Hype and reality: the emerging impact of AI on digital learning

The promise is great but not without challenges

Artificial intelligence dominates commentary about work. Whilst ChatGPT and similar products are powerful tools with great potential for learning, they are not the whole story. AI, in many forms, has been a driving force of digital learning for many years. What is new, however, is the potential to augment, transform and disrupt the provision of workplace learning.

Amongst the noise, there is universal pressure for a clear plan. But what should that plan include? Where are the achievable opportunities? How can the risks be avoided?

In this paper we will cover:

- *The drivers for uptake of and barriers to AI adoption*
- *Implications and opportunities for the learning cycle and personal learning at scale*
- *The emerging solutions toolkit for eLearning design*
- *How L&D teams should respond*

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Why is this important?

AI offers the opportunity for efficiency and genuine transformation

For many years, artificial intelligence has been changing the face of workplace learning. Handling structured and unstructured data at scale has allowed skills analytics services to benchmark skill levels, forecast skill demand and match workers to development opportunities. Adaptive learning providers have applied AI technologies to personalised learning programmes, targeting content to the right learner at the right moment. Meaningful curation of seemingly endless volumes of content has been made possible.

A new generation of AI technologies, large language models among them, promise to accelerate the augmentation of learning value and to transform it. The ability to rapidly create synthetic media assets, such as video avatars, and automate learning content authoring takes digital learning design efficiency to new levels. Similarly, analysing the learning value within existing courses and content libraries creates opportunities to explore skills development not practically possible with human editorial effort.

Generative AI tools are bringing work scenarios to life as conversational experiences. Learners can rehearse and practice their skills with an intelligent chat bot and receive real time feedback on their performance. The creation of such 'safe spaces at scale' adds fresh value to existing content solutions.

Further on the horizon, genuinely personal development products and services which learn about learners as they progress can take personalised learning real at scale. Along with the emerging personal assistants as new interfaces on learning and productivity tools these developments can power performance guidance as we work and learn.

Expectations might be too high too soon

Bill Gates said "*We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten. Don't let yourself be lulled into inaction.*" He could have been describing the atmosphere of expectation in the digital learning industry. Our research shows that 69% of respondents

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believe the level of hype around AI is justified[1]. It also shows that 38% anticipate a great deal of impact in the next twelve months with the same proportion expecting quite a lot. Expectations are very high.

In larger enterprises' budget cycles, approval processes and navigating IT strategy are some of the practical barriers to overcome before new technologies can be implemented, let alone flourish. Whilst smaller businesses may be able to take swifter decisions, getting the right tools into the right hands with clear metrics in place is not easy for smaller L&D functions with limited IT support.

Current drivers of AI adoption[2], as described in the chart below, are focused on efficiency, optimisation and costs of existing learning approaches. Even if these can be realised swiftly, transformational benefits lie further out.

What is driving your adoption of AI for learning in your organisation?
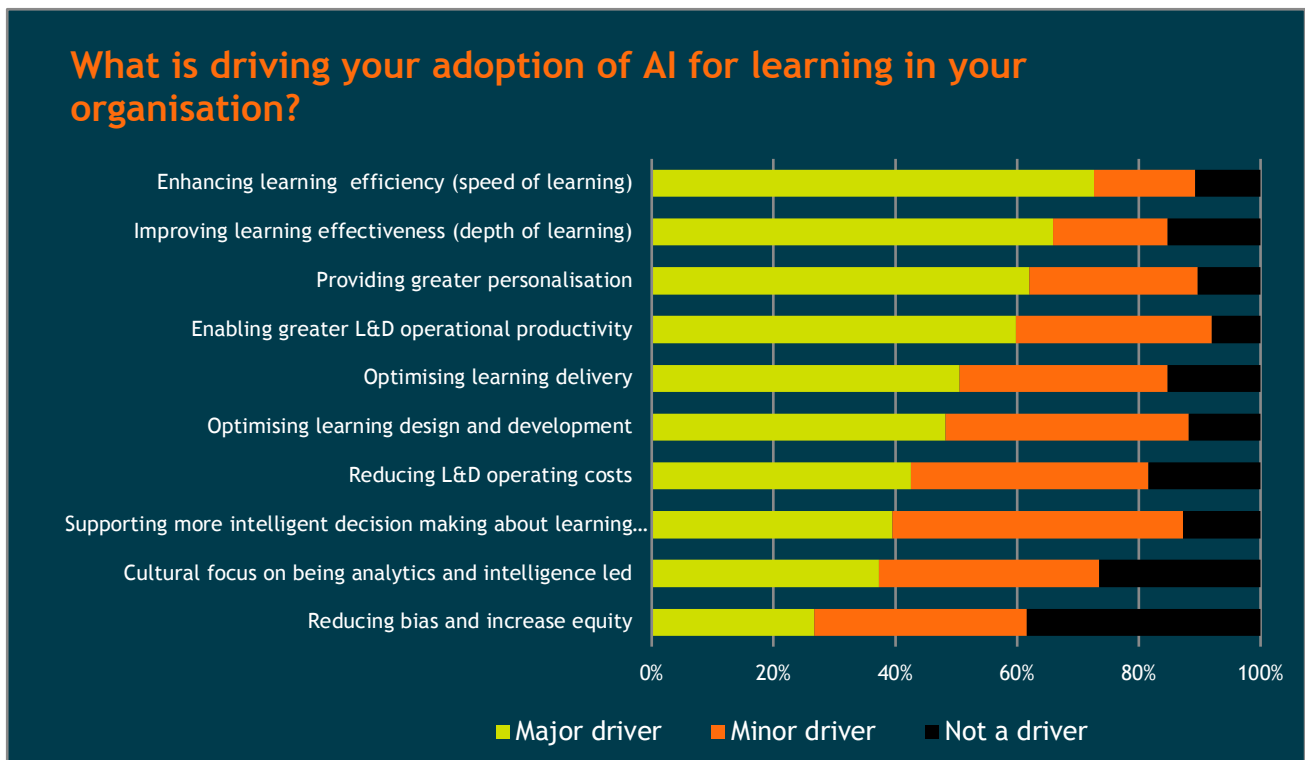
FOCUS-ON: AI in Learning

