Humanizing Learning

How our uniquely human characteristics can provide the ultimate competitive advantage

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Introduction

Embracing technology versus feeding the fear.

Since the beginning of 2014, searches on the term “digital transformation” have increased by about 900%.

This focus on digital transformation has created a lot of panic. Not only are organizations faced with figuring out which technologies need to be implemented, they also need to determine the best course of action for re-skilling the workforce in an environment based on those technologies.

Digital transformation also gives voice to fears about AI, automation, and the rise of robot overlords. Robots can do many rote tasks historically done by humans, much more efficiently. We consistently run across articles that delineate the jobs that will be outsourced to robots (our favorite is www.willrobotstakemyjob.com). Instead of embracing technology and how it can help us, the articles feed the fear it will replace us.

What bothers us most about these discussions is that they reduce employees, and humans in general, to a supporting role. Nowhere is this more blatant than in a recent study conducted by Korn Ferry, that found that the majority of CEOs see more value in their technology than in their workforce.¹

Somewhere in all of this discussion, we have forgotten to focus on our differentiators: those uniquely human traits that put us on top of the food chain in the first place.

We find it interesting that neither discussion takes into account the uniquely human characteristics that got us this far in the first place.

More evolved organizations have a fundamentally different –human–focused – mindset. Our research shows that forward-thinking learning leaders are leveraging the characteristics that make us human to upskill their workforces faster and make them more competitive.


Source: Google Trend Data
This report provides some detail into what we have found so far. We’ll first address the uniquely human traits that impact business outcomes. We’ll then dive into each trait, presenting each in the context of organizations and transformation, providing examples of organizations that leverage them well, and giving you some questions to think about in leveraging them in your organization.

The Traits

The first step in this journey was to figure out what, exactly, are uniquely human traits? This research took us from anthropology and evolution to religion and futurism. We read academic journals, think-tank findings, scriptural texts, and theories some call ‘crazy’.

While there isn’t one definitive, authoritative list of uniquely human characteristics, a general consensus around four traits emerged (although opposable thumbs are a bonus for sure, research indicates that there are other, perhaps more important traits), all related to how we gather and use knowledge to develop individually and as a society:

**Envisioning a different future**

Humans can imagine things that never have been, and because of this, we are better able to change our circumstances. What’s more, we have a greater ability to innovate and create. While chimps react to their environments and robots iterate, humans can dream futures for themselves that currently don’t exist and then work toward them.

**Storytelling**

Humans tell stories. We have developed “episodic memory,” which allows us to recall not only the dates and events, but also how we feel about and what we learned from those events. Stories provide context and depth and can motivate and encourage in ways that data alone does not.

**Collaborating**

While other animals collaborate to survive, humans collaborate far longer than it is beneficial to them personally. In common with other animals, we are devoted to ensuring the survival of the next generation. Unlike other animals, we have an innate desire to share information, help our fellow humans, and work together toward something greater, even if we personally won’t see the benefit.

**Using tools**

While other species use tools, humans perfect the art. We use tools to change our physical and our mental spaces, and to help us learn and create things that don’t physically exist. We also use the first 3 traits to create tools that meet needs we didn’t even know we had.
Research tells us that these traits have helped us develop as a species, and that they also help us to develop as individuals. It follows that any organization leveraging these characteristics in its employees will affect its ability to grow, develop, and compete.

The Elements

Armed with an understanding of the current research on this topic, we conducted a survey to determine if organizations that effectively use the four human traits (envisioning a different future, storytelling and context, collaborating, and using tools) in their learning and development efforts perform better.

To that end, we identified “elements” to assess the four traits. We looked at the impact each element had on two measures: financial performance compared to expectations and organizational nimbleness (a combination of the organization’s innovativeness, responsiveness to the market, and organizational curiosity). All together, we measured 31 different elements in our survey.

So, what’s important?

Of the 31 elements in our survey, only eight had an impact on organizational performance, as shown in Image 3 (elements impacting financial performance are bolded and those affecting organizational nimbleness are italicized).

Of particular note, only one item, Builds opportunities for development into work had an impact on both financial performance and nimbleness, underscoring the critical importance of this activity.

ELEMENTS AFFECTING FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE

**Image 3: Elements impacting financial performance and nimbleness, by human trait**

- **Envisioning a different future**
  - Encourages employees to take smart risks
  - Prioritizes knowledge and skills to compete in the future
  - Uses data to determine necessary knowledge and skills

- **Storytelling**
  - Builds opportunities for development into work
  - Clearly articulates what development employees can expect

- **Collaborating**
  - Helps employees build internal networks
  - Organizes to encourage problem-solving together
  - Shares successes and failures for learning purposes

- **Using Tools**
  - Learning tools
  - Tools adapted for learning

**KEY:**

**Bold** = direct impact on financial performance

**Italics** = impact on nimbleness

Source: RedThread Research
Three survey elements impacted financial outcomes (see bolded elements in Image 3). Building opportunities for development into work, sharing successes and failures, and organizing for problem-solving all have a direct impact on an organization’s financial outcomes.

Together, these three elements accounted for approximately 9% of the variability in the survey responses about financial performance. Granted, this is not a lot, but anything higher might have given us pause because financial performance is based on so many variables which are outside an organization’s complete control.

**ELEMENTS AFFECTING NIMBLENESS**

Seven survey elements impacted nimbleness (see italicized elements in Image , and accounted for approximately 61% of the variability in survey responses about nimbleness. Because organizations have more control over internal systems and processes that affect things like innovativeness, responsiveness to the market, and organizational curiosity, this makes sense. These elements help to make up the culture, attitudes, and consciousness that organizations have about development, and organizations are fully in control of leadership, managers, and individuals.

