



Decentralised L&D: The secret to empowered and engaged employees

Learn how to build a decentralised L&D strategy that promotes learner engagement without sacrificing organisation and alignment.

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About Learn Amp

Learn Amp is an award-winning People Development Platform. Learning, employee engagement and performance management — all in one.

We're on a mission to make work life, work better. We make it easy to map out and deliver the best employee journey. Learn Amp combines learning, engagement and performance management tools in one seamless platform, driving better business results and higher employee retention.

Introduction

The debate about whether to centralise or decentralise learning and development (L&D) has been going on for years. However, in today's globalised and increasingly remote workplaces, a more decentralised framework is rapidly becoming the best approach.

Decentralisation places responsibility for employee development in the hands of employees themselves, increasing their engagement, motivation and even retention. However, full decentralisation is not without risks. The lack of centralised control can result in disruption and overspending.

Luckily, with careful implementation and the right toolkit, companies can get all the benefits of a decentralised approach to L&D while still maintaining the best aspects of centralisation.

In this white paper, we'll explore why the centralised model has been in favour for so long and what issues it presents in today's rapidly changing business context. We'll make the case that now is the perfect time to move towards a more decentralised approach - particularly if you're currently shifting to a more flexible and remote workforce.

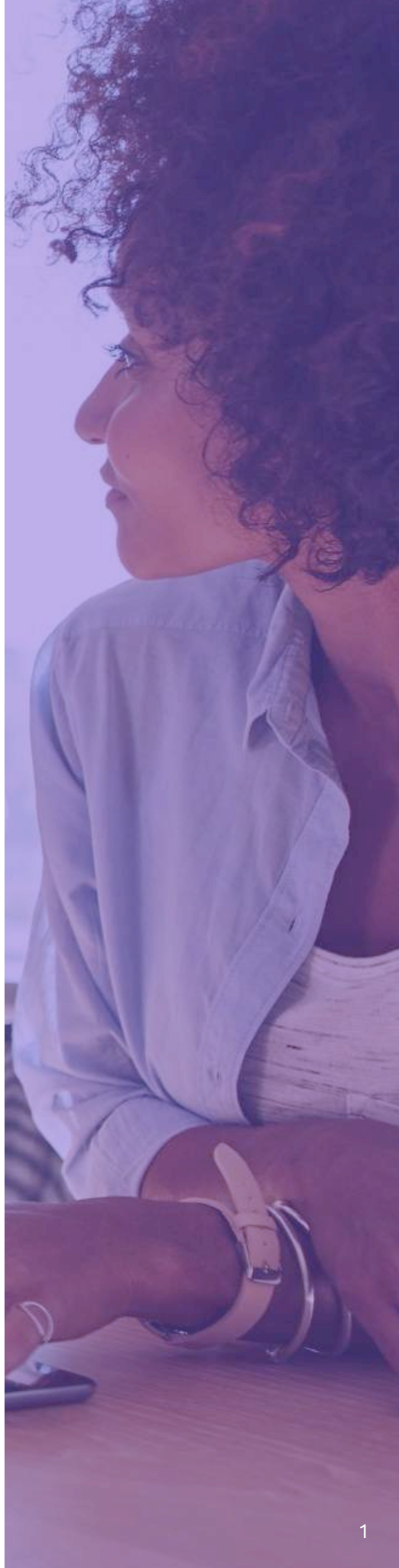
Finally, we'll get into the details of implementing an effective transition to decentralisation without sacrificing organisational alignment and oversight of your learning strategy.



Jacqueline Rough

HR Advisor, Adarma

“In just 18 months Learn Amp has helped us transform our learning culture for the better! Employee engagement has increased significantly and we are quickly seeing the positive impact from Learn Amp's 1-to-1 and OKR functionality. Our next step is to implement a training academy on LearnAmp.”



1. Centralised and decentralised approaches to L&D

L&D professionals have long debated the pros and cons of centralised and decentralised L&D models. But with the evolution of new learning technologies, the definition of decentralisation is changing. For many businesses, the best solution for L&D is a hybrid model which balances decentralisation with some elements of centralised control. In this chapter, we'll clarify what we mean by decentralisation and centralisation in the context of L&D.

