



# Self-Directed Learning for Professional Development:

## Opportunities Forecast

R. Stefan Rusyniak & Brenda Spehar









## Executive Summary

In an age where finding the answer to a specific question is at our fingertips, Self-Directed Learning (SDL) happens all the time.

Most people now turn to Google to find answers to their questions or to help them learn a new task.

This form of learning is very common and also very effective, yet few employers have been harnessing it for professional development purposes.

While SDL is a fairly organic process, it generally follows the following 5 steps:

- identify a gap in knowledge
- define learning goals
- identify resources
- utilize resources
- assess learning

The key is that the learner is the sole driving force behind this process.

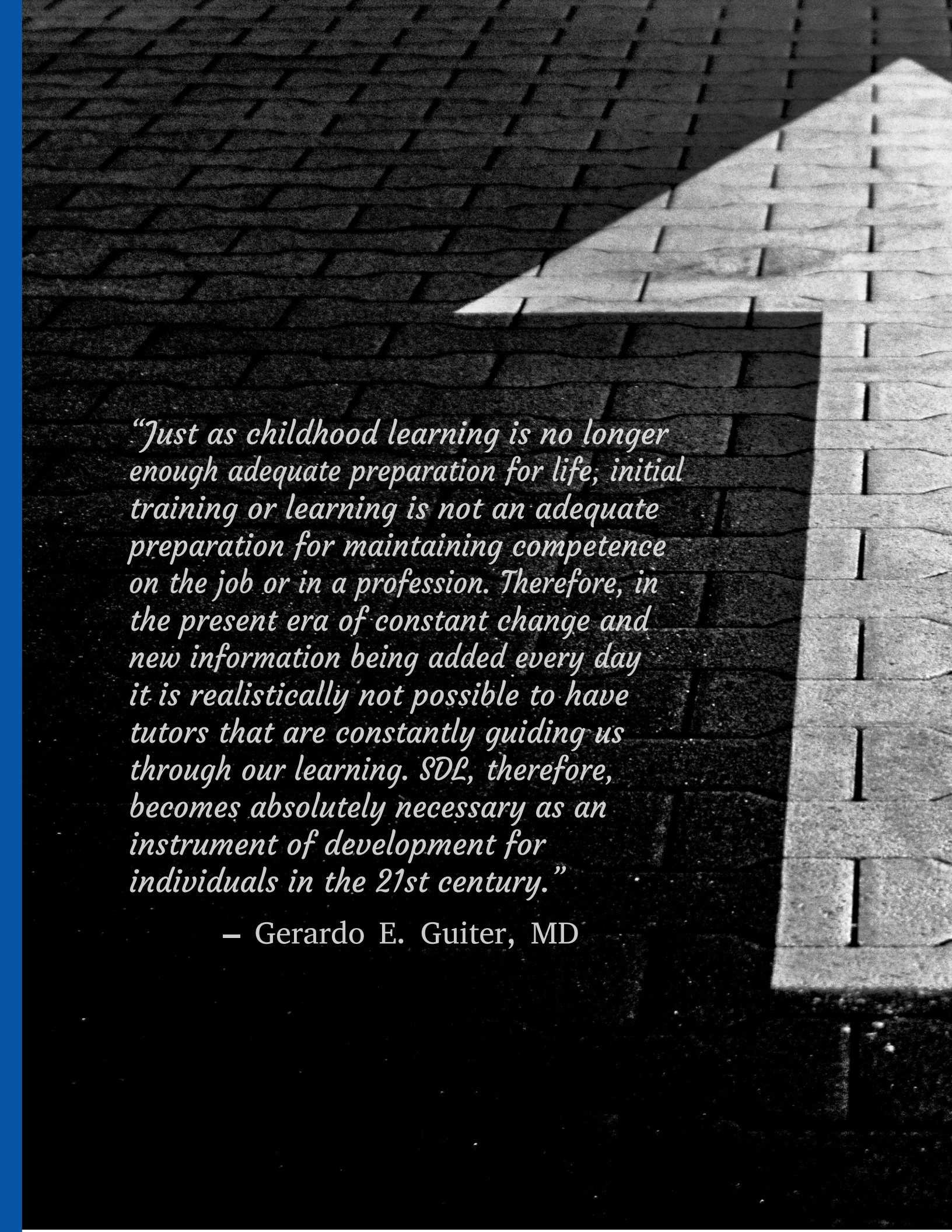
### **People want to learn**

There are, however, numerous barriers which hinder effective SDL and this is where we see opportunity.