As mentioned above, only one survey element impacted both financial performance and innovativeness: builds opportunities for development into work. This aligns with other research we’ve seen (and conducted) and reinforces the importance of an holistic view of development – beyond the classroom – and to leverage the work itself for the learning (more on this later).

Before we move on to how most organizations are performing, a quick note: in this next section, we address the eight elements that fall under envisioning a different future, storytelling and context, and collaborating. We do not include data on tools, in part because the fact that an organization has a tool doesn’t tell us if how, or how well, it’s using that tool. It is generally the systems, processes, and culture of the organization that let them leverage tools for more success. That said, there are some general conclusions that can be drawn from the data, and we address tools in its own section later on.

**How are organizations doing on the eight critical elements?**

To get a sense of where organizations in general are performing, we wanted to understand what percentage of survey respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their organizations did these things. The results are shown in Image 4, with colors indicating the trait to which each element belongs.

**Image 4: Percentage of “agree/strongly agree” responses for the eight critical elements, entire survey population**

- Builds opportunities for development into work: 47%
- Organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving: 43%
- Prioritizes knowledge & skills to compete in the future: 42%
- Helps employees build internal networks: 42%
- Shares successes and failures for learning purposes: 40%
- Uses data to determine necessary knowledge and skills: 38%
- Encourages employees to take smart risks: 35%
- Clearly articulates what development employees can expect: 32%

Source: RedThread Research
What insights can we draw from this? Fewer than 50% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their organization is performing well on any element. In a way, this chart illustrates the hypothesis of this research perfectly: because we’re human, some of these things are going to happen. But we aren’t excelling at any of them, perhaps because we don’t explicitly focus on any of them.

We can also see correlations to conversations we’re hearing in cyberspace: The highest score, building opportunities for development into work, is being talked about a lot right now, so many organizations (and individuals) are able to recognize that it’s happening. We also know that prioritizing knowledge and skills to compete in the future, which also falls near the top, is a popular current topic: almost all organizations we’ve spoken to are worried about ensuring a skilled workforce in this time of incredible change.

Likewise, we can see some of the things at the lower end of the scale as constant discussions with no real answers in many organizations. For example: many are trying to figure out how to: use data to determine necessary knowledge and skills, clearly articulate what development employees can expect, and encourage employees to take smart risks.

We aren’t necessarily great at these elements, but they have an impact on business outcomes -- companies that prioritize getting better at each element will win.

The data gets even more interesting when we look at how organizations that performed in the top-third on financial and nimbleness measures – we call these organizations “evolved” – compare to low-performers (bottom third on those same measures). Survey respondents in more evolved organizations are at least 24% more likely to agree or strongly agree that their organizations working on the eight elements than those in less evolved organizations, as you can see in Image 5.

**Image 5: Comparing human traits in more- and less-evolved organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Trait</th>
<th>More evolved</th>
<th>Less evolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourages employees to take smart risks</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses data to determine necessary knowledge and skills</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prioritizes knowledge &amp; skills to compete in the future</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builds opportunities for development into work</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly articulates what development employees can expect</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps employees build internal networks</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares successes and failures for learning purposes</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RedThread Research
The largest gaps between evolved and less evolved organizations were builds opportunities for learning into work and organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving.

More evolved organizations appear to be at the forefront of two major movements in the employee development space: using work for learning and thinking about how organizations organize their employees differently. We’ll discuss both of these in more depth later.

While these charts may be enough for the data geeks, it’s not particularly useful without deeper discussion and context. In the following sections we will take each of the four (the three discussed here plus Tools) traits separately and provide a richer discussion about what it means for organizations today. We’ll also provide an example of a company that exemplifies the human trait in its learning practices. Finally, we’ll provide some points to think about as organizations try to adapt this data for their own use.

We’ll start with envisioning a different future.
“One of the key characteristics that makes us human appears to be that we can think about alternative futures and make deliberate choices accordingly. We are the only species on this planet with the foresight capable of deliberately plotting a path toward a desirable long-term future.”

Let’s start with the technical: humans possess “episodic memory,” a very detailed memory which records context to aid imagination. Episodic memory records the who, what, when, where, and why elements of information. It’s the collection of past personal experiences that occurred at a particular time and in a particular space.

While there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which other animals also have episodic memory, few scientists argue that animals can leverage this memory the way humans do. No other animal appears to have such elaborate personal memories as well as the ability to use memory to plan whole chains of actions in advance.

Envisioning a different future is what lets individuals — and organizations — move forward. Organizations that make a habit of envisioning a different future (by challenging the status quo, experimenting, and taking smart risks) can innovate and respond to the market more quickly.

In this research, three of the survey elements related to envisioning a different future had an impact on an organization’s ability to be nimble:

- Prioritizes knowledge and skills development for the future
- Encourages employees to take smart risks
- Uses data to determine necessary skills and knowledge

Let’s look at the numbers first.

The Elements

When we compare evolved and less-evolved organizations on their “agree” and “strongly agree” scores across the 3 elements, we get Image 6. Not surprisingly, evolved organizations vastly outscore his research, three of the survey elements related to envisioning a different future had an impact on an organization’s ability to be nimble:

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The Elements

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This gap is particularly stark for encourages employees to take smart risks. Significantly more evolved organizations encourage risk-taking. As there is generally larger reward associated with risk-taking, it seems obvious at first that organizations that take more risks will have better financial performance.

Yet there’s an equally large downside to taking risks, so there may be other things at play in organizations that take more risks than at first appears. Risk-taking also fosters learning, which lets organizations innovate and respond to market pressures more quickly.

Fewer than 15% of respondents in less-evolved organizations agree or strongly agree that they are encouraged to take risks. The story isn’t much better for either of the other two items: uses data to determine necessary knowledge and skills and prioritizes knowledge & skills to compete in the future.

