MASTERSTART
SOUTH AFRICA

Solutions To Local Learning & Development Challenges:

A SOUTH AFRICAN SURVEY

What's inside

Aligning L&D with Business Objectives:
A Critical First Step in the Way Forward

New technologies are reshaping virtually every business, and the digital economy requires new ideas, information, and business models. Add to that ongoing skills shortages in the country, and new layers of complexity brought on by work-life fusion and hybrid work, and it's clear a strong alignment between corporate strategy, the talent agenda, and the learning agenda is critical. This means Learning & Development (L&D) practitioners need a seat at the table, and preferably right next to the organisation's senior managers and key business decision-makers.

When L&D is conducted in harmony with a broader organisational framework, businesses protect against segmented or siloed learning that could be out of sync with the day-to-day realities at work. Skills-based learning initiatives begin to propel progress in the strategic goals of the organisation when L&D objectives are aligned with business objectives. This approach not only addresses the immediate skills shortages but also promotes ongoing growth and adaptability in the workplace, ensuring the workforce remains agile and responsive to evolving business needs.

When companies see L&D practitioners as critical partners for their business strategy, it results in a number of direct benefits.
These include:

- **Builds a learning culture** by emphasising the role of coaching, feedback, leadership and ownership.

- It **improves employee performance** through targeted skills-based training sessions and helps employees learn job-specific skills.

- It **encourages employees to keep learning** and stay up to date with the latest industry developments.

- It **increases employee satisfaction** and retention by allowing employees to advance in their roles.

- It **helps achieve organisational goals** by focusing on the necessary skills and knowledge required to perform their roles.

- It **leads to internal promotions** and facilitates career advancement, which benefits employees and their companies.

A Study on L&D Trends & Challenges in South Africa

South Africa's unique socioeconomic factors and evolving demands across industries present various challenges to L&D professionals. Yet, despite their critical role in guiding skills development, limited local resources exist on exactly what these challenges are and even less on how to solve them.

To fill this knowledge gap with first-hand research from the L&D community in South Africa, MasterStart ran a survey to gauge what the most pertinent, real-life challenges are that L&D professionals face in strategising and implementing learning and development plans for their organisations.

Based on insight from over 318 respondents, we found that the challenges L&D professionals face are not unique or one-off but rather evident across businesses and industries—and understanding these challenges is the first step in devising actionable solutions.

Common Challenges & Actionable Solutions for Local L&D Professionals

CULTURAL HURDLES

1

Problem:
Resistance to change and engagement challenges

Many of the respondents say they face constant resistance to change from employees, managers, and stakeholders. They also struggle to find ways to motivate employees to engage in learning and training programmes, while many also experience resistance among staff to adapt to new technologies and different ways of working.

Our recommendation:
Develop a learning culture

Providing easy access to opportunities for learning in the 'flow of work' — having access to the right knowledge at the right time, along with support in the form of tools, mentoring, and coaching, is critical. Be transparent about the company's skills development purpose and objectives across departments and roles, and explain what's in it for participants (potential for promotion, salary increase, personal/career growth, etc.).

2

Problem:
Time management and prioritisation

Skills development professionals struggle to find time to manage all aspects of their roles effectively. This includes conducting needs analyses and updating training materials, engaging with various stakeholders, and handling administrative tasks.

Our recommendation:
Strategic road mapping

Time management and prioritisation issues can be easily solved by partnering with skills development providers that can offer a skills gap and needs analysis, industry–aligned training, course material, and skills mapping to bridge their programmes with your requirements.

3

Problem:
Alignment with business goals

Aligning L&D strategy with business objectives and demonstrating the value of skills training programmes remain common challenges. Many respondents report a lack of support from managers in general, who still fail to make the connection between learning outcomes and organisational improvement.

Our recommendation:
Share relevant benefits with key decision–makers

Outsourcing your training needs to a skills development partner that has their programmes aligned to Category B of the Skills Development matrix can assist in recognising your employees' salaries as part of the 'cost' of training, thereby freeing up cash flow to invest in further training.

DIFFICULTIES IN DELIVERING SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

1

Problem:
Resource constraints

A recurring theme is the challenge of limited resources, which affects everything from budget constraints for implementing comprehensive training programmes to the availability of training materials and skilled trainers. This includes challenges in sourcing vendors and managing the cost-quality balance of training.
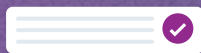
Our recommendation:
Budget management and strategic partnership

Finding a skills development partner who can work within budget to provide scalable, industry-aligned learning content through online learning will go a long way toward managing resource constraints. Robust mechanisms for measuring the impact of training are particularly beneficial, too, as they help organisations track the return on their investment in skills development.

2

Problem:
Employee engagement

Many respondents highlighted difficulties in generating employee interest and motivation in their own skills development, including attending courses they have been registered for. Issues such as lack of motivation, time constraints, requirements to be out of office, and the perceived irrelevance of the training to their direct roles make engaging in skills development with employees an uphill battle.

Our recommendation:
Make learning more accessible

Part of developing a learning culture means creating enough space for employees to learn, digest their learning, and apply it in real-time—as well as providing both financial and intrinsic rewards for learning (a sense of achievement and feeling valued). This empowers employees and removes potential grudges toward ongoing learning. Understanding the value proposition for the learner and getting their buy-in for why they should take a specific course is also key.

3

Problem:
Technological and industry changes

Staying current requires continuous updates to training content and methods, which can be challenging to manage within the constraints of existing budgets and resources. Updating training content and methods to ensure relevance and effectiveness also involves adapting to virtual and self-led learning initiatives, which have become more prominent in recent years.