In this report, we argue for an increase in support for SDL by employers.

A well-implemented SDL support system provides good quality and relevant training resources, which an employee needs to fill the learning gaps in what they specifically need to perform and grow in their job.





*“Just as childhood learning is no longer enough adequate preparation for life, initial training or learning is not an adequate preparation for maintaining competence on the job or in a profession. Therefore, in the present era of constant change and new information being added every day it is realistically not possible to have tutors that are constantly guiding us through our learning. SDL, therefore, becomes absolutely necessary as an instrument of development for individuals in the 21st century.”*

— Gerardo E. Guiter, MD



## What is Self-Directed Learning?

*"In its broadest meaning, 'self-directed learning' describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes."*

– Malcolm Knowles

Self-Directed Learning (SDL) is not a new concept – it has been with us longer than formal education. While the basic stages identified by Malcolm Knowles may not seem that much different from formal learning, the key difference is that the learner's own interests and self-motivation are the guide and driving force behind this process.

The learning itself, does not have to be completely independent or isolated, but the learner is responsible for deciding what they wish to learn and how they wish to do it.

For adults especially, SDL is the primary form of learning. Once

formal education is completed and a degree conferred, there are few physical places where adults can go to have an expert stand in front of them and deliver a carefully-designed set of lessons.

Instead, they must become self-motivated and self-guided seekers of knowledge – this can be a difficult adjustment, but it is facilitated through access to online resources.

With the amount of information at our fingertips these days, it could be argued that SDL has never been easier. In many instances, there is no need to look up a book, sign up for a course, or find a mentor.



The sheer volume of available online resources, searchable through Google or YouTube, has brought a new dimension to SDL. Many skills and answers are now just a few clicks away.

This type of just-in-time learning for personal development is becoming ubiquitous in our lives – whether we want to figure out how to tie a bow-tie, or prepare the perfect turkey,

these skills are often just 5-15min away. More complex skills, like programming microcontrollers or sketchnoting, can also be acquired in a similar manner – they just require a longer time commitment.

This self-guided exploration of topics of interest and identification of relevant resources are the essence of self-directed learning.

## Learning in the Workplace

Offering classroom training can be expensive and time-consuming, resulting in lost productivity which may affect the training session's ROI.

Additionally, the general nature of the content presented in many such sessions can lead to a lack of engagement and complaints from the employees.

*"I have so rarely been to an effective Professional Development (PD) session in my years as a teacher it has almost become a joke. This is frustrating because I want to have a good PD session."*

*"A recent training session I attended was for two days and the most useful information for me could have been covered in the space of an hour. I was away from my office, so there was a cost of lost time and the bulk of what I was learning was not useful to me or the job I was doing. The course cost hundreds of dollars. It was a waste of time and money for the company."*

As a result, after the most recent recession, many companies made significant investments into e-

learning resources to promote self-paced learning.