**Prioritizes knowledge and skills to compete in the future**

It didn’t surprise us that prioritizing knowledge and skills to compete in the future (the first element under envisioning a different future) impacts business outcomes. Organizations are constantly striving to ensure an up-to-date workforce, and that has become even more important in recent years.

Why? Because we are past the time when the half-life of a workplace skill was 35 years. Then, people could reasonably expect to retire from their jobs with the same skills they learned in college.

Today, the half-life of a workplace skill is between 2.5 and 5 years. This means that employees need to upgrade their skills every ten years, often faster. As technology continues to disrupt industries, companies need workforces that can help them anticipate and respond to change. Organizations should constantly be monitoring the skills they have, the skills they need, and the gap in between.

While many organizations use competency models and assessments, it is difficult to keep them both accurate and relevant given that things change so rapidly. Which brings us to the second element under envisioning a different future.

**Uses data to determine necessary skills and knowledge**

The second element under Envisioning a Different Future is uses data to determine necessary knowledge and skills. HR teams – particularly L&D – are notorious for relying on intuition to determine priorities. Evolved organizations are making better use of data.

Data, measurement, and analytics are an ongoing struggle for L&D. Although it is slowly changing, most learning measurement is still L&D-centric – focusing on how employees feel about the development they
receive, and how L&D departments can be more efficient and effective in how they execute. While these are noble goals, we think measurement and analytics for employee development should be doing more. So. Much. More. And there are tools to help us do it:

**NEW PLATFORMS**

Whereas data used to exist on smile sheets, course evaluations, and occasionally in a Metrics that Matter™ database, data that can be used for development now exists everywhere.

In fact, in our recent study of the learning tech space, we found that over half of the 115 solution providers we looked at considered themselves capable of offering analytics – not just measurement – of learning, and evolved organizations are taking advantage of it.

Beyond simply determining skills gaps for known skills, organizations are mining the data to determine what kinds of skills and knowledge employees are searching for.

Others are mining standard business tools (for example, the Microsoft Office suite or Slack) to give them information that enables better decisions about their development investments.

**NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

New analytics platforms geared specifically toward employee development and learning, like Watershed, Yet Analytics, and Visier’s learning module are providing richer information that can be correlated against business results to see what types of development and content are most effective.

Other technologies, such as Zoomi and Butterfly.ai are leveraging AI and machine learning to better understand the learning experience and help organizations improve upon it.

**NEW FEEDBACK MECHANISMS**

New companies like Cultivate, Gameffective, and Axonify use data as both a feedback and delivery tool. These systems first identify needed knowledge by correlating performance data to key performance indicators, and then use that data to feed information and opportunities to individuals to remediate.

The proliferation of data and technologies can paralyze organizational leaders and L&D. It’s challenging to know what to pay attention to and how much more technology to add to the organization without overwhelming stakeholders.

Further, in functions that historically rely on intuition, simply having a data-rich technology doesn’t guarantee L&D leaders have the skills or inclination to use it.

We have high hopes that these advances in analytics will help organizations better understand their needs and the needs of their employees.

We’re optimistic that the data is getting better and the technology is getting smart enough to make sense of it. We have high hopes that, in the very near future, these advances in analytics will help organizations better understand their needs and the needs of their employees.

The critical challenge for L&D will likely be the challenge of replacing intuitive decision making with skills to make rigorous data-driven decisions focused on meaningful, measurable outcomes.
Encourages employees to take smart risks

Intuitively, it makes sense that organizations that encourage employees to take risks are more innovative. The highest correlation in our entire dataset occurred between our organization has a culture of innovation and encourages employees to take smart risks.

While the data indicate correlation, not causation, they suggest that organizations that are more apt to encourage or accept risk are also those that innovate.

Aside from the numbers, anecdotal data in business journals abound:

- Jim Donald, previous CEO of Starbucks who turned around Extended Stay America, encouraged employees to take risks by offering them all “Get out of Jail Free” cards. Employees who took risks and failed handed in their cards with no repercussions.8
- Amazon established the “institutional yes”: when new ideas are suggested, the default answer is yes. This biases the organization toward new ideas and helps to keep the mindset of the workforce focused forward and learning.3

Encouraging smart risks is an organizational responsibility and a cultural necessity. It is also an uncomfortable idea for most CLOs and L&D departments. From the beginning, their responsibility has been to mitigate risks by teaching employees the “correct” and “efficient” way to do things.

As organizations build this risk-taking muscle, L&D departments will need to change the message their development efforts send to the organization. Specifically, we expect to see fewer rote types of training (with some exceptions for compliance, safety, etc.) and more varied types of development that encourage employees to think in many directions.

This may require L&D (and HR overall) to hire for different skills, and for different attitudes towards risk and innovation.

Questions to consider

As organizations, and particularly learning functions, begin to think through helping their humans envision different futures, they need to agree on clear answers to questions like these:

- What is our strategy for determining the knowledge and skills individuals need to help our business compete in the future?
- To what extent do we use data in helping us make investment and programming decisions?
- To what extent do we use data to automate the process of determining needed knowledge and skills, and then serving up necessary remediation?
- What is our process for determining what skills and knowledge our workforce will need in the next year? In the next three years?
- To what extent do we understand the implications that technological advancements will have on the skills of our workforce?
- To what extent have we defined decision-making authority at all levels of the organization?
- To what extent do we encourage people to take risks? What are the motivators and demotivators that may affect an employee’s willingness to take risks?
Example: Viventium

Viventium Software, Inc. is a purely cloud-based Human Capital Management (HCM) solution that helps mid-sized organizations with talent acquisition, timekeeping, payroll, and human resources.

