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Laura
Overton

5 new thinking
habits for a

Smarter Stronger L&D

Contents

Emerging stronger from disruption	3
Thinking about thinking	5
Thinking about value - Business First	8
Thinking about role - Empathetic Explorer	10
Thinking about others - Interdependence	12
Thinking about timescales - Act Now	14
Thinking about risk and innovation - Move On	17
Reflection: What thinking habits do I need to shift?	19
Next steps: Reinforcing habits	20
Appendix: Digging deeper with the Emergent Experts	21

Acknowledgements: The *Learning Uncut - Emergent* podcast hosts, Michelle Ockers, Shannon Tipton and Laura Overton, would like to thank all the L&D guests - our Emergent Experts - who took part in the podcast series.

Emerging stronger from disruption

Let's be honest. L&D professionals have long had to cope with disruption. Shifting priorities, new demands, budget cuts, and changing technologies can all regularly interrupt our careful plans.

However, throughout 2020 we saw the level of disruption climb to new heights.

In the middle of that year L&D leaders found themselves in a situation that could either make or break them. Many teams suddenly faced new demands at the cutting edge of business-critical change, while others found themselves increasingly side-lined or scrambling to keep up.

So: what does it take for L&D to emerge stronger from disruption?

Michelle Ockers (founder of *Learning Uncut*), Shannon Tipton (founder of *Learning Rebels*) and Laura Overton (independent industry analyst) explored this very question in *Learning Uncut - Emergent*, a podcast series bringing together leading L&D practitioners and experts in a global conversation.

As hosts of the *Learning Uncut - Emergent* series, we were fortunate to gain insight from many of the top L&D experts across the world. The podcast series was packed full of excellent advice, strong recommendations, and food for thought, as we discussed:

- What can L&D do right now that is most useful?
- How can we anchor ourselves in business reality?
- What does L&D need to do to prepare for an emerging future?



You'll find a full list of the *Learning Uncut - Emergent* podcast episodes and guests in the **Appendix** on page 21.

5 new thinking habits for a smarter, stronger L&D

Throughout the podcast series, we found that our L&D experts (we like to think of them as our Emergent Experts!) consistently challenged our internal narrative. The conversations shone a light on the inner dialogue that L&D professionals have about our thinking and our problem-solving process. And the tactics our experts recommended reflected that.

At the end of each episode, we asked our guests to prioritise their recommendations, honing in on the practical steps L&D practitioners can take to emerge stronger from disruption.

This eBook explores how the Emergent Expert's insightful recommendations can help us shift our inner narrative to create the foundations for a smarter, stronger L&D.



We will highlight examples of the practical insights from each of our podcast contributors throughout this eBook.

Check out the **Appendix** at the back of the eBook to find out more about each Emergent Expert and listen to their original interview.

Thinking about thinking

“

Challenge your assumptions. Think differently. Stand on your head.



Anne Bartlett-Bragg

Our thinking processes influence our decisions, our feelings, and our actions. To emerge stronger, it's time to throw a spotlight on our thinking habits.

A definition

In this eBook we define **thinking habits** as the persistent perspectives and settled tendencies that influence the way we think about our professional world of L&D work.



Repetition reinforces habit

Back in 1903², the American Journal of Psychology originally defined a habit from a psychological standpoint as a *fixed way of thinking, willing, or feeling gained through previous repetition of a mental experience.*

Repetition reinforces habits. What we repeatedly do, are rewarded for, or are asked to do reinforces L&D thinking habits.

What's more, our keystone thinking habits influence how we respond professionally in many other areas. These thinking habits shape the perception of our value, our role, our contribution, our timescales, and our approach to risk and innovation.

Our keystone thinking habits outline the perspectives that influence the actions we take.

²Andrews, B. R. (1903). "Habit". *The American Journal of Psychology*.

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Examples of keystone thinking habits in L&D

1. **Learning First** - 'my value lies in solving learning problems'
2. **Knowledgeable Expert** - 'I know the best way forward'
3. **Independence** - 'I rely solely on my expertise'
4. **Act For Future** - 'my timescales are driven by longer term capability goals'
5. **Hold On** - 'my approach to future risk/ innovation is shaped by my past successes'

These keystone thinking habits influence our decisions relating to technology, and the way we respond to opportunity and challenge. They influence our behaviours, tactics, and go-to solutions. They influence what we celebrate and what we reject.