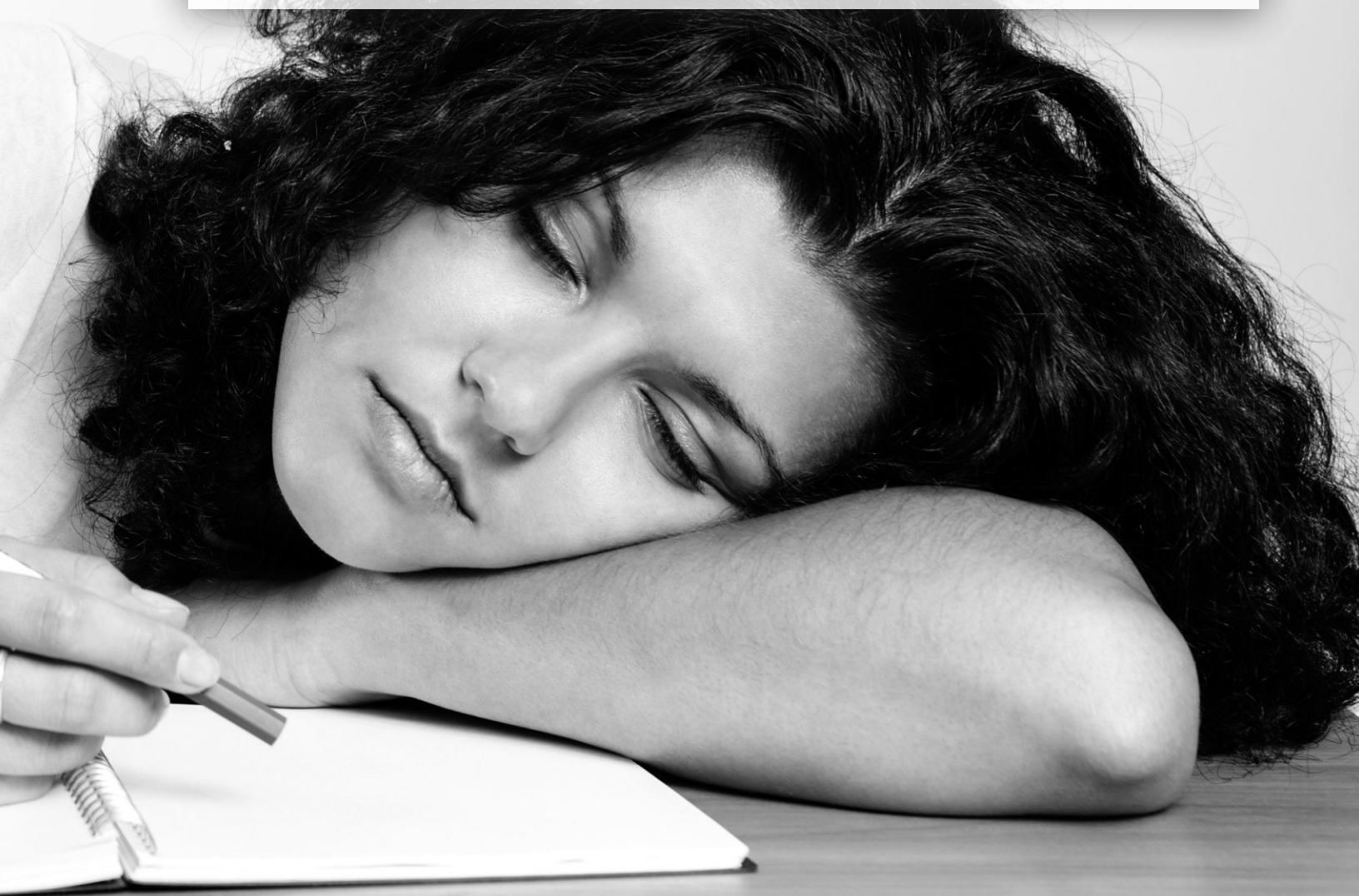
In fact, according to a leading training industry publication, in-class presentations during work hours in 2015 accounted for only about 50% of all training hours. Our own polling showed slightly higher results, but similar results.

Self-paced learning is a form of training that employees are able to complete on their own time, using e-learning resources provided by the company. But, self-paced learning is not the same thing as SDL.

### **All self-directed learning is self-paced, but not all self-paced learning is self-directed**

This is an important distinction. Most job training doesn't give employees any freedom to choose their path. In fact, all the steps that would be found in SDL, except for actually using the resources, are controlled by the employer.