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[1] FOCUS-ON: AI in Learning 2023
[2] FOCUS-ON: AI in Learning 2023
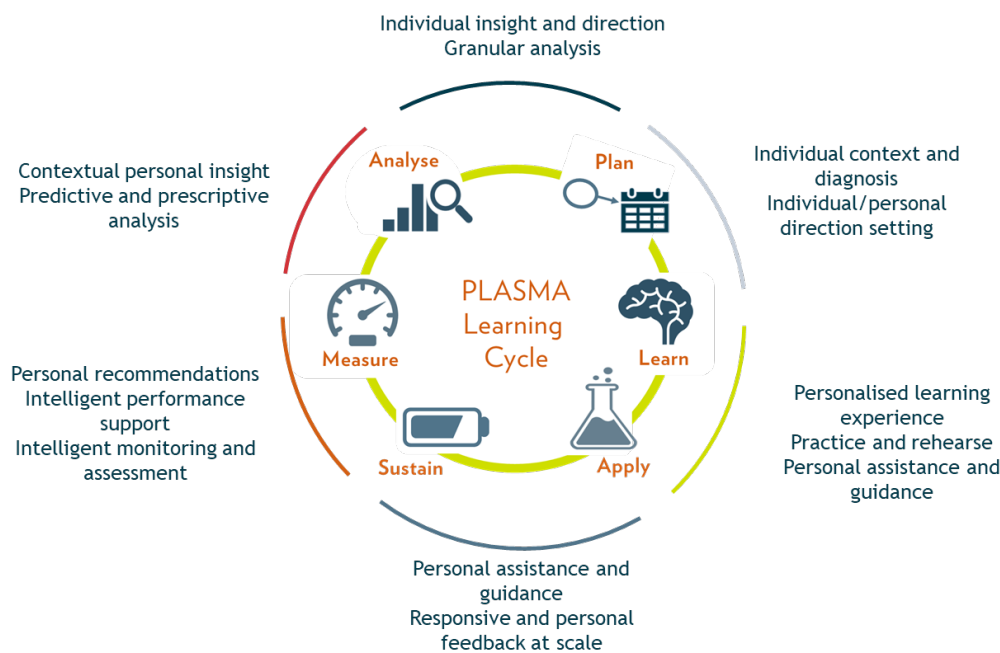
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The potential to unlock personal value is great

Throughout the learning cycle, shown below, the opportunity to gather granular data about performance context and needs is coupled with properly personal development planning in real time, freed from a static review moment.

Personal assistance and guidance holds the promise of supporting learners through personalised programmes as they apply skills in their work, and sustaining development with intelligent recommendations and ongoing feedback. The potential for analytics to move beyond the description of performance change into predicting it - skills attainment for example - and prescribing next steps to reach those new goals brings the realisation of demonstrating business value into view.