Our recommendation:
Build resilience and foster adaptability

In fast-moving times, it's essential that employees are coached into developing a more adaptable and resilient mindset, and that means leaning into the concept of 'learning to learn.' Equally important, transparency, open communication, and training will boost employees' confidence in unfamiliar tech and new developments in their field, making them more likely to embrace change.

The Latest Developments in Local L&D

THE SKILLS L&D PROFESSIONALS FEEL ARE A PRIORITY

1 Technology & digital literacy

Many responses highlighted the importance of skills related to technology and digital platforms, including AI (Artificial Intelligence), digital communication channels, and specific software like D365, PowerApps, and MS Excel. This reflects a real need for employees to be able to use digital tools effectively and efficiently in performing their roles.

2 Leadership & management skills

Leadership skills, including project and people management, were frequently mentioned. These skills are critically important to enhance leaders' ability to manage teams effectively, make strategic decisions, and lead organisations through change both internally and from the external environment.

3 Soft skills

Soft skills such as communication, active listening, empathy, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution are non-negotiable in the modern workplace. Considering the shift to hybrid working, rapid technology adoption and domestic as well as global pressures, the 'human' touch is critical.

4 Adaptability & resilience

Being adaptable, resilient, and self-aware were highlighted as priorities in our survey findings. These competencies enable employees to effectively handle change, uncertainty, and challenges, which are increasingly common in an increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) environment.

5

2. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK L&D PROFESSIONALS FOLLOW

1 Needs analysis & skills audits

Many respondents emphasise the importance of conducting thorough needs analyses and skills audits to identify specific training needs within departments. This involves analysing current skills, identifying gaps, and understanding each team's unique requirements to tailor programmes accordingly.

2 Stakeholder engagement

Engaging with key stakeholders, including department heads, HR, and even employees, is essential, according to our survey results. This engagement helps L&D professionals understand departmental goals and integrate their input into the learning process to ensure that training aligns with their needs.

3 Strategic alignment

There is a strong focus on aligning training programmes with the organisation's broader strategic objectives. This includes linking skills development to the company's vision, mission, and overall HR initiatives, ensuring that training supports organisational goals and enhances its strategic direction.

4 Customised training plans

Respondents mentioned the development of tailored training content and curricula that address the specific needs of each department or team is a top priority. This might involve customising courses based on job specifications or creating department-specific learning plans approved by management.

5 Continuous feedback & adjustment

Continuous monitoring of training effectiveness and regular feedback from participants is essential for adjusting programmes as needed. This includes performance reviews and encouraging cross-functional collaboration to ensure the ongoing relevance and effectiveness of the training.

Aligning Skills Training With Business Needs

These themes highlight the importance of a targeted and responsive approach to skills development. They suggest that L&D initiatives could benefit from offering customisable modules and tools for conducting skills audits and needs assessments, along with mechanisms for ongoing feedback and adaptation.

These are our recommended steps to get started:
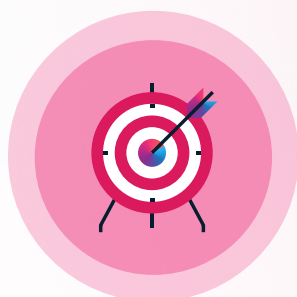
1 **Define your goals:** Whether it's expanding the knowledge base of your workforce or improving employee engagement, aligning skills development programmes with the specific needs of different departments and the business as a whole is key to maximising effectiveness.
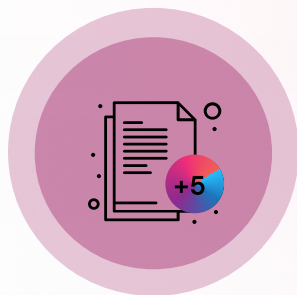
2 **Assess skill gaps:** You can do this by monitoring how well employees perform against the defined goals. The best training needs analyses include organisational, occupational, and individual assessments.

3 **Set training objectives:** Determine what employees will gain, how they'll demonstrate what they've learned, and how this will be measured. Clear objectives are a prerequisite for clear progress.
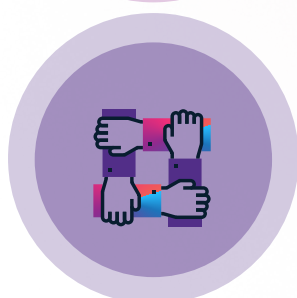
4 **Deliver the right training:** Your training initiatives should cater to company, team, and individual needs. Certified courses in practical and workplace–applicable content—delivered with a humanised approach and strong community support—create the best results.

5 **Track learning outcomes:** Ask employees to document what they have gained and identify where additional training is required. This can be through informal 1:1s with managers or through 'knowledge management', where employees record their learning outcomes and present their new knowledge to others. Some courses integrate learning outcomes reports as a part of the package to make it easier to measure your ROI.

Is competency-based skills training about to have its day?

As training becomes more flexible, focused, relevant, and digital, more employees will start to regard a vibrant learning culture as a key part of what makes a company a great place to work at.

Yet, as is evident from our survey, there are still challenges ahead. Four things stand out: The need for L&D professionals to have a seat at the business strategic-planning table; the alignment of skills training with business goals; getting those still reluctant to upskill to embrace continuous learning; and for organisations to partner with skills-based providers that can meet them with the skills they need.

Ready to make competency-based skills programmes a part of your organisation?

MasterStart creates, builds, and delivers scalable and innovative learning solutions for forward-thinking businesses that want more than just another educational programme. Delivered 100% online and underpinned by our unique 'connect.learn.work' model, our courses can be customised or contextualised to meet your desired outcomes.

Foster confidence, competence, curiosity, and character in your employees.

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