Examining our thinking habits

As L&D professionals, we take great joy in exploring the role of cognition and thinking in supporting behaviour change. Metacognition (the awareness and understanding of our own thought process) is increasingly becoming part of an educator's DNA.

But how often do we examine our own thinking habits?

In the past we didn't need to; they have served us well. However, whilst these habits in themselves are not right or wrong, some may serve us better than others in times of fundamental change.

Many of the Emergent Experts we talked with felt that it was essential for us to question the status quo of persistent L&D perspectives.

To focus our thinking, we asked them what we need to stop, start, and accelerate in order for L&D to emerge stronger from disruption.

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By analysing their stop, start, and accelerate recommendations, we identified five alternative thinking habits to help L&D emerge stronger.

1. **Business First** - 'my value lies in solving business problems'
2. **Empathetic Explorer** - 'my role involves prioritising proactive listening and understanding'
3. **Interdependence** - 'my contribution is enhanced by bringing the outside in'
4. **Act Now** - 'my timescales recognise the importance of embracing speed and agility'
5. **Move On** - 'my approach to risk and innovation is defined by a willingness to let go'

To further explore this, let's dig in a little deeper.

Thinking about value - Business First

For L&D professionals to emerge stronger from disruption, the thinking habit **Business First** is one of the most powerful to develop. This thinking habit means we define our value in terms of business solutions.

It challenges the **Learning First** thinking habit that has been reinforced over decades. The **Learning First** thinking habit develops when we define value by our learning solutions, and the ability to respond to requests with proven known interventions. It thrives in a world of courses, content, and technology to manage the process and improve efficiency. This thinking is reinforced with positive feelings when we are asked for a course and we can meet that request. This thinking habit also puts us under pressure when faced with the fact that our go-to solutions are no longer viable.

Throughout the podcast series, our L&D experts consistently challenged listeners from every angle to shift their thinking from **Learning First** to **Business First**. Learning professionals who adopt this thinking habit are driven by how to best apply their talents to solve business problems. They think about their value in terms of how they address critical business challenges and tasks.

What did our Emergent Experts recommend we do to successfully shift towards a **Business First** thinking habit?

1. Develop your business acumen

“

Accelerate developing commercial acumen – to help you make a call on what is important to executives and what is not.

Arun Pradhan



2. Join the business conversation

“

Start becoming more strategic – be in on the business conversations, build those relationships at more senior levels, claim [draw up] that seat at the table.

**Brandon Carson /
Barbara Thompson**



3. Work on your L&D business model

“

Start making a deliberate choice to change your L&D business model to create sustainable change and better business value.

Jos Arets



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“

Start seeing your department as a business and [emerge stronger by] accelerating the diversification of your own offering.

Seb Tindall



“

Stop being afraid that new business models and services [that look beyond the course] cannibalises your old business model.

Katharina Krentz



4. Challenge L&D view on value add

“

Stop doing stuff – the processes, content, programs – that don't add business value!

**Simon Gibson /
Sarah Lindsell**



“

Stop preserving the status quo where our go-to is designing content using traditional methods.

Krystal Irving



The **Business First** habit helps L&D emerge stronger by prioritising what really matters to business. It releases us to confidently ask new questions and find alternative ways of driving business value when it is needed the most.

Thinking about role - Empathetic Explorer

The **Empathetic Explorer** thinking habit involves prioritising proactive listening that develops an understanding of the needs of individuals and their context of work. It uses that understanding to balance the priorities of both the individual and the business.

The alternative thinking habit of **Knowledgeable Expert** has been reinforced over time by L&D's focus on instructional design models and teaching techniques and our preoccupation with learning styles. It is positively reinforced by great feedback, ratings, and happy sheet scores, but it can also result in a commitment to maintaining the status quo – which may hold us back during times of disruption.

Throughout the podcast series, our L&D experts consistently challenged listeners to shift their thinking about their role as a **Knowledgeable Expert** to thinking of themselves as an **Empathetic Explorer**.

What did our Emergent Experts recommend that we do, to successfully shift towards the **Empathetic Explorer** thinking habit?

Go deep

“

Start really building empathy and deep understanding ... think deeply because we have got to address fears, challenges, mental health.