AI Adds Intelligence and Insight to the PLASMA Cycle

Individual insight and direction
Granular analysis

Contextual personal insight
Predictive and prescriptive
analysis

Analyse

Plan

Individual context and
diagnosis
Individual/personal
direction setting

PLASMA
Learning
Cycle

Measure

Learn

Personal recommendations
Intelligent performance
support
Intelligent monitoring and
assessment

Sustain

Apply

Personalised learning
experience
Practice and rehearse
Personal assistance and
guidance

Personal assistance and
guidance
Responsive and personal
feedback at scale

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Efficiency at scale is a valuable prize. The release of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT to consumers first has set hopes of efficacy and flexibility high, creating benchmarks for corporate learning products. Equally, concerns of hallucinations, falsehoods and unpredictable responses have prompted anxiety. Clarity about use cases and boundaries of features is vital to set appropriate expectations in the workplace.

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What should you do?

Understand your barriers to adoption

To make the most of the potential, a clear view of the challenges and issues organisations face is critical. At this early stage in development of AI technologies, these are many and varied (see diagram below). Cultural factors should not be overlooked. Many workforces are change weary from transformation initiatives and external factors such as COVID-19 recovery. Learning technology leaders face new policy and strategy territory with heightened expectation and anxiety.

A necessary foundation for realising AI value is data readiness. 61% are concerned about data privacy and security[3]. The reality for many organisations is that data is held in multiple systems which integrate poorly. It may also be incomplete and unmanaged. Investing in data quality and interoperability is a prerequisite for the transformational benefits of AI systems.

Barriers to AI Adoption

People & Culture	L&D Readiness	Strategy and Planning		Technology Infrastructure	
		Policy & Governance	Risk Management	Systems	Data
• Acceptance of the new • Attitudes to automation • Employee organisation and knowledge • Change fatigue • Trust • Digital literacy • Communication openness	• Skills - learning design, product, UX, data analytics • Service maturity • Stakeholder awareness and relationships • Ability to experiment • Supplier readiness • Goals and metrics	• Strategic direction and fit • Investment case • Shared principles • Structure and responsibilities • Accountability • Success metrics • Privacy • IP ownership and protection	• Commercial reputation • Quality • Consistency & reliability • Bias & accuracy • Security • Privacy and data • Employer reputation	• Systems interoperability • Ecosystem maturity • Standards • Resource availability • IT policy • Supplier readiness	• Availability • Accuracy • Completeness • Currency • Consistency of data • Security • Resource availability

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Here vendors can help steer a course. The best will help to guide you through policy decisions and integration challenges with their own technology architecture and data expertise. Openness about where

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[3] FOCUS-ON: AI in Learning 2023

and how proprietary technologies and third-party services are used will be an important consideration around data and security risks. They will also have a stable and ready data environment to support your plans.

There may be substantial barriers to overcome; that last sentence of the Bill Gates quote is worth holding in mind, however. Doing nothing also carries great risk of lost opportunity.

Experiment to understand value in your context

As with any technology, the benefits of AI will vary depending on context. Adopting the methods of the product management world is instructive in designing experiments to gather useful data.

A good experiment will tackle a problem in a way that improves your knowledge of how the technology and tools actually work for you (and how they do not), what end users make of them and how far quantifiable business needs are met. In combination, these describe potential product value, as in the diagram below.

Product Management Mindset

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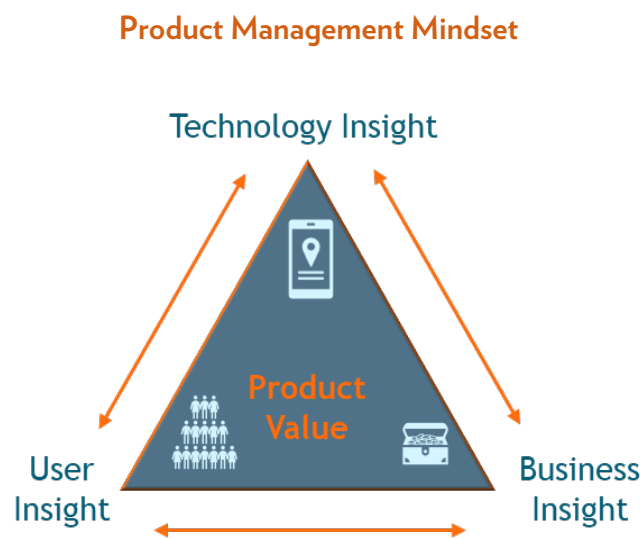
Early evidence suggests the digital learning market is partly focusing on solving problems in the content creation and experience areas, adding value to existing solutions. How far this extends insight into fresh sources of business value remains to be seen.

