



Changing learning cultures

Al Thompson, a bit about me

**I am experienced, curious
and so proud to work at
Thrive.**

I have worked in Learning and Development for over 20 years, and am excited about how technologies can make learning social, accessible and in multiple formats to suit everyone’s learning preference.

My two decades of work in technology have included working on the client side creating learning strategies that work, and on the vendor side, implementing hundreds of LMSs and developing key functionality.

**In this guide, I’ll be outlining my
key tips and strategies for evolving
your learning culture.**