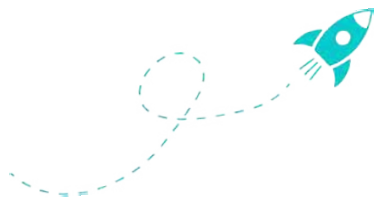


1.1 A short history of L&D

It is perhaps unsurprising that many L&D programmes are still heavily centralised – after all, L&D evolved from earlier economic models. From the National Cash Register’s “Schoolhouse” to the Ford Motor Company’s “Sociological Department”, early learning programs were based on centralised control and standardisation.

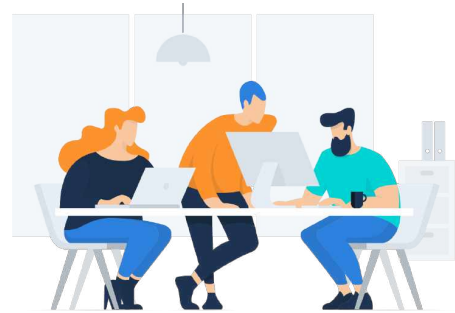
Learning Management Systems (LMS), which became popular in the 1990s, made online learning possible – but the early users of these tools were universities, such as the Open University in the UK, rather than businesses. While businesses quickly spotted the potential that these tools held for improving employee performance, LMS platforms retained the static, standardised, curricula-based model developed for their original academic users. Although new features, such as the SCORM scoring tool, enabled businesses to track the performance of individual employees, the focus remained on scalability, rather than offering a personalised learning experience.

Even today, proponents of centralised learning argue that the advantages created by economies of scale let them maximise their return on their investment in learning programs.



For instance, Bonny Stoufer, VP of L&D for Boeing, argues that the airline’s centralised approach to L&D allows them to “create a collective purchasing approach when dealing with external vendors that will save the company money.”¹

However, others argue that the savings delivered by centralisation are outweighed by the model’s inefficiencies. For instance, global management consultant firm McKinsey makes the case that L&D should be at least somewhat decentralised.



They point out, “Business leaders dating back at least to...the 1920s have recognised that badly judged centralisation can stifle initiative, constrain the ability to tailor products and services locally, and burden business divisions with high costs and poor service.”² In the modern workplace, they argue, centralisation can only be justified if it is a) mandated by external stakeholders, b) adds significant value, and c) avoids the risks of “bureaucracy, business rigidity, reduced motivation or distraction.”



1.2 What's the difference between centralised and decentralised L&D?

With a centralised model, the L&D team or HR department are responsible for managing the budget at an enterprise-wide level, as well as sourcing and managing learning content and suppliers, learning standards, attendance, and reporting.

If managers or individuals want to request training, they must do so via the central HR team. Usually, the process of requesting, administering, and managing employee learning is handled via a traditional LMS platform.

A decentralised approach to L&D spreads responsibility for employee learning across multiple roles, such as line managers, divisional heads, coaches or the employees themselves.

This might mean that each business unit has their own L&D manager, who supervises learning for their specific function or geography.³ Each business unit, department or division can then source its own trainers and learning resources, manage its own learning budget, and conduct its own reporting and analytics.

With the evolution of more flexible, user-centric learner experience platforms (LXPs), decentralisation can be pushed even further. For instance, in some organisations, decisions about team learning are devolved to individual managers or employees.

Finally, a hybrid approach, including aspects of centralisation and decentralisation, brings together the best of both worlds.

A hybrid approach to L&D finds a balance between centralisation and decentralisation. For instance, central L&D teams can keep control by managing obligatory compliance training such as health and safety. For other learning topics, the business can create a career pathway based on organisational objectives. Each employee can work with their manager to design their personal development pathway in tandem with what the business has provided. Individual employees therefore have the freedom to create a unique learning journey, within specified parameters.

Another hybrid model is based on the learning budget - managers can be assigned a budget for team learning, while larger learner initiatives are still handled under the central HR budget.