Add to this the requirement that the employee complete the training on their own time – ie. the employee gets to do more “work” outside of work – and it becomes apparent that a lack of motivation might affect training completion rates.





```
if ( $loop == 0 ) {  
    $columns = array( 'zoom' );  
}
```

```
if ( ( $loop == 0 || $loop % $columns == 0 ) )  
    $columns[] = 'first';
```

```
if ( ( ( $loop + 1 ) % $columns == 0 ) )  
    $columns[] = 'last';
```

```
$image_link = wp_get_attachment_url( $attachment_id );
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if ( ! $image_link )  
    continue;
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```
$image = wp_get_attachment_image( $attachment_id, $size );  
$image_class = esc_attr( implode( ' ', $columns ) );  
$image_title = esc_attr( get_the_title( $attachment_id ) );
```

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printf( '

%s

',  
        $image_class, $attachment_id, $image );
```

```
$loop++;  
}
```



## A Changing E-Learning Market

Even though initial corporate enthusiasm for this form of training seemed high – corporate spending on LMS software and mobile learning products nearly doubled between 2012 and 2015 – some, like the market research firm Ambient Insight are now forecasting declining revenues in this sector.

This does not however, mean a return to face-to-face instruction. Instead, it signals a shift in the self-paced education market.

This shift is at least partially the result of the entry of a new generation of employees into the workforce. The millennials are much more tech-savvy than the previous generations, and more likely to choose their employer based on the available learning opportunities.

In fact, in a recent PWC survey of over 4000 young recent hires, showed

that professional development opportunities were the most valuable benefit that could be provided by their employer – significantly more valuable than performance bonuses or free private health care.

This, along with technological changes and the ubiquity of mobile devices, have led to an evolution in e-learning.

This evolution is allowing us to explore the possibility of using knowledge transfer methods, such as game-based Learning, virtual simulations, and cognitive learning products when designing learning activities.

Thus, self-paced learning and self-directed learning are alive and well, but the market in which they exist is changing. And with rapid change comes opportunity.



# Lessons from Our SDL Open Educational Resource

## SDL in the Workplace

People turn to SDL on a regular basis, to assist them with various aspects of their lives. Our survey of a small group of education professionals indicated that nearly 90% of them had engaged in SDL in the previous 48hrs, and nearly 100% within the past 7 days.

These learning events were mostly driven by the immediate needs in their personal lives, although a fairly significant number of participants felt that their learning efforts would also benefit their professional lives.

*"I usually use self-directed learning for very practical and immediate purposes."*

This active, curiosity-driven, just-in-time learning can be contrasted with the typical workplace training session, which occurs less frequently. For a majority of our surveyed respondents, it had been more than a month since their last formal PD session, which was usually in the form of face-to-face instruction.

While this form of professional development does allow for interactivity and easy access to a reliable source of expertise, it is also quite often used for delivery of the type of generalized training seen by some employees as a waste of their time.

*"We just had a two-day in house PD conference. However, I found much of the information did not apply to my specific situation or could have been learned independently."*



Alternatively, employers will offer the option of "self-paced" learning that is to be completed on the employee's own time.

This form of professional development, however, seems to suffer from low completion rates due to its reliance on intrinsic motivation in learning activities which may not be of any interest to the employee.

While many of our survey participants agreed that there were some topics that simply need to be covered for all employees regardless of their enthusiasm for the subject matter, many voiced a preference for a more interest-driven approach to professional development.

It therefore seems that employers could benefit by finding ways of harnessing SDL for professional development.

## Barriers to SDL in the Workplace

In contrast to self-paced learning, SDL resolves the issue of a lack of engagement. Because the subject matter is selected out of interest by the employee, it is more likely to keep the learner engaged and to promote deeper learning. In spite of this, lack of completion may still be an issue.

One of the main challenges to SDL use, as identified by our survey participants, was the identification and access to appropriate and reliable sources of information

and/or tools. About half of those surveyed identified that as a major barrier their use of SDL.

Difficulty in identifying relevant and accurate information was also specifically cited in several comments throughout our OER website.

Thus, one way in which employers could encourage the completion of professional development through SDL, could be by focusing their efforts on providing access to the necessary learning resources.