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Arguably, the most valuable insight gathered from testing new products is the understanding it provides about your capabilities and readiness to apply them. Getting to grips with new tools, even on a small scale, will show which skills need development, how ready your data sources are and how ready people are for new learning experiences. Generative AI products are ideal for such rapid prototyping.

Grasp the opportunities of the emerging solutions toolkit

Our analysis highlights an approaching set of powerful tools for eLearning designers. The efficiency opportunity of prompt-based authoring is at the heart of much development, along with synthetic media creation. The scope for automating subject research and mapping enterprise-wide topic domains could equally transform earlier consultation and exploration stages of projects.

The Emerging AI eLearning Toolkit
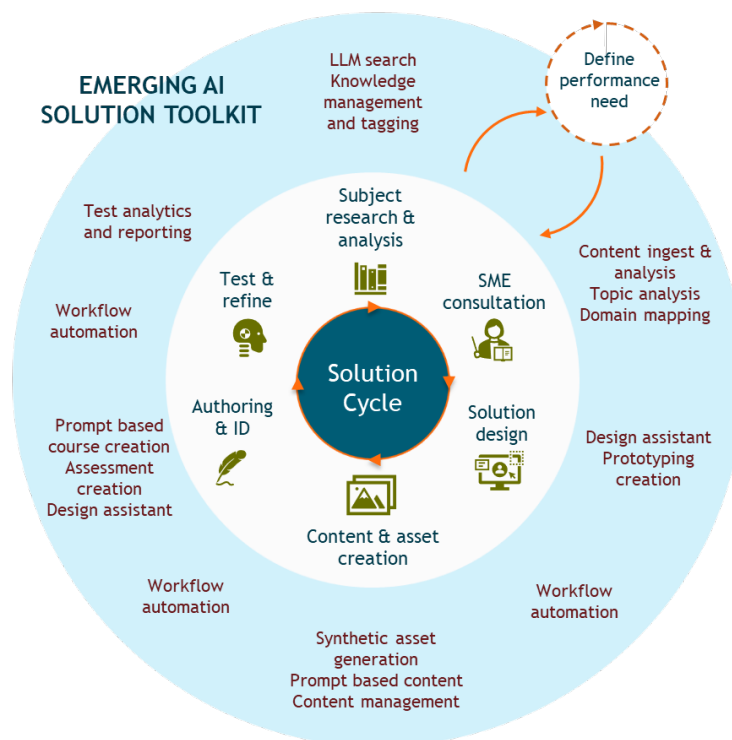
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As the components of the toolkit emerge, elements of workflow automation are being developed. This will start to supplement efficiency gains with operational and performance data, mirroring more mature digital content sectors.

Evaluate the market with care

It might be tempting to find AI shaped problems to satisfy the perceived need for an innovation story. But presenting a real and current problem to solve when approaching potential suppliers will help filter your options and measure value. Consider resource heavy or slow processes, generic or untargeted content or unreliable and variable design inputs as areas which might offer solid tests for new AI solutions.

The best suppliers will engage in a constructive conversation to identify where real benefits can be delivered. It is crucial to evaluate the AI credentials of suppliers; look at how they support long term product development and how they balance risk and opportunity for customers and end users.

AI Supplier Evaluation Focus

- Evidence for innovation claims versus enhancements and efficiency to existing products

- AI and innovation pedigree and experience

- Software and data engineering team strength and growth

- Commitment to a sustained roadmap of enhancements

- Third party technologies will power many services – which are used and why?