With a hybrid model, L&D professionals can become the curators of learning resources, which are created or sourced by the learners themselves. Alternatively, the central L&D or HR team can retain control over the learning strategy and analytics, but delegate responsibility for implementation to departments, teams, or individuals. Under this hybrid approach, critical skills such as leadership or sales would remain managed by L&D or HR, while function-specific training would be handled by the team heads or regional managers.



2. Centralised – vs – decentralised: the pros and cons

Why do some businesses still prefer the centralised model? What are the advantages of decentralising your learning program? Is there a way to get the best of both worlds with a hybrid of the two models? In this section, we'll explore the pros and cons of a centralised L&D function, and why a decentralised model may be the best option for today's businesses.



2.1 The advantages of centralised L&D

To centralise or not to centralise?

The CIPD found that approximately 44% of the companies they surveyed were still relying on a centralised L&D model.⁴ This isn't surprising. The logic behind centralising L&D was clear, especially in more traditionally structured organisations.

With centralisation, the theory went, you have visibility over your learning spend.⁵

Organisations feared that if managers could choose their own providers, they would add unnecessary costs. They also expected that they would make gains in operational efficiency by placing the sourcing, management, and supervision of learning in the hands of a central team.

While we would argue that decentralisation can be both more efficient and more cost effective, there are some aspects of centralisation that we believe should be preserved, even as businesses move to a more flexible and decentralised approach.

For instance, we believe that it is important that HR retains oversight and accountability for the entire learning program – and so a certain amount of centralisation will be needed to keep L&D cohesive regardless of company size. HR needs to be able to analyse L&D data from a central platform, to be able to measure learning impact at an organisational level.

Furthermore, some learning clearly needs to be centralised to make sure that everyone receives the right training. Required compliance or safety training or other mandated learning is far easier to manage through a centralised system.

Failure to ensure all employees have received key training can be a serious risk to the company. To take one extreme example, the BP oil rig explosion was blamed on a group of employees who had failed to complete refresher courses on their required safety training.⁶



Centralising these kinds of critical training programs is vital to the company's long-term risk management. In particular, any changes to industry regulations, core technologies or safety procedures can be rolled out company-wide.

It also makes sense to manage the design and structure of any induction and onboarding processes centrally to create a strong and consistent employee experience. That said, individual departments should, of course, personalise that experience.

2.2 The issues with centralisation

So far, the case for centralised L&D looks strong. So, what's the problem?

The main issue with centralising your L&D program is that it is simply unsustainable in the modern world. We are living in what Thomas Friedman memorably termed the “Age of Accelerations”. He argues that one of the only ways to keep up with the pace of change is to “learn fast.”⁷

Organisations must respond to this rapid rate of technological and market disruption by building agile, responsive learning programs to help employees stay up to date.

Centralised L&D is not up to the challenge. In an environment where job requirements can change from one month to the next, centralised learning provided by a traditional LMS cannot respond to learner needs at the necessary pace. Instead, it's the learners who are in a far better position than a central management team to identify what they need to know, when they need to know it.

Centralisation is based on a one-size-fits-all model.

However, this is not how learning works in practice. Some learning material will be far more relevant to some teams than others. Individuals have different skills gaps and priorities.

As a result, the centralised approach forces learners to wade through irrelevant content to find the information they need, thus driving down learner engagement. While some training must be standardised, much of it needs to be designed with the individual employee's experience and development in mind.

The centralised model makes it harder for L&D to keep up with demand.

You need a much larger L&D team if you manage all L&D centrally. This fixed headcount cost can often outweigh the economies of scale from managing everything centrally.

In a centralised learning model, the L&D team has to design a global learning strategy, manage partnerships, and measure the impact of learning. But they're also responsible for the granular implementation of all learning at a company-wide level. Any gains in operational efficiency that could be generated by centralising learning processes and systems are eroded by the bottleneck effect.

In today's increasingly complex digital age, it seems unreasonable to expect a central L&D team to have the necessary expertise to source or develop the perfect learning resources for every team in the company.



2.3 What makes decentralisation the better option?

For today's businesses, decentralising L&D is the right choice.