Anne Bartlett-Bragg



“

Accelerate listening and engaging. Listen to what is really going on. Take the polls, be at the heart of what is going on inside the organisation at the moment.

Nigel Paine



“

Start asking what are the critical tasks that somebody is performing? Look at the difference between someone doing that task well and somebody who isn't. Use that to help people grow and develop.

Geraldine Voost



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Make a stronger connection

“

Start understanding people's motivations. What will trigger them? What will prompt them to act or to do something? Who are the people they care most about?

Rachel Happe



“

Accelerate listening exercises to uncover the belief systems that people are holding and how they are already developing themselves. This understanding creates a clear narrative to help us join conversation rather than being on the back foot.

Barbara Thompson



Be willing to learn from the organisation

“

Start embracing the flexibility that our workers have showed over the last year– leverage new tools and cross functional working to build a greater sense of the learning culture that is emerging.

Shai Desai



“

Start looking at what we've learned from this experience and incorporate that into a future learning model. Stop being myopic about this is the only way because this is the way we used to do it.

David Shirley



Challenge your assumptions

“

Stop trying to be right all the time and have all the answers.

Brian Murphy



The **Empathetic Explorer** thinking habit helps L&D emerge stronger by prioritising the requirements of the individuals in the workplace. It's a habit that helps us spot opportunities to stay relevant, listen, learn, and continually adapt.



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Thinking about others - Interdependence

The **Interdependence** thinking habit continually focuses on how to bring the outside in. It celebrates the opportunity to break down thinking silos to co-create business value with others.

Conversely, the **Independent** thinking habit has traditionally been reinforced by the siloed approach of internal departments. Learning leaders have relied solely on bringing their own expertise to the challenge ahead. The lone L&D hero who has implemented a new academy or initiative is rightly celebrated, both internally and externally. However, in times of disruption, pursuing a purely independent thinking habit may limit chances for finding alternative ways to contribute to organisational success.

Disruption has accelerated an alternative thinking habit of **Interdependence**, which persistently seeks opportunities for new types of partnership and alternative inputs from evidence, from data, and from others working on similar or the same business problems.

What behaviours did our Emergent Experts recommend that we do to successfully shift towards an **Interdependence** thinking habit?

Harness collective wisdom

“

Right now, *start looking* beyond L&D ... see how other industries operate, how other successful verticals have pivoted.

Lori Niles-Hofmann



“

Stop pursuing the wisdom of 1. Once we tap into collective wisdom, everyone feels listened to and that they are playing a part in sculpting the future.

Paul Dunn



“

Stop over-engineering, theorising, inventing new models, new ways. Here's the latest news - everything's invented. Let's just focus on what's already there.

Dave Buglass



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Turn data into insights and insight into action

“
Start, and continue, to be evidence-based practitioners.

Julian Stodd 

“
Stop thinking that data comes only from what we do. Data is something that others use in the organisation.

Kevin Yates 

“
Accelerate exploring the technologies that enable the analyses of different types of data.

Trish Uhl 

Encourage interdependence in others

“
Start making connections. L&D should be in the connecting business. Connecting people, connecting ideas together, is making those connections that maybe other people don't have time to make.

Harold Jarcho 

The **Interdependence** thinking habit helps L&D emerge stronger by surfacing new opportunities to create business value. It does this by welcoming alternative perspectives and embracing the opportunity to co-create value by working creatively together with internal and external partners. 

Thinking about timescales - Act Now

Those primarily operating with an **Act Now** thinking habit will explore how they can respond rapidly to changing business requirements with both agility and speed.

Traditionally, learning professionals have been engaged in long-term change projects, and leadership initiatives. As a result, an **Act for Future** thinking habit has formed and is reinforced when quality programs repeatedly take months to start and longer to evaluate. It is unsurprising that our go-to perspective is that quality takes time. This is not wrong but is dangerous when it causes L&D to be left behind when business circumstances overtake schedules.

Our Emergent Experts instead confirmed that an **Act Now** thinking habit, with agility, flexibility, and speed, is critical to business success. L&D needs to believe that acting with speed will not compromise results but in certain circumstances improve them. **Act Now** is about balancing the opportunity to respond and iterate but not ignoring the power of reflection and slow thinking that has also served us well.