Viventium’s CEO, Dan Neuburger, is passionate about innovation and encourages it within his organization by requiring his direct reports to have two “intelligent failures” every year. He believes that it is his role as CEO to encourage his colleagues to push the envelope, try new things that make sense, and not be afraid of being admonished for doing so – even if they fail.

Viventium believes that supporting intelligent failures can lead to the organization learning something that the competition has not yet figured out. In essence, it’s a learning tool.

Neuburger is not suggesting that any organization “bet the farm” and makes a distinction between failure and intelligent failure. Failures can occur through lack of attention, poor application of resources, bad communication, and just plain carelessness. Intelligent failures are deliberate.

Although Neuburger is new in his role at Viventium, intelligent failures are already helping the organization in three ways. First, they encourage innovation. While most organizations innovate “safely”, through small iterations, Viventium encourages out-of-the-box thinking to provide an edge over competitors.

Second, intelligent failures create opportunities for self-reflection. One employee said that just knowing she will be asked about her intelligent failures leads her to think more carefully through decisions, which in turn, stretches her critical thinking muscle. Providing space for employees to think about where their decisions can lead helps them to continuously think into the future.

Finally, intelligent failures create a culture of continuous learning. Viventium encourages risk-taking, but also takes time to “celebrate the breakdown.” Instead of hunting for the guilty party or sweeping failures under the proverbial rug, Viventium engages in open, honest discussion about what broke down, why it broke down, what they learned from it, and what they’ll do in similar situations in the future. Everyone, regardless of level in the organization, has a voice and is encouraged to use it during these discussions.

Dan sees intelligent failures as a key learning tool at Viventium, and a key enabler to help Viventium continue on its current path of innovation and out of the box thinking. Making people accountable for taking smart risks through their goals will help them think more strategically, not just about their future, but about the future of the organization.
Stories—narratives—provide a way of understanding our place in the scheme of things by structuring our understanding of events. They root us in an on-going stream of history and thereby provide us with a sense of belonging and helping establish our identities.10

The second trait humans have developed far beyond their primate counterparts is Storytelling. We use language to tell stories. Through stories, we do more than just communicate information; we also communicate emotion and other features of context.

Stories provide context to the data of experience. Through stories, humans cast themselves as main characters, place themselves in predicaments, and learn from their own experiences as well as others’ successes and failures. As markets require organizations to move more quickly, stories about the what, the how, and the why behind new directions are crucial to nimbleness.

Of the questions in the survey we asked about Storytelling, two affect financial outcomes and nimbleness:

- **Clearly articulates what development employees can expect**
- **Builds opportunities for development into work**

The smallest spread between evolved and less-evolved organizations shows up under clearly articulates what development employees can expect. And by quite a margin. Unfortunately, the data indicate that neither evolved or less-evolved organizations are doing it particularly well.

**Builds opportunities for development into work** received the highest scores of all the items. The gap between evolved and less-evolved organizations was also one of the biggest. Evolved organizations definitely leverage opportunities to build development into work more than their less-evolved counterparts.
Let’s take a look at the individual elements within this trait.

**Builds opportunities for development into the work**

*Builds opportunities for development into work* speaks to the context within which we provide employees the opportunity to learn. This item was the only element that has a statistical impact on both financial and nimbleness outcomes, indicating that it is probably something we should pay more attention to.

Why does *builds opportunities for development into work* fall under storytelling? The short answer is that there is context inherent in learning done as part of work that is absent when learning happens in a different environment (like the classroom).

When we use the classroom to teach (an admittedly efficient way to process lots of people through information), we take away the context within which employees must learn to apply new learning.

Some of the ways organizations can build learning into work include the following.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE MISTAKES**

We mentioned risk-taking earlier, but we want to reiterate its importance in the learning process. People usually learn more, and more quickly, from mistakes than from any other method. The opportunity to make mistakes introduces risk into learning, and that risk intensifies the experience, and the retention of new behaviors.

**INTERNAL PROJECTS**

Lately, we have seen several learning technologies that let managers post projects that might otherwise be outsourced. Offering them to internal employees enables them to develop skills that they cannot in their current position.

**REGULAR FEEDBACK**

More and more frequently, organizations approach performance management as a continuous discussion rather than a point scale. Managers who have frequent conversations with their employees naturally incentivize learning more often than those who do not.

**STRETCH ASSIGNMENTS**

Even within a given role, employees can identify skills and knowledge they would like to develop, and then find aspects of the job that will allow them to do so. The idea of stretch assignments is not new, but we feel that it is vastly underutilized.

The context inherent in learning done as a part of work accelerates and sustains mastery.

We know that some organizations leverage technologies like sandboxes and scenario platforms that mirror the actual workplace to give more context to employee development.

There is definitely a place for this, particularly in situations where it is cost-prohibitive or dangerous to allow huge mistakes during training (crashing a multi-million dollar jet, for instance).

Such prohibitive considerations are rare. In most cases, the workplace is the best place to learn. Evolved learning organizations figure out how to stealthily use work to teach instead of taking employees out of the workplace for development.
Clearly articulates what development employees can expect

*Clearly articulates what development employees can expect* speaks to organizations’ abilities to bring employees into the story about development in their organization – and most are doing it poorly.

Evolved organizations more often leverage different types of development, including non-traditional development approaches. It could be that the reason scores are so low is because communication about those different types of development have not quite caught up with reality.

The ability to learn and grow is one of the top reasons that candidates choose employers, yet most companies we talk to have yet to adequately answer the question, “What does it mean to be developed in this organization?”

As a result, in many organizations, the term “development” is too narrowly understood, and many employees are standing around, waiting to be tapped on the shoulder and sent off to a workshop.