While some aspects of centralisation will be necessary in most businesses, a mostly decentralised model, supported by a flexible, user-friendly learning platform, offers both employees and employers the best return on investment in today's changeable world.

What are some of the advantages of decentralised L&D?

Empowered, autonomous employees

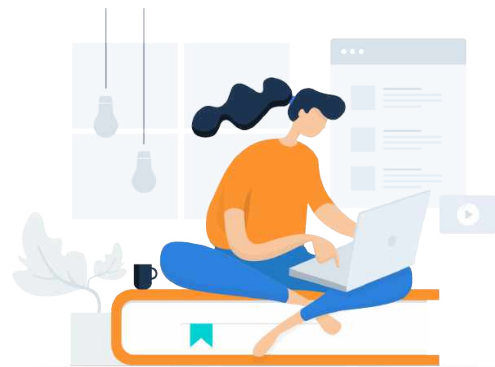
By shifting the responsibility for learning and development away from a central team to individual employees and their managers, the decentralised model creates a far more autonomous and empowered workforce. It gives employees the resources to design their own unique learning journey and address their own challenges and skills gaps. It should make it easier to conduct a needs analysis for employees, and then allow the employees to design their own personalised learning experiences within an overall business framework.

More manager involvement

Increased manager interest in L&D has been shown to be a key driver for employee learning – for instance, LinkedIn found that 75% of employees would take a course if it were suggested by their manager.⁸ By allowing managers to make decisions about their team's learning needs, you encourage managers to invest in employee development.

More agile and responsive L&D

A decentralised approach allows line managers to more quickly identify and source training to meet the needs of their team. Employees can access the learning they need to meet new requirements as their role evolves. Decisions about learning requirements can be made more quickly. Simultaneously, the reduced administrative burden on the L&D team can free them up to spend more time on high-value activities, such as learning strategy, analytics and design.



Creating a learning culture

By opening up learning to employees and managers, you empower them to create, share and collaborate on the development of their own learning resources. This can be an invaluable way to create a learning community and transform your organisation into a development powerhouse.

For remote organisations, in particular, it can also be a very helpful way to keep knowledge circulating across the business. In the absence of quick chats with colleagues over the coffee machine, you need an approach to learning that creates opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and coaching.

3. Implementing decentralised L&D

The move to a decentralised model can be daunting for businesses used to top-down control. However, a balanced approach – and the right tools – can help companies get all the benefits of decentralised L&D, without losing the alignment of centralisation. Here's our best practice guide to getting it right.



3.1 Maintaining alignment with business strategy

Decentralising your L&D shouldn't mean giving up alignment between your learning strategy and the delivery of learning objectives.

The first priority when you shift to a decentralised model is to make sure that you don't lose the advantages of centralisation. So how do you maintain the alignment and top-down oversight of the centralised model, while still adopting a decentralised approach?



Rethink the role of L&D and its place in the organisation

L&D still has a critical role in setting strategy, reporting on and providing insight into the impact of learning initiatives, and managing company-wide mandatory training initiatives.

L&D professionals could also shift from being learning controllers to being learning curators. For instance, if you use a platform that allows user-generated content, then the L&D team can review, approve, promote and share content suggestions from front line employees.