What did our Emergent Experts recommend that we do to successfully shift towards an **Act Now** thinking habit?

Decide!

“

Stop being afraid of failing and making decisions so slowly – any decision is better than a decision that takes a long time.

Dani Johnson



“

Stop searching for perfection ... good enough is good enough. And that releases a whole load of pressure in the system just to create some space.

Simon Brown



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Act

“

Just *start* doing something, because not doing something is, in fact, a decision.

Kevin Thorn



“

Start creating a minimum viable product that you're just getting out and testing in the market. And then, based on feedback and impact and data, you'll then change that product to make more of an impact.

Arun Pradhan



Prepare others for action

“

Start thinking about contributing to the future. The world can change at an instant and we need to be preparing people for whatever those changes are.

Rachel Hutchinson



“

Stop looking for quick fixes for longer-term problems like the skills gap. We can save time by embracing a more comprehensive outlook that avoids duplication of effort.

Simon Tindall



Mitigate risk

“

Start thinking about the business risk of not doing [an action] now and of waiting to the end to evaluate. Start looking at data early and often to help mitigate risk.

Trish Uhl



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Stop for a moment

“

Accelerate reflection. Before we accelerate, we need to stop and reflect. So, stop and ask 'what was the result of our experiment? What have we learned from it?' And then act.

Stella Collins



“

Stop being distracted – know when to turn off the tech channels & release innovation.

Kevin Thorn



An **Act Now** thinking habit helps L&D emerge stronger by responding faster to changing business needs. It does not replace an **Act for the Future** perspective but complements it. Expecting to work smarter at speed can release innovative and responsive solutions for both long-term and short-term gain.



Thinking about risk and innovation - Move On

A **Move On** thinking habit acknowledges the usefulness of experience but will let it go to embrace alternative models, new services, and new curiosity about the future.

Conversely, a **Hold On** thinking habit is where an approach to future opportunities is shaped by the success of the past. This thinking habit is reinforced by company expectations following success with tools, technologies, and approaches. This thinking habit works well when faced with similar problems to the past. However, it might mean we miss new opportunities that are presented to us in times of disruption.

For some, disruption has kick-started a **Move On** thinking habit as it has forced rewarding new learning approaches to new challenges. For others, this thinking habit prepared them for disruption, as they had already established approaches for experimenting and flexing in order to drive better business value.

What behaviours did our Emergent Experts recommend that we do to successfully reinforce a **Move On** thinking habit?

Rethink reliance on traditional approaches

“
Start taking a long hard look at all your content ... retire the last 30%. If it's not being used, get rid of it.

Sarah Lindsell 

“
Stop offering training for everything – open up and give the people tools and methods where they can learn what they need at the moment they need it.

Katharina Krentz 

“
Stop thinking technology first.

Lori Niles-Hofmann 

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Relinquish control

“
Start creating new spaces for people to learn through pilots and experiments.

John Stepper 

“
Start purposefully enabling learning in the flow of the work, so people can learn iteratively and in the moment. Like we do in our home and in our personal lives.

Krystal Irving 

“
Accelerate enabling rather than holding onto control and remaining in the middle. It's going to increase your capacity and ability to make an impact, no end.

Michelle Ockers 

Transfer ownership

“
Accelerate that breakdown of hierarchy ... put the decision-making in the power of the people doing the work. That's where we see massive gains in productivity and positive outcomes.

Krystal Irving 



A **Move On** thinking habit helps L&D professionals emerge stronger by releasing them from the past so they can embrace the future.

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Reflection: What thinking habits do I need to shift?

There is never a bad time to challenge our thinking habits. They influence our feelings, our behaviour, our results, and our reputation.

