

Empowering Our Employees to Embrace Self-Directed Learning



To make employees future-fit, upskilling is an essential way to ensure that employees have the right tools with which to face the next decade. To survive in the marketplace, we will need teams that are motivated to learn and evolve.

American businessman Alvin Toffler [famously said](#), “*The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.*”

For our employees to be leaders in their fields who can keep up with the trends and developments in their subject

areas, we’d need to help create a culture of self-directed learning (SDL).

But isn’t upskilling the responsibility of the organization? We believe it goes both ways: Employees need to make self-directed learning a priority for themselves, but employers and managers also have a role to play in facilitating this.

In this article we will explain the concept of self-directed learning, discuss the challenges and benefits, and give some helpful tips on how we can provide the best environment for our teams.

The concept of self-directed learning explained



With SDL, the responsibility of learning is transferred from the instructor to the learner. This gives the learner the opportunity to make key decisions about their own process and progress.

The learner, or employee, gets to direct their learning as they see fit. Rather than being told what to study and when to study it, the employee gets to attain deep learning by applying themselves to the topic at hand.

As managers and company leaders, we ought to realize that when it comes to SDL, it's always best when the employee gets to exercise their own choices. Some of the most important principles in successful SDL programmes are as follows:

- Learners should have a desire for lifelong learning
- SDL programmes should be tailored to the individual's situation and maturity
- It's always good to link upskilling to the personal study motivations of the learner
- The best SDL programmes are multi-sensorial i.e. text, videos, audio, and even face to face

Challenges for employees



There are so many misconceptions about how adults do SDL. It is a common idea that people have to close themselves in a quiet room for days at a time. There is a thought that it is a lonely and gruelling process. The reality should be, and often is, quite different. Modern SDL is fluid and dynamic. The learning preferences of employees are taken into account. While this may be true, we can't forget the few genuine **challenges that certain learners face:**

Some learners just can't do it alone:

This is an unavoidable fact. For some learners, it's not just about having the

freedom to work at their own pace. Some adult learners genuinely require the guidance of tutors to grasp certain concepts.

When too much freedom is not a good thing:

It all comes down to personality types and learning styles. Sometimes too much freedom can be counter-productive. By giving learners a blank page on which to plot their own course, some learners freeze and need direction.

Unintended lessons learned:

It's quite possible that a self-directed learner can receive material in the way it was not intended. With no professional to guide the thinking of the individual, unintended lessons could come to the surface. This is common in diverse teams, where people from different backgrounds can take different meanings from the same text.

Benefits for employees



As much as there are challenges, we should also focus on the many benefits of SDL:

Honing in on special interests:

When left to their own devices, students will gravitate to what truly interests them. It should come as no surprise that people learn best when they are invested in the subject.

Accounting for each learner's specific needs:

Learning comes in different styles and speeds. Although many of us took our first lessons in a group classroom, this is not to say that every student picks up knowledge in exactly the same way when they are in the same room. SDL allows learners to learn in a way that feels right to them.

Deep learning is better than superficial learning:

When a learner is in charge of their own learning journey, the lessons tend to be deep and long-lasting in nature. This is because they will have arrived at this knowledge on their own accord. Superficial learning is similar to rote memorization, which is not learning at all.

Ways to empower employees to pursue their own upskilling



As we've said, the employer has a role to play in providing a good environment in which the employees can work:

1. Foster a thirst for knowledge

This could look different in most companies. But the key is to foster a spirit and an excitement for learning. That spirit starts at the top, with engaged and solution-seeking leader at the forefront.

2. Have good SDL Resources

One of the key requirements of good SDL is a well-stocked and well-maintained resource library. We could lose learners if we make the gathering of knowledge too difficult and challenging.

3. Peer-to-Peer training works

[According to the Harvard Business Review](#), high-performing teams hold themselves accountable. Peer-to-peer training can be enjoyable and can strengthen team culture and solidity all at once.

4. Goal Setting around SDL

Goal-setting encourages accountability and gives teams incentives to succeed. With SDL, employees can even choose their own goals depending on their values and aims. As long as managers are aware of these goals and can keep an eye on progress, there is nothing wrong with setting your own goals.

5. Get the most out of technology

Covid-19 has brought technological adoption forward in a remarkable way. By using it well, we can create SDL programmes that are efficient, inexpensive, and scalable. Online learning and remote working have been two of the biggest emerging trends this year, there is no reason they cannot be combined to create a healthy SDL programme.

Conclusion

When done well, SDL can unlock many powerful results. We should seek these results by giving employees time to pursue their SDL goals. We should normalize setting aside SDL periods where employees can upskill for the betterment of themselves and the company.

We should not be afraid to show unwavering support for SDL culture by allowing mistakes, creating room for different styles, and yes, giving away precious company time for this activity.

Top management support is crucial. A supportive environment allows learners to feel comfortable and encouraged to succeed. The philosopher Mortimer Adler [said it best](#), *“The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as long as we live.”*

