learning systems.

1. **Simple Navigation Menus**
   Mobile design benefits from simple navigation (e.g. click-to-view “hamburger” menus) that take up less space on the page, thus allowing users to focus on the content at hand.

2. **Small File Sizes**
   If your learning modules contain photos—and we hope they do—it’s important that they’re saved in the proper format (SVG files are ideal for mobile platforms) to improve loading times.

3. **Strategic Content Hierarchies**
   You may want employees to read every single word in a learning module, but chances are they’re going to scroll through the content to find what they need—make it easy for them by utilizing whitespace, subheads and colors to highlight important lessons.

How Design Thinking Applies to HR and L&D

Organizations that apply design thinking to L&D have already reaped the benefits. As a Towards Maturity report\(^7\) shows, overall, these companies are “twice as likely to report improved employee engagement, better ROI, increased self-directed learning, as well as better integration of learning and work.”

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\(^6\) [https://www.wix.com/blog/design/2018/05/mobile-web-design/](https://www.wix.com/blog/design/2018/05/mobile-web-design/)

\(^7\) [https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-design-thinking-can-do-hr-id-armin-hopp/](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-design-thinking-can-do-hr-id-armin-hopp/)
Design thinking is part of a new model of corporate L&D, where instead of merely providing information with the expectation that employees will study all the material in their free time, it incorporates learning as part of the job itself. It is not secondary—rather, continuous learning is part of the company’s culture and growth. It is also characterized by a realistic approach to learning. Instead of providing a one-size-fits-all learning solution or expecting employees to set aside large chunks of time for learning, the process is integrated into the working environment. In other words, learners are more likely to succeed, since they are offered an experience that suits their needs.

The Microlearning Method

Microlearning is one method that provides information in small, more manageable pieces over a longer period of time. This type of learning is especially well-suited to mobile platforms as users tend to prefer reading short, digestible pieces of content on their smartphones and tablets. A survey by Software Advice found that 58% of employees were more likely to use the company’s learning program if the content was divided up into shorter lessons.

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![Likelihood to Use LMS With Microlearning](https://www.softwareadvice.com/resources/top-lms-features-employee-engagement/)

**Source:** [Software Advice](https://www.softwareadvice.com)

User-centric learning places an emphasis on how the user learns as well as what they learn. Material isn’t simply handed out, but carefully crafted so that it’s easier to digest and more engaging. The experience is designed to help the user learn as efficiently as possible. To find out more about how you can use microlearning in the workplace, read our e-book.

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*https://www.softwareadvice.com/resources/top-lms-features-employee-engagement*/
The Smart Learning Method

Design thinking in L&D also takes into account different types of learners. Smart learning works with AI by predicting the type of content that is of most interest or relevance to the user. Similarly, algorithms pick up on a user's learning habits or speed\(^9\) so that the training accommodates learners of all different levels and backgrounds.

Again, it is a user-centric concept that allows a more individualized approach to learning. Technology is allowing companies to provide training experiences that are much more efficient than the traditional in-class learning environment, where learners with differing levels of proficiency are forced to adjust to one method of learning.

By using a design thinking approach to develop your L&D programs, you can guarantee they work for everyone—and benefit the company as a whole.

How Speexx Applies Design Thinking to Training

Speexx’s user-centric solutions are designed with the learner in mind. The software is optimised for all devices, with consistent UX across all platforms. Each solution allows for personalisation based on an organization’s needs and requirements:

- **Online Assessment:** Confidently screen applicants and employees based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
- **Active Coaching:** Skilled trainers are available 24/7 for group or individual coaching, ensuring everyone gets the most out of their language lessons.
- **Needs/Gap Analysis:** Reporting and analytics allow trainers to identify knowledge areas with room for improvement. AI-driven technology provides the ability to adapt content to the needs of a particular learner.
- **Customized Workshops:** A unique combination of micro- and macrolearning means each employee can receive training that’s right for them.
- **Open Virtual Classroom:** Mixing technology with real workplace communication guarantees success in Speexx’s online environment.
- **Executive Training:** Through a combination of face-to-face training and technology-based blended learning, Speexx can assist senior management in improving business communication and foreign language skills in record time.

Smart Learning for Languages

Language learning is one of the most personal processes there is. Individuals not only learn at different rates in different categories—listening, reading, speaking, writing—but pick up a language in vastly different ways based on their language background.

\(^9\) https://towardsdatascience.com/4-ways-ai-is-changing-the-education-industry-b473c5d2c706
Speexx’s smart learning technologies put the needs of the individual first by using AI-led algorithms to match each learner with the most relevant and interesting information (including job- or industry-specific content) so that the language skill can be immediately applied to their work. Daily refreshers keep users engaged and help them memorize words they need the most help with.

**Intelligence and Analytics**

Speexx’s Performance Center helps both trainers and trainees analyze and measure the efficiency of each learning session. An employee’s learning progress and results can be fully integrated with your Learning Management System (LMS)—and also everyday recruitment, performance and talent management systems—so that you can access everything from one dashboard. Understanding how employees use and interact with learning programs (successfully or unsuccessfully) will help you to develop more effective L&D programs in the future.

For learning programs to succeed, HR and L&D leaders must understand design thinking principles and prioritize user-centric design methods (such as microlearning or smart learning) in the workplace. Only then can they provide employees with the essential tools for an enjoyable learning experience. As L&D processes continue to evolve, HR must strive to incorporate learning into the heart of their organization, ultimately fostering a thriving, knowledgeable company—and a team of engaged and productive employees.

At Speexx, we share a goal to bring the best online language learning experience to users in large organizations worldwide. We are proud to help millions of people understand each other better every day. For more HR, training and learning insights, visit the Speexx Exchange Blog.