L&D should create a flexible learning framework

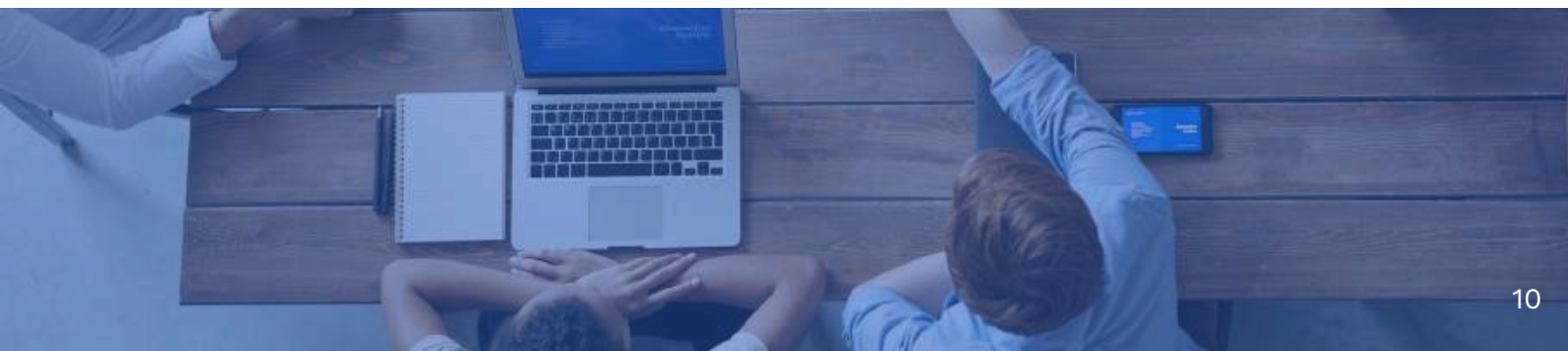
L&D teams can set a flexible learning framework to encourage learners to engage with content without being overly prescriptive. For example, each learner could have some learning tasks and milestones assigned by L&D, and then establish additional L&D goals in collaboration with their line manager. In this way, learners have a unique learning experience customised to their needs and role, but L&D creates an overall structure that makes sure that all learning supports overall strategic goals.

Manage access to content with permissions, segmentation, and hierarchies

Another great way to balance alignment with decentralisation is to use a platform that gives your L&D team the ability to modify settings and access by role, position, rank and so on.

Similarly, employees could all have permission to create and upload content, but not have permission to share that content with others. They would have to seek permission from L&D to publish and share content, thus making sure that all content remains cohesive with the overall company brand and learning objectives.

This set up gives you the best of both worlds – L&D plays a key role in ensuring consistency, quality control and strategic value, while employees are empowered to steer their own learning journey and set their own pace for learning.



3.2 Personalisation

One of the most effective aspects of the decentralised approach to learning is that it enables you to create highly personalised experiences for learners. Instead of the tendency towards a one-size-fits-all model favoured by central control, companies who switch to a decentralised and flexible L&D program can create unique learning experiences for every employee. Examples of effective application of personalisation include:

Manager-designed learning pathways

Learners can work with their line managers to establish development areas to target. Managers can then assign specific learning resources to each team member to support their performance improvement. This method is great for several reasons – learners focus only on learning content that will directly tie to business results; managers are more closely involved in the learning process; and learners see the direct link between learning and performance, encouraging further engagement with learning in the future.

Self-directed learner journeys

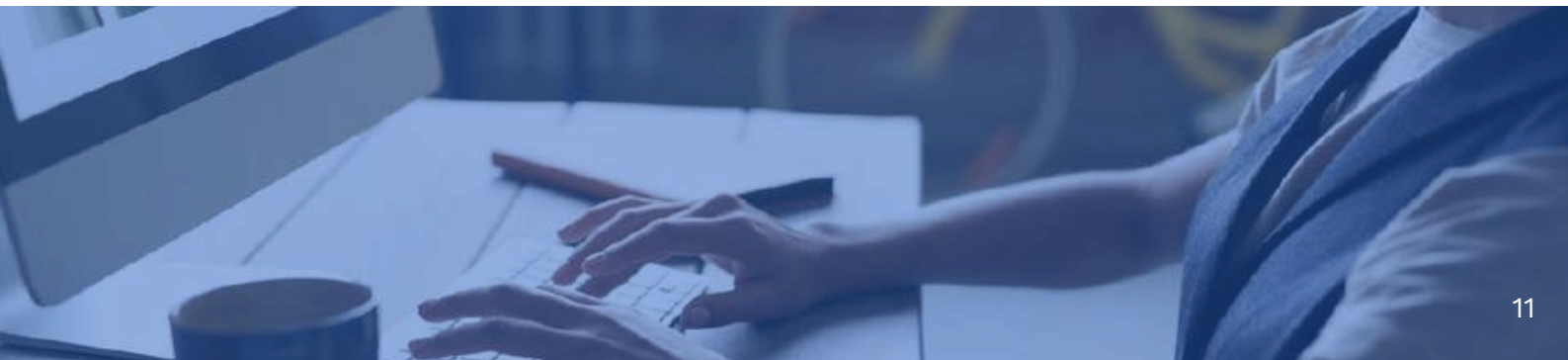
Learners can create self-directed learning journeys to target specific areas of weakness. With access to self-service learning content, learners are able to access the resources they need, when they need them, and immediately apply their learning to their day-to-day tasks. This way, learners are not only empowered to design their own learning - they are also more likely to remember their learning over the long-term.