**Most companies have yet to adequately set a vision for “what it means to be developed in this organization”**

Organizations that have clearly defined development for their employees tend to do so in similar ways. For example, they:

**MATCH SALES PITCH TO REALITY**

Often, recruiters and leaders advertise the great opportunities for growth to job candidates. However, messaging around responsibility, resources, and forms of development are often woefully lacking once an employee is hired.

Organizations doing this well are aligned on their messaging to candidates, new hires, and employees.

One large consulting firm does this very well. On the first day of work, new employees are briefed on expectations when it comes to their development. They are also given clear guidelines on where to find developmental tools and are assigned a counselor or coach to guide them in their efforts. There is no disconnect between expectations and reality because of this clear, unambiguous communication.

**DEVELOP BEYOND THE MEASURABLE**

L&D departments are often partial to types of development that can be measured, which are frequently more formal.

Partiality to these types of development likely means that communication about development, definition of development, and encouragement to participate in development focus on the formal instead of a continuous, ubiquitous, integrated view of development.

Instead, more evolved organizations seek to enable learning wherever it happens in the organization and finds ways to define impact beyond traditional measures, such as completion rates and ROIs. This often means that L&D functions track organizational key performance indicators as well as their own and focus on correlations rather than causations.

**FOCUS ON NON-SILOED DEVELOPMENT**

Organizations, and particularly L&D departments, tend to view “learning” as a silo. In our conversations with evolved organizations, development is hardly ever talked about without also discussing performance and career. Strategies that involve all three are more holistic and necessarily change the messaging around development to employees.

Incidentally, learning technology vendors seem to be ahead of the curve on this point; more and more
are incorporating performance and/or career into their tools because they see this as necessary to develop individuals holistically.

So who is doing this well? From our conversations, a few examples come to mind:

• One organization makes it clear to their employees that not everyone will be the CEO or wants to climb the hierarchy at all. Instead promise advancement up the ladder, they work with individual employees to maximize their opportunity to “collect experiences.” When employees have outgrown their tenure, the organization maintains a close relationship with them, hoping that they will gain valuable experiences elsewhere and come back.

• A media organization encourages leaders to share their career paths in podcasts that they make available to their employees. Because so many of their leaders have taken nontraditional paths to gain the experiences they have, sharing them with employees provides different viewpoints on development, which helps employees make choices that are best for them personally.

Questions to ask yourself

• What does “development” mean in our organization? What types of activities take place? What can employees expect?
• How broadly have we defined development?
• Are we considering the things that happen outside the classroom and in between screens?
• What examples of building learning into the work exist in our organization?
• How often do we default to the work first for development?
Example: NASA’s JPL

The learning population of NASA’s Jet Propulsion Labs is literally made up of rocket scientists. Because they are at the top of their field and at the forefront of innovation, many off-the-shelf types of learning aren’t appropriate. JPL’s Technical Learning and Development team focuses on creating a culture of information sharing, learning from each other because it is imperative to their mission.

Because so much of JPL’s work is collaborative and exploratory, the L&D function reinforces collaboration and exploration - the story - through collaborative and exploratory employee development. They were early adopters of self-guided learning, learning from all sources, and the learning experience platform. Employees are encouraged, both in person and in the tools they use, to share experiences and knowledge.

JPL knows that much institutional knowledge exists in the scientists themselves. When scientists decide to retire or move on, it isn’t just solution knowledge that leaves the lab; the process knowledge - what scientists went through to get to the answer - also leaves. This may be the greater loss.

So JPL is designing a system through which scientists tell process and solution stories. They tout it as a “system by engineers and scientists for engineers and scientists.”

The system is designed not just to capture the end result, but to tell the story of how scientists got there as well. Scientists can enter stories, documents, videos, work product in the form of design thinking, cognitive task analysis, virtual interaction, and tacit knowledge. The system then organizes information based on research topic so that employees and scientists can easily navigate to find what they’re looking for.

While many organizations are concerned with maintaining institutional knowledge, JPL is one of the few we’re aware of that builds on the idea of story and context by capturing not just a solution, but the feelings and thought patterns behind its creation. It’s also the most wonderfully extreme example of user-generated content we’ve seen.

Image 8: Screenshot of JPL’s knowledge capture tool.
Comparative studies between humans and chimps show that while both will cooperate, humans will always help more. We know that chimpanzees also work together and share food in apparently unselfish ways ... but they will only cooperate if there is something in it for them.11

The second human trait is collaboration. We collaborate long after it is useful to us personally. We help each other out. We share information for the benefit of all.

Organizations that foster collaboration make it easier for employees to learn from each other and build on both successes and failures.

Thomas Suddendorf, an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Queensland in Australia, says that we have a fundamental urge to link our minds together. “This allows us to take advantage of others’ experiences, reflections, and imaginings to prudently guide our own behavior.”12

Collaboration also lets us link our scenario-building minds into large networks of knowledge, which helps us accumulate information through several generations.

Of the collaboration-focused survey questions we asked, three have an impact on business outcomes:

- Shares successes and failures for learning purposes
- Organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving
- Helps employees build internal networks

And now, an overview of the elements.

### The Elements

In Image 9, you can see that the evolved organizations rated significantly better than the less-evolved organizations when it comes to collaboration. Interestingly, the item organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving has the biggest gap between evolved and less evolved organizations, of all the elements we tested.

**Image 9: Percentage of “agree/strongly agree” responses for collaboration, more evolved vs. less evolved organizations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>More evolved</th>
<th>Less-evolved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helps employees build internal networks</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizes to encourage collaborative problem-solving</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares successes and failures for learning purposes</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RedThread Research
This was interesting to us, particularly in light of the rise of organizational network analysis and the growth of attention on teams-of-teams.