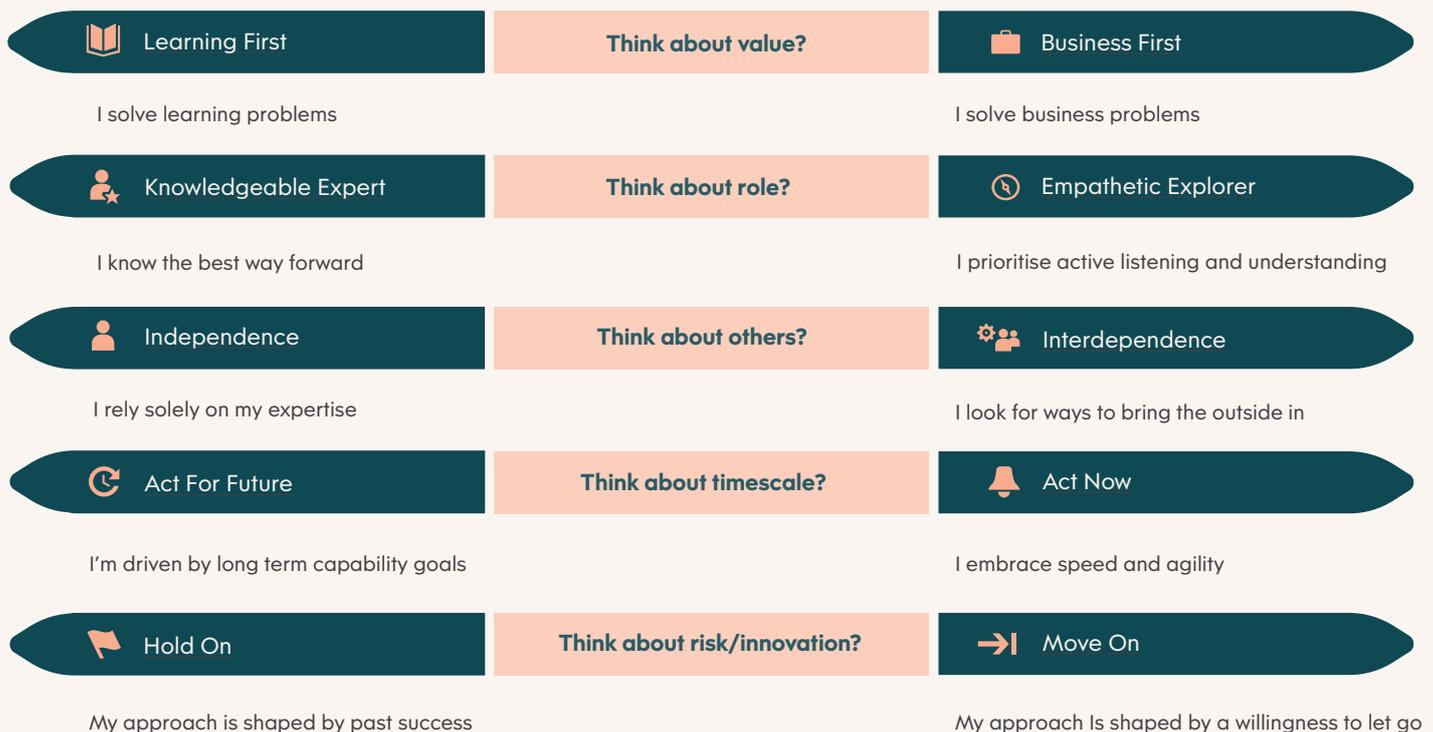
In this eBook we have not labelled any thinking habits as bad. Instead, we have explored ideas to help us examine our go-to approaches, recognising that some will equip us better to harness disruption to improve business value and emerge stronger.

Typically, which of these thinking habits resonate most with you?

Think of a situation where you have made a decision or judgment call. Plot the habits that you think influenced your decisions, feelings and actions on the thinking habit continuum below.

What habits have shaped your past decisions?

How did you...



Repeat this exercise using another decision or judgment call that you made.

- Are you spotting any patterns?
- Which of these thinking habits do you want to shift over the coming months?
- What difference would this shift in thinking habit make to your decisions?
- What actions will you take to help you reinforce this thinking habit?

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Next steps: Reinforcing habits

We form our thinking habits through repetition and reinforcement. Behaviour can influence them.

As L&D professionals, the position on the continuum of our go-to thinking habits will determine how ready we are to take advantage of new opportunities and approaches that disruption throws at us.

How we think about the value that L&D brings, our role, working with others, our timescales, and attitude to risk and innovation determines the decisions we make and the lenses we use to make sense of the problem.

The Emergent Experts we conversed with throughout the podcast series discussed many tactics and approaches that have both prepared L&D teams for change and helped them adapt quickly. We believe these are the behaviours that will reinforce new thinking habits to serve you long into the future.