Employee directory for internal coaching programs

Companies can create an employee directory which highlights each employee's specific area of expertise. Learners can then reach out to the appropriate employee for coaching or guidance when they are struggling with a particular subject. Again, this not only puts ownership for learning in the hands of the employees themselves but also reduces the task load for line managers who are no longer solely responsible for all on-the-job employee training. This can be particularly helpful for remote employees, who might otherwise struggle to know who to approach for help.

Customised employer branding

Today's employees have come to expect a personalised experience from their interactions with software. In fact, to create a positive and impactful employee experience, it's critical that employers provide users with tools that offer a high-calibre user experience. If you use a decentralised People Development Platform, instead of the traditional LMS, you can allow each team to customise the appearance of their own learning platform to reflect a particular team culture. As a result, each employee or team will have their own learning space, instead of a single, monolithic look and feel. This not only promotes a more positive experience with the learning platform. It can also reinforce feelings of team togetherness and shared norms, which can be very helpful for remote teams.

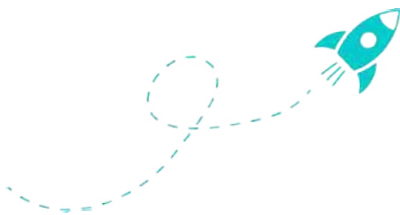


3.3 Community Learning

Another clear advantage of the decentralised model is that it opens L&D up to community and peer-to-peer learning.

It's well-established that community learning has a tremendous impact on learner engagement. A peer learning program organised by US airline JetBlue delivered an engagement increase of over 85% and, even more impressively, nearly 100% of the employees who benefited from the program described themselves as more likely to stay with the company.⁹ Community learning through the decentralised model empowers employees to make their own decisions, while retaining the cohesion of a more centralised approach.

So, how can you implement community learning in your organisation?



Choose the right platform

Make sure your learning platform offers social and collaborative features. Then use these features to engage with employees and promote learner discussion. Invite reviews of learning content. Set up discussion forums or Q&A sessions with internal experts. Host online events and share the recordings with the whole company.

Ask questions

Involve your employees in the development of learning resources. Set up pulse surveys to evaluate how useful learning resources are. Track and respond to usage data. Send out polls to help make decisions about learning content that you should develop or source.

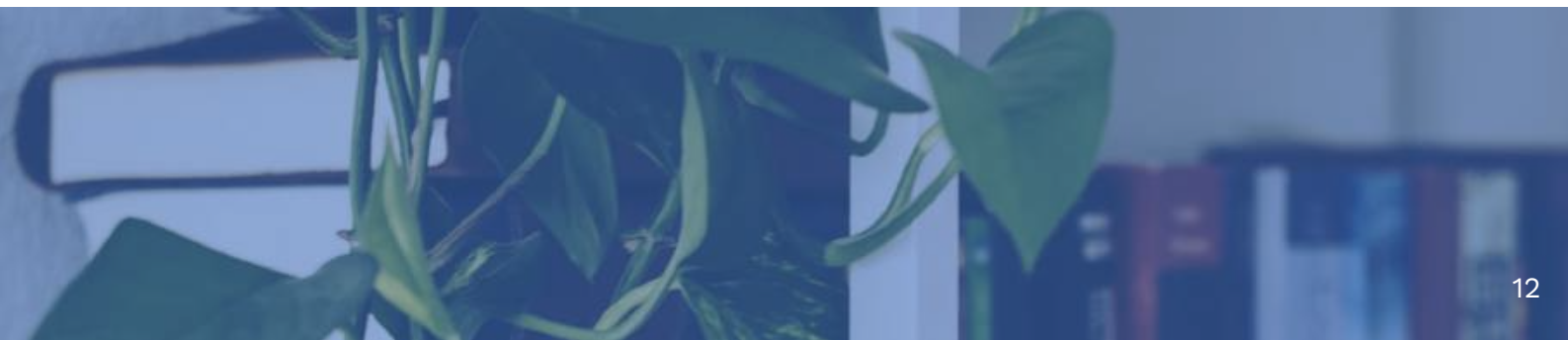
This makes it easier to respond in a more agile way to market changes and employee interests and needs.