We know that organizations tend to shy away from taking time to learn from successes and failures, likely for many of the same reasons they don’t take risks: communicating failure is inherently risky in most cultures.

Let’s dive into the individual elements.

**Helps employees build internal networks**

The element *helps employees build internal networks* shows a big difference between evolved and less-evolved organizations. When employee networks are wide, information travels more quickly, which can enable responsiveness, agility, and innovation. In many circumstances, knowing who to go to for the latest, greatest information is more important than actually having that information, because it changes so quickly.

Much of this comes down to culture: in some organizations it is taboo to contact anyone outside the chain of command; in others, it is encouraged.

That said, recent learning technology helps employees build internal networks. Technology also lets employees follow learning paths, share information, reach out, and otherwise engage with each other in ways that encourage collaboration and mutual learning.

We predict that as the boundaries of organizations continue to thin, building networks outside the organization will also become important. Already we see organizations begin to be more attentive to alumni networks as they plan differently for their workforces.

Employees with large internal and external networks will not only have more opportunities personally, they will also have a broader pool of knowledge and experience to draw from to solve challenges for the organizations they serve.

**Organizes to encourage employees to solve problems together**

The significance of *organizes to encourage employees to solve problems together* surprised us as it illustrates how just thinking about org charts and career paths is not enough. That doesn’t mean traditional approaches won’t continue to play a role.

We expect that Organization with a capital “O” (organizational charts and work structure, who reports to whom, and how the balance sheet is divvied up) will be an ongoing discussion, as it affects so much.

We also expect it to grow in importance as the nature of work changes: more fluid definitions of “employee,” the increasing integration of team structures, the changing relationship between employer and employee, and the like.

However, the discussion of organization with a small “o” is equally important, one that HR and L&D can influence to a large extent. Their responsibility, amidst changes in the larger organization, is to remove roadblocks and barriers to natural collaboration.

Collaboration improves the work and helps individuals develop in ways that more traditional methods for development do not.
If organizations must enable collaboration and problem-solving, how can they best do this?

**TEAMS**

More organizations are adopting team structures, which are often more agile because they handle resources, decision-making, and task assignment faster than traditional infrastructures. To handle the complexity that some organizations face, more advanced structures – teams of teams – are also making an appearance.

**TECHNOLOGY**

Productivity and communication tools, such as email, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and online collaboration spaces also encourage employees to solve problems together. Leaders and L&D professionals should pay attention to barriers keeping employees from adopting these tools.

**DATA**

Data abounds. Productivity, office tools, and learning tools can tell us where to go for information. Organizations are getting better at mining this information to do organizational network analysis which allows them to figure out who knows what, where to go for information, and how to assemble teams to leverage the best people for the job. Making data available to employees through dashboards and other business intelligence helps them organize to solve problems.

**SPACE**

When considering the repair of the House of Commons after WWII, Winston Churchill said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards, our buildings shape us.” The way we organize and maintain workspaces sends messages about an organization’s expectations for collaboration.

For example, Amazon famously has white boards in their elevators to encourage collaboration. Google designed its headquarters with cafes and micro-kitchens to create a place for employees to leave their desks and interact with people who don’t sit by them. Organization leaders should consider how their physical and virtual spaces either encourage or discourage collaboration.

As the work itself continues to evolve, we imagine how it is organized will as well. This was driven home to us as we wrote this report: at one time, we had four different professionals in four different time zones working on aspects of this report – and only one was a full-time employee. Figuring out how to organize to get stuff done will be critical in this new reality.

**Shares successes and failures for learning purposes**

*Shares successes and failures for learning purposes* was one of just three elements that influence an organization’s financial outcomes. To share successes and failures requires organizations to be vulnerable and willing to admit fallibility. More important, taking advantage of chances to learn from failure requires thinking differently about it: instead of seeing failure as something to avoid, see it as data that accelerates innovation and progress.

Organizations that share failures send a strong message to employees that failure doesn’t always end careers; it’s always a chance to learn and grow, providing valuable information to move the organization and the individual forward. (It can also be good for morale.)

We’re aware of several good examples of organizations celebrating failure as well as success. The boldest leaders have adopted failure as a measure of success:
• James Quincey, CEO of Coca-Cola Co., recently told his managers, “If we’re not making mistakes, we’re not trying hard enough.”

• The head of Google’s R&D division, Astro Teller, thinks it’s important to actually encourage failure. When a team kills their own project because they find a fatal flaw, they often get a bonus. They’re also celebrated at all-team meetings and given time to figure out what’s next.

• Sara Blakely, founder and CEO at Spanx, regularly gives her teams high fives when they fail.

Organizations focused on their five-point performance scales and their 70% pass rates on learning assessments – artifacts of an efficiency mindset – miss the opportunities failure affords.

Accepting failure changes everything. Instead of competencies and “good enough to pass” metrics, the conversation with employees switch to a deeper, more nuanced discussion about continuous improvement, support, and responsibility.

Human capital leaders, particularly in L&D, must lead the culture change embracing failure will require in most organizations. Is your L&D group brave enough? Are you?

Questions to ask yourself

• How open is our organization to sharing both the bad news and the good news?

• How does our company encourage or discourage employees from solving problems together?

• What social or cultural norms may be keeping employees from collaborating?

• What tools does our organization use to help employees build their networks?

• Does our organization have formal programs (coaching/mentoring, reverse mentoring, job swaps, etc.)?

• What incentives can we provide for informal programs?
Example: Sapient

Sapient is a forward-thinking marketing and consulting company that provides business, marketing, and technology services to clients. Because their clients are on the cutting edge of technology, they strive hard to ensure that their employees have the knowledge they need in order to serve them.