- Policies and processes to ensure security, privacy and safety

- Monitoring activity to manage those policies and processes

- Controls and opt-outs available for future releases

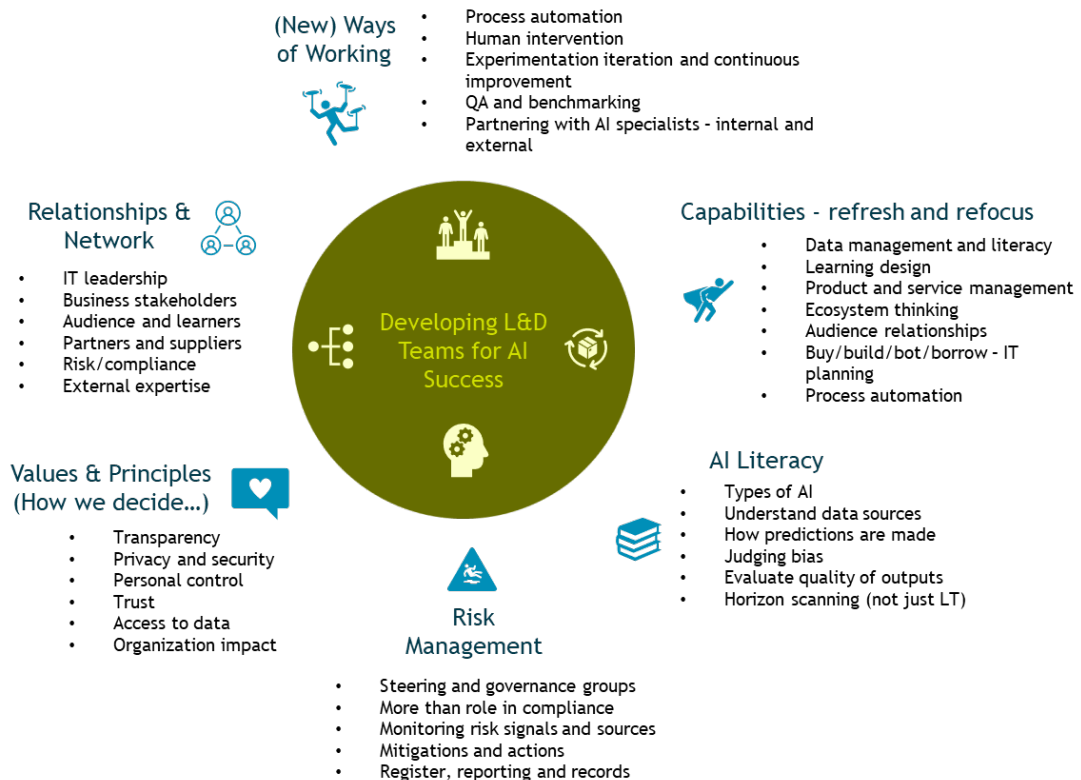- Learning design depth in addition to technology delivery

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Develop the right capabilities

The far-reaching potential of AI technologies and the barriers to their implementation require a fresh focus on existing capabilities and the addition of new ones for successful implementation. L&D teams with strong digital foundations and evidence-based decision making habits are at an advantage.

A refreshed focus on quality assurance to monitor the outcome of automated processes will be needed to ensure relevance. Balancing human intervention and the application of learning design expertise will be crucial to avoiding generic outputs. A new set of AI literacies need to be developed alongside emerging data and digital fluency. Data sources need to be understood. Decision making principles to steer if and how AI is applied will help engender trust, and a new risk management capability will be needed to safeguard it. There is much to attend to.

Capabilities and Ways of Working for AI Success

(New) Ways of Working
- Process automation
- Human intervention
- Experimentation iteration and continuous improvement
- QA and benchmarking
- Partnering with AI specialists - internal and external

Relationships & Network
- IT leadership
- Business stakeholders
- Audience and learners
- Partners and suppliers
- Risk/compliance
- External expertise

Developing L&D Teams for AI Success

Capabilities - refresh and refocus
- Data management and literacy
- Learning design
- Product and service management
- Ecosystem thinking
- Audience relationships
- Buy/build/bot/borrow - IT planning
- Process automation

Values & Principles (How we decide...)
- Transparency
- Privacy and security
- Personal control
- Trust
- Access to data
- Organization impact

AI Literacy
- Types of AI
- Understand data sources
- How predictions are made
- Judging bias
- Evaluate quality of outputs
- Horizon scanning (not just LT)

Risk Management
- Steering and governance groups
- More than role in compliance
- Monitoring risk signals and sources
- Mitigations and actions
- Register, reporting and records

Perhaps most pressing of all are effective relationships with IT decision makers and those who influence

them. To make the most of the potential, a clear view of how this generation of learning tools can guide and support people though coming changes in their workplaces is a genuine source of advantage.

Summary

At what is still an early stage of AI adoption in corporate L&D, there is great potential to deliver on long standing promises of digital learning. Genuinely personal relevance and utility at scale is a possibility in more tangible ways. Augmenting the existing value of digital learning and generating efficiencies in content design and development processes is a natural place to establish the use of these new tools and methods.

There is real value at hand but it will change our status quo. Realising the transformational benefits of AI will take time and effort, with few shortcuts. A recalibration of existing expectations is needed to allow for a clearer view of the possibilities in the context of each business and the decisions needed to achieve them.

Recommended Fosway reading

For further Fosway analysis relating to this topic, please see the following papers or resources.

- Digital Learning Realities 2023

- 2023 Fosway 9-Grid™ – Digital Learning

- PLASMA Learning Cycle

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Talk to us today at:

Email: info@fosway.com
Telephone: +44 (0) 207 917 1870
Web: www.fosway.com

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Contact Us

Visit: www.infoprolearning.com

Call: (609) 606 9984

Write: info@infoprolearning.com