Encourage self-generated content and collaboration

Invite employees to create and upload learning resources to your learning platform. These user-generated learning resources should then be approved by L&D to ensure quality control. Once they are published and shared, other employees should be able to make suggestions for how a particular resource could be improved, or other related content they would find helpful.

Promote internal coaching

Take full advantage of the expertise you already have in-house with an internal coaching program. With a more open and flexible platform, anyone should be able to connect with their peers to ask a question about a learning resource or request a quick training session.



Conclusion



Decentralised L&D is the future - but only with the right tools in place.

A hybrid decentralised model keeps the pros of centralisation, without the cons.

In this white paper, we've outlined some of the key advantages of centralisation, but also pointed out how ill-suited a centralised L&D model is for the rapid pace of the modern-day workplace. We've explored how a decentralised approach to L&D is more empowering, motivating and engaging for today's employees. We broke down how to retain some of the best elements of centralisation, while shifting towards a more flexible, agile, decentralised L&D program.

We then explored some of the key ingredients that an effective, cohesive decentralised model should include. In particular, we examined the importance of collaboration and community learning, central oversight and control, and personalisation and adaptability. Finally, we took a look at how our client was able to shift to a balanced hybrid decentralised model, using the Learn Amp employee experience platform.

To learn more about how Learn Amp could help your organisation develop its people please visit our website to book a free demo.

“We are really happy to see that people are amazingly quick to adapt to the Learn Amp platform! Through the Boon Edam University, we can ensure that all our staff are highly trained and up-to-date with the latest developments in our business. The tool Learn Amp offers is easy to work with and can be used without the need for extensive user training.”

Pjotr Hoekstr
Group HRD Manager, Boon Edam



About the Authors

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We're on a mission to make work life work better. We make it easy to map out and deliver the best employee journey. Learn Amp combines learning, engagement and performance management tools in one seamless platform, driving better business results and higher employee retention.



DUNCAN CHEATLE

Aside from founding Learn Amp, Duncan has spent over 20 years championing UK enterprise through The Supper Club. Established in 2003, The Supper Club is now home to around 500 of Britain's most innovative, high growth entrepreneurs.

Duncan sits on the Chartered Management Institute's Board of Companions, was a co-founder of Start Up Britain (launched by the Prime Minister in March 2011) and was a non-exec of the Start Up Loans Company for its first year. He has also sat on a variety of Advisory Boards including the Centre for Entrepreneurs and the Sheffield University Management School.



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Joe is Chief Commercial Officer and Lead Solution Architect at Learn Amp. He has spent the last 14 years helping global scale-ups in people and organisational development.

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He has been a judge for the UK Customer Experience Awards and regularly writes and speaks about the link between customer experience and employee experience.

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Give your employees a platform to succeed

Learning, employee engagement and performance management all in one, to develop happy, engaged and performing employees.

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Testimonials



Andrew Long
COO, Ten Lifestyle Group

“Having Learn Amp has increased access to learning and development opportunities from 50% of our staff to 100%. We can now deliver the Ten Academy I have always envisaged.”

“The teams have adopted Learn Amp straight away. It’s great to see people motivated to use the platform without the need for encouragement. It is so easy to add content in any format from any source. Dare I say it but uploading materials has actually been easy and enjoyable. And we were up and running in a few weeks from scratch!”

— Diane Young | CEO, The Drum





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