“***Start by being really bold ... do something, suggest something different ... accelerate your experiments and relationships with the business.***”



Sarah Lindsell

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Appendix: Digging deeper with the Emergent Experts

Connect with the Emergent hosts:

- Michelle Ockers <https://www.linkedin.com/in/michelleockers/>
- Shannon Tipton <https://www.linkedin.com/in/shannontipton/>
- Laura Overton <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lauraoverton/>

Listen to their introduction to the *Learning Uncut - Emergent* podcast series <https://bit.ly/01MOES> and wrap up observations <http://bit.ly/EP18MOES>

To dig deeper into:	With Emergent Experts:	Go here for contacts, conversation, and resources:
The new business context for learning	Brandon Carson (USA) Director of Learning, Delta Airlines Paul Dunn (Singapore) Chairman, B1G1	https://bit.ly/02LOES
How L&D can create business value	Jos Arets (Netherlands) Co-Founder at 702010 Institute Geraldine Voost (Belgium) Global L&D Manager, Bronkhorst High-Tech	https://bit.ly/03MOES
Building creativity and innovation into the future of work	Arun Pradhan (Australia) Co-Founder at ModelThinkers; Founder of Learn2Learn app Kevin Thorn (USA) Chief NuggetHead, NuggetHead Studioz	https://bit.ly/04STES
Building L&D confidence and courage	Sarah Lindsell (UK) Global Chief Learning Strategist, PwC Rachel Hutchinson (USA) Director of Learning and Development, Hilti	https://bit.ly/05LOES
The social currency of community	Julian Stodd (UK) Founder of SeaSalt Learning Rachel Happe (USA) Principal & Co-Founder, The Community Roundtable	https://bit.ly/06STES
How to make the business case for change	Lori Niles-Hofmann (Canada) Senior EdTech Transformation Strategist, NilesNolen Dave Buglass (UK) Director, Learning Services Operations, PwC	https://bit.ly/07LOES
The future of physical spaces for work and learning	Anne Bartlett-Bragg (Spain) Founder & Managing Director of Ripple Effect Group David Shirley (Australia) Partner, Flex We Are	https://bit.ly/08MOES
Accelerating learning from failure	Brian Murphy (UK) Global Head of Learning & Enterprise Capabilities at AstraZeneca Jeff Mariola (USA) Chief Development Officer at Mariola Unlimited	https://bit.ly/09STES

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To dig deeper into:	With Emergent Experts:	Go here for contacts, conversation, and resources:
Culture and curiosity	<p>Nigel Paine (UK) Co-Presenter of Learning Now TV</p> <p>Simon Brown (UK) Chief Learning Officer, Novartis</p>	<p>https://bit.ly/10LOES</p>
Working out loud	<p>John Stepper (Canada) Founder, Working Out Loud</p> <p>Katharina Krentz (Germany) Corporate HR Transformation Team & Collaboration Crew, Bosch</p>	<p>https://bit.ly/11MOES</p>
Connecting the dots on data	<p>Trish Urhl (USA) Consultant, Owl's Ledge</p> <p>Kevin M Yates (USA) Performance Detective</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/EP12MOES</p>
New priorities for L&D	<p>Michelle Ockers (Australia) Organisational Learning Strategist, Learning Uncut</p> <p>Seb Tindall (UK) Head of Learning and Development, Vitality</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/13LOES</p>
The rise of technology and L&D	<p>Dani Johnson (USA) Co-Founder & Principal Analyst, RedThread Research</p> <p>Stella Collins (Belgium) Co-Founder & Chief Learning Officer, Stellar Labs</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/EP14STES</p>
Smarter working relationships	<p>Barbara Thompson (UK) Learning Transformation Specialist, Network Rail</p> <p>Shai Desai (Australia) Co-Founder, Learning Plan and ModelThinkers</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/15LOES</p>
The skills economy for L&D	<p>Simon Tindall (UK) Head of Skills and Innovation, The Open University</p> <p>Simon Gibson (UK) Advisory Board Member, The Learning and Performance Institute</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/16STES</p>
New structures for L&D teams	<p>Krystal Irving (Australia) Product Area Lead, Learning Strategy, Culture, Capability and Technology, ANZ</p> <p>Harold Jarcho (Canada) Principal, Jarcho Consulting</p>	<p>http://bit.ly/17MOES</p>



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