

# Barriers To Learning: How To Conquer The Challenge Of Engagement

The benefits that come with engaged learners are plenty. Which organization doesn't want higher completion rates, better retention, increased workplace satisfaction, and positive training ROI?

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- With the many learner engagement benefits being *that* convincing, one has to wonder why engagement is so seldom achieved. The reason is that there are various and, sometimes, complex obstacles standing in the way of achieving learner engagement.

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- There isn't a silver bullet to “solving” these obstacles, but when they are properly understood, they become easier to overcome. In this chapter, we examine the challenge of achieving and maintaining learner engagement from three different perspectives: barriers to learning, workplace challenges, and barriers to online learning, specifically.

- Overcoming the barriers to learning
- A barrier to learning is anything that prevents learners from fully engaging in learning. During training, most learners have to face several different barriers to learning. Think, for example, a student who has left their textbooks at home or an employee who hasn't received the preparation notes for a training workshop. Or, a learner who cannot complete their final online assessment because of a distraction-filled workplace.

- All these can be considered barriers to learning. When learners cannot fully participate in a learning activity, they cannot be truly engaged in learning.
- In an adult learning environment, the barriers to learning can be many and quite unpredictable. Here are some of the most common cases of barriers to learning and how to overcome them:

# Lack of focus

- Every learner has been there. Most workdays are flooded with numerous forms of digital, verbal and written communication. Phones ring, email notifications pile up, and meetings run back to back. That often leaves learners distracted and unfocused. They read notes without absorbing their essence, and they watch videos without actually paying attention to the lessons.
- In the modern workplace, the distractions of digital technology and the demands for multitasking in most jobs leave little opportunity for learners to fully focus on learning.
- Solution: Lack of focus can be overcome with a few simple tactics. During the online course orientation, advise learners on when and how to find space to focus. Additionally, recommend setting aside a “focus hour” where learners can ignore their phones, log out of their email, and reserve time in their calendars to concentrate on learning.

# Negative past experience

- Bad teachers, sloppy online courses and a history of boring schooling are all factors that can foster one of the trickiest barriers to learning: poor past experience.
- Many adults have had experiences that gave them a distaste for learning. Some experiences even leave adults doubting their ability to learn new skills.
- Unfortunately, an entire history of bad learning experiences cannot be undone. However, the learners' concerns and misperceptions can be identified and addressed early on.
- Solution: Create an environment where learners can regularly and safely voice their concerns both before and during the course. That can be done with a survey at the beginning of the course that asks learners what they value in learning, and what they would prefer to avoid in their learning experiences.
- Align their personal development goals with the outcomes of the course, so that they understand the true benefits of learning engagement.

# Personal mindsets

- Whether it is due to negative past experience or low self-esteem, many adult learners simply believe that they are too old to learn new tricks. Sometimes they are just resistant to online learning and new technology. These individuals can be disengaged learners from the very start of the course. On top of that, their own negativity can even foster disengagement among their co-learners.
- Solution: As with addressing past experiences, make sure that the learning environment offers learners the room to discuss concerns in a constructive manner. If the resources are available, offer live support for both technical and content concerns, so that learners are not delayed by technical glitches or content queries.
- Some barriers to learning are of a personal nature and stem from the learners themselves. Others, though, are raised exclusively in the workplace. Let's take a look at some of the most tricky workplace challenges and how to address them.

# Conquering the barriers to learning in the workplace

- In the workplace, barriers to learning mostly stem from the social and the working environment. Those everyday challenges are not only counterproductive but also have a negative effect on the employees' ability to engage in their training. The most common workplace challenges that learners face are:
  - lack of community
  - lack of purpose
  - distracting office environment
- To better understand how those challenges work and what we can do to address them, let's break them down one by one:

# Lack of a sense of community

- Social engagement in learning is impossible to achieve without a sense of connection among learners. In the workplace, a sense of community also translates into a stronger sense of connection to the organization and its goals. This is especially important when training adult learners because sharing experiences, learning's, and observations with others is known to motivate them.
- Solution: Make the most of the on boarding period by actively showing learners how they fit into the company's bigger picture and allowing their peers to participate in the process.
- Also, take advantage of the learners' personal experiences and their desire to share by building active online learning communities into the courses.
- Discussions can go a long way toward creating a sense of community. If entire departments are undergoing the same training, encourage learners to share their experiences from the course in their meetings.

# Lack of purpose

- As far as workplace challenges go, a lack of purpose can prove to be the most harmful of all. Without being aware of a good reason to learn new things and develop, adult learners simply cannot engage in the learning experience. Who could blame them, though? We all prefer to be sure of why we do something before we proceed and learners are not an exception.
- Solution: Address a potential lack of purpose by making the goals of any learning experience clear upfront. Avoid “training speak” and provide learning outcomes that are connected to specific workplace goals instead.
- For example, in sales training, use the opening material of a sales course to explain to learners how mastering the principles of negotiation will help them improve their sales numbers and commission by 10-15%

# Distracting office environment

- Open plan offices, loud colleagues, construction on a nearby building, visitors on site — all those factors are potential barriers to learning. They distract learners not only from their work, but also from learning.
- Solution: When possible, remove distracting factors from the workplace and promote the importance of engaged learning across the organization. Explain to employees and management how critical it is for learners to be focused in order to engage with learning. That way, you foster a culture of respect for the needs of others.
- Consider creating a separate space, free from noise and disruption, for learners to complete their training. Combine this with the “focus hour” recommended earlier, so learners can engage in learning without distractions.
- Even when all the barriers to learning in the workplace have been addressed, the online environment can still present its own challenges. Fortunately, they can be easily identified and mitigated.

# Eliminating the barriers to online learning

- The first step to overcoming the barriers to online learning is to examine them from a learner's perspective. Does technology hold them back from engaging with content? Do they feel alone on their learning journey? Are they bored, even?

# Lack of technical skills

- Not every adult learner has the same degree of technical experience or digital savvy. Similarly, not all LMSs are designed to be user-friendly. When learners struggle to navigate the platform, they waste precious time and energy that should be spent on learning.
- Solution: Create simple tutorials that demonstrate how to use the organization's LMS. Learners who dread the fully-online experience usually appreciate a more personal walkthrough of the system, either in-person or through a recorded webinar that they can refer back to.

# Isolation

- Even when learners experience a sense of community in the workplace, they can still feel isolated when they are alone facing their computer screen. Actually, isolation is one of the most common fears when it comes to online learning.
- Solution: Overcome this barrier to learning by making social features, like Discussions, a key element of your course design strategy. Incorporating team competitions, group work and leaderboards can further reduce feelings of loneliness

# Boredom

- Although engagement does not equal entertainment, boredom can sometimes equal disengagement.
- Solution: Prevent having disengaged learners by first understanding your training audience needs and the kind of content and scenarios they find relatable and inspiring. Ensure that the assessments' difficulty level is challenging enough to prevent boredom, but also not too difficult, so that the majority of learners can complete or pass them.

# • Engaging learners despite the barriers to learning

- When learners are prevented from fully participating in learning, the many benefits of learner engagement can't be realized. So, act immediately towards removing workplace challenges and understanding your learners' personal barriers to learning.
- By identifying and addressing the factors that prevent engagement in online courses, learners and businesses are both able to get the most out of the learning experience.



THANKING YOU