*"... sifting through all the unhelpful and irrelevant "hits" is the most time-consuming and at times frustrating part of SDL for me."*



Easy access to relevant information would remove one major stumbling block.

Another major barrier to SDL completion in the workplace appears to be a lack of time – more than 90% of those surveyed identified this as a problem. We seem to be living increasingly busy lives, and more PD activities seem

to be taking place outside of regular work hours – therefore, making it easier to fit SDL into a busy schedule should be a priority for anyone developing educational resources.

Such resources should ideally take the form of microlearning – especially in the form of videos.

*"Some of my questions were answered in writing but the more complicated settings were harder to follow so I watched a quick video."*

*"videos provide digestible micro learning segments and it seems reading is becoming more of a separate activity for leisure and not the first modality of choice for learning something quickly."*

One of the things we noticed throughout our survey is how often YouTube or TED were mentioned – these appear to be the "go-to" resources in SDL for many of our respondents.

The presentation format used by these sites seems to be preferred over text-heavy resources like Wikipedia (only mentioned once in the comments).

Additionally, the rising popularity of sites providing short answers to very specific questions, like [stackexchange.com](http://stackexchange.com) and [quora.com](http://quora.com), also seems to support the idea that time is a scarce resource for learners and needs to be taken into account in any learning resource development.

*"The most frustrating part of this type of self-learning was not being able to find the answer. It can be very frustrating scanning forums and blogs looking for answers."*



## So, What is Needed?

Employers can promote Professional Development by removing some of the barriers mentioned above. There is also ample room for new enterprises to enter the field to assist companies with this task. Here are a few needs that can be filled:

### **Relevant and Accurate Sources**

While big players like Lynda.com and Pluralsight are already providing trusted quality content, not all of it is relevant to all sectors.

*"what we do is constantly evolving, and we are expected to learn to keep up"*

There is definitely room for more targeted materials. This is where partnering with specific industry groups to produce relevant quality content could result in removing some of the barriers mentioned by our survey participants.

Organizing such content into specialized collections – lynda.com, coursera and others are already starting to do this – would also help to provide more depth to any SDL done using that content by making other resources easier to find.

### **Lack of Time**

Since there is no way to add more hours to the day, we must ensure

that we use our PD time wisely. Providing easy access to quality, relevant materials (as discussed above) will help, but the way these materials are presented could make a big difference as well.

The use of microlearning and presenting content in a video format – TED, TEDed and Khan Academy are good examples – will help to ensure that learners can do their PD in short bursts whenever "time allows."

Providers like coursmos.com already promote microlearning and provide support to assist instructors in designing their materials in this format.

*"... people here tend to work 10-12 hour days. [...] This means that there is a serious lack of free time after work."*



### **Liven Up the Boring Onboarding/Policy Stuff**

This is the material that most employees complain about – in many cases they don't see how that material is relevant at the time. In this case, the content may not need to change, but the instructional approach could.

The existing materials could be presented as a resource for use in PBL-style sessions. Participants could simply be presented with well-

designed cases which would require knowledge of the relevant material in order to solve the problem. Thus the participants would be able to see how that "dry/boring" material might actually be useful and relevant.

The design of good PBL-style cases can be challenging and time-consuming, and thus there is definitely room for independent operators to assist employers with this task.

## About this Report

This report was produced for ETEC 522 – Ventures in Learning Technologies. This is a graduate course at the University of British Columbia, in the Master of Educational Technology programme.

The data in this report was collected from other participants in the course, through an OER located at: [etec522.lrnbl.com](http://etec522.lrnbl.com)

### **Authors**

**Stefan Rusyniak** has been facilitating adult learning in the academic sector for the past 15 years. Before that, he spent 5 years working in the hospitality industry, where he often found himself teaching skills to new hires. He has extensive experience in data analysis, course design, and the production of educational resources and assessment tools.

**Brenda Spehar** has worked in HR for over 15 years. She is currently responsible for implementing and communicating new system requirements to over 10,000 employees, both in person and on-line. Prior to that, she provided services in recruitment, compensation management, onboarding and career development.









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