Sapient’s L&D function has a large part to play in ensuring their skilled workforce. Because skills in the technology sector change so rapidly and because the team is limited, they leverage the idea of collaboration to a large extent, and the do so in three main ways.

First, the L&D function itself collaborates with the business functions. They understand that L&D could put out the best content in the world, but unless business leaders buy in, it’s futile. They maintain tight relationships with business leaders to ensure that they are on the same page about future skills, strategy, and participation.

This is particularly important when it comes to developing skills that will be essential in the future, but don’t necessarily serve the business today.

The close relationship ensures that leaders understand that, although there may be short-term inefficiencies, it benefits both the individual and the organization in the long run.

Second, L&D enables employees themselves to collaborate. Since employees are not collocated and often on client sites, Sapient needed to find a way to help employees share information that could benefit others.

To this end, they encourage employees to develop case studies, tell stories about the things they have encountered, and share best practices and problem-solving techniques, particularly around new or complicated technologies. They do this not just to develop employees, but to actually help them make the work better.

In order to make collaboration easier, Sapient provides a virtual space for collaboration using a technology called Vox. Vox allows employees to create virtual project communities, post white papers, start discussion threads, link to blog posts and other relevant data, and more. Employees can ask questions and start conversations. The alert functionality keeps people up to speed on things that are useful and pertinent to themselves and their work.

Finally, Sapient also collaborates with their external cloud partners. Their partners have extensive knowledge about the future of cloud computing, and Sapient is able to leverage that knowledge and even specific learning opportunities for their employees that allow them to scale in ways they couldn’t otherwise.

Sapient sees collaboration as crucial to helping their organization compete in the future. The L&D function’s focus on collaboration with their business functions, the employees themselves, and their external partners ensures that their employees will have both the ability and motivation to stay up to date and relevant.
“Tools have repeatedly revolutionized human society. From the earliest stone axes through today’s mobile phones, tools have changed how we interact with each other and with our environment. While it is clear that one of the key features of humans is their high level of sociality, many of the events that have had the greatest impact on our history have not been revolutions in our sociality, but in our technology.”

Humans use tools. While there is ample proof that other species do too (the ape, for example, uses blades of grass to fish for ants), we have elevated tool use to an art form. What’s more, we use tools to change not just our physical spaces, but our mental spaces as well.

Tools have always been a part of the story we tell about ourselves. We evolve with our tools; they have an effect on us, and we have an effect on them. They are, for all intents and purposes, a barometer for what we value and where we want to go.

Tools have proliferated in the modern organization, especially in the area of human capital. We recently conducted research specifically on learning technology (tools organizations use to help individuals learn), and found no fewer than 29 different categories of technology used to support learning.

This proliferation complicates things for L&D leaders, whose jobs are already complicated. In years past, it was enough to choose the best LMS (prior to that, it was enough to make sure that the overhead projector worked). L&D leaders are now faced with choosing from among nearly 30 different technologies sold specifically for learning, along with myriad others that are adapted for learning within organizations.

The Data

Our recent study identified types of tools used for employee development that more or less align with the three human traits. We then looked at their popularity by more and less evolved organizations, as shown in Image 10.

Image 10: Percentage of organizations that use specific tools, evolved vs. less evolved organizations organized by size of gap
When comparing evolved and less-evolved organizations, overall usage isn’t as interesting as the gap between them for each tool. As a result, we organized the technologies by size of gap, reading from top to bottom: largest gap between scores to smallest gap.

So, for example, while standard business tools score highest for both evolved and less-evolved organizations, the difference between how much each uses them is small. In contrast, the data for internal communication tools shows that evolved organizations use them significantly more than less-evolved organizations.

Looking at the data this way gives us a sense of what evolved organizations are doing differently. If we pay attention to the elements on the top of the graph – the ones where the gap is biggest – we can clearly see evolved organizations using some of the technologies more broadly:

- Internal communication tools
- Internal collaboration tools
- External media platforms
- Business performance dashboards
- External social networks

Not one of these five tools is traditionally considered a “learning” tool. Instead, this chart shows us that evolved organizations use internal communication tools and social collaboration tools to drive learning.

It’s probably no accident that internal communication and social collaboration both speak to an organization’s ability to tell stories and collaborate.

The use of storytelling tools could also reflect a trend we’re seeing, which is that more and more learning technologies are integrating with work and productivity systems (Slack, Teams, Salesforce, etc.) to deliver content where people work rather than in some “learning” space removed from “the real world.”

Questions to ask yourself:

- To what extent does my organization have a strategy to leverage business technologies for learning?
- To what extent does my organization have a digital mindset when it comes to employee development?
- To what extent is my organization focusing on utilizing tools to create more personal learning experiences for employees, versus focusing on efficiency?
- To what extent does my organization experiment with new technologies, or combinations of technologies, for employee development?
Example: Financial Company

A fortune 500 leading financial organization’s learning function is big on making use of innovative new tools for learning. They are the first to admit that they don’t adhere to some of the more traditional theories on organizational learning, and have a history of experimenting with technologies.

Recently, the company has embarked on two interesting initiatives. The first focuses on bringing learning closer to the employee through “Learning Lounges,” connected classrooms, only on a personal scale.

These multimedia learning pods allow classes of 8 to 10 employees to connect from different locations to learn in a collaborative way. They can also be used as collaborative workspaces - meaning employees can go from collaborating in a work situation to naturally flowing into a learning situation, to flexibly support the needs of the project.

The Learning Lounge experience consists of employees connecting through the Polycom Centro - a high-definition collaboration device with a 360-degree camera and four monitors to provide seamless interaction from any angle between two or more locations.

Large Surface Hubs using Skype replace the traditional whiteboard, allowing the facilitator to write, present and broadcast to other remote pods in real time. Furniture is kept casual and comfortable, and as far from a classroom aesthetic as they could get - using club chairs and coffee tables to send that message.

Since the company doesn't have a physical corporate university space, these pods were developed to create greater connectivity between teams that are learning together. The goal is to make learning more of a lifestyle than an event - bringing the learning experience closer to their day-to-day work. The fact that the pods are semi-virtual also helps the organization keep travel costs low, saving additional money that can be invested in tools like this.

The second initiative focuses on using virtual reality for certain types of training. The first pilot the L&D team ran was a survival mindset course with the company’s senior leadership. The software places employees into a virtual version of their headquarters and teaches them to apply the appropriate survival principles in response to a threatening person onsite.

The use of a VR tool in this instance provides employees the opportunity to practice these important skills in an immersive scenario without an active threat situation. When adrenaline kicks in, book learning goes out the window; allowing them to engage with the physical aspects of looking for exit signs, crouching under desks and hiding in bathrooms provide a level of learning that a simple course or procedure manual could never replicate.

The second pilot using VR tools is on presentation skills. Employees have the opportunity to present to an audience, practicing movements, eye contact and timing all within the safety of a virtual space.

The software can also “listen” to your presentation and give feedback on pauses, filler words and tone. While the company is currently using an off-the-shelf version, they will eventually move to company-specific environments, allowing an even more personalized, context-relevant experience for employees.

The learning organization’s philosophy on the use of tools and technology is that they should be used to create better user experience (i.e. to make things more human.) When HR departments use technology with a singular focus on ‘making things more efficient’ for the organization, the result can be a disappointing user experience. Instead, the company advocates using technology in meaningful ways to simplify and digitize the experiences, making them consumable, impactful and relevant for employees.
Conclusion

This study is the beginning of more in-depth research on many of the topics introduced here. With this study, we identified four traits that make us human: envisioning a different future, storytelling and context, collaborating and using tools.

We validated the hypothesis that organizations demonstrating these traits more effectively develop their people, and perform significantly better than those that are not, as measured by financial performance and organizational nimbleness.

These traits – envisioning a different future, storytelling and context, collaborating and using tools – these uniquely human traits, are our competitive advantage over the robots and the apes.

They can also be your advantage over competitors who are on an unrelenting drive for ever-less-valuable efficiency improvements from increasingly disengaged employees. Let’s change things. Each of us. Let’s all go out there and create learning organizations that are a lot more human.
Endnotes

1 Korn Ferry Global Study. 2016
2 Dr. Tamin Wooley-Barker. Seeing how superorganisms work together to build infinite wealth on a finite planet (and your company can too). White Cloud Press. 9 May 2017.
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14 Organizational Network Analysis is a way to analyze how much information, decisions, work, and communication flow through an organization by looking at how people are connected.
16 Amazon Website: https://www.aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon/our-global-offices.
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The Humanizing Learning Study began in May 2018. Our research scope was to begin to understand what factors help organizations take a more human-centered approach to learning and development. To that end, we sought to answer the following questions:

- What are organizations doing, with regard to human-centered learning, that contribute to the organizational culture?
- What are organizations doing, with regard to human-centered learning, that contribute to self-reported financial outcomes?
- What are organizations doing, with regard to human-centered learning, that contribute to whether employees would recommend their learning practices to others?
- Are there any similarities in what leads to important cultural, financial, or recommendation outcomes?
- What tools/solutions are organizations leveraging in their attempts to create a more human-centered learning approach?

A literature review, on human-centered learning, was the first step in our process. Following this, an exhaustive list of potential survey questions were created that covered areas identified in the literature review. This list was reviewed for clarity and overlap and refined to a set of 34 items. 20 items covered practices or policies that organizations may or may not have in place, while 14 items covered tools, solutions, or mechanisms that organizations may have in place to support learning and development.

The survey was conducted from June 2018 to July 2018. During this time the survey was regularly monitored for response time and completion rate. Some items were removed or revised to increase response rate.

### Demographics

After data cleaning a final set of 238 respondents was included in analysis.

Of this set, 29% indicated they were individual contributors, 39% were managers, 25% were in leadership levels and 6% declined to answer.

In addition, 30% of respondents indicated they were in Human Resources and/or Learning & Development roles. 36% were in non-HR and/or Learning & Development roles, while the remaining 34% chose not to answer.

In terms of industry representation, a majority of respondents indicated they worked in technology (software), professional services (consulting), manufacturing, healthcare, and education (post high school).

Lastly, with regard to head-quarter location, of those that chose to report one region stood out. Specifically, a vast majority of respondents indicated their organization was head-quartered in the United States (77%). Seven percent indicated Western Europe and five percent indicated a UK/Ireland head-quarter. All other regions including; Latin /
South America, Eastern Europe, Asia, Australia / New Zealand, Middle East / Africa, and other made up roughly 11% of the respondents, collectively.

Sample Questions

A list of example questions, asked in our survey are provided below.

To understand the practices that organization may have in place to foster learning and development, a 5-point agreement scale was used in which respondents answered questions such as:

- My organization provides knowledge and skill development necessary to compete in the future.
- My organization has a culture of encouraging employees to take smart risks.
- My organization provides a personalized learning plan for every employee.
- My organization has a formal or informal system to help employees to learn from mistakes.
- My organization curates and organizes information that helps employees to develop on the job.

To understand the mechanisms that organizations have in place to support these practices, a 4-point degree scale was used in which respondents answered questions such as:

- To what degree does your organization use the following mechanisms for employee development:
  - Mentoring / Coaching software
  - Expertise directories
  - Media platforms (e.g., video, podcasts)
  - Curation software (e.g., aggregator apps)
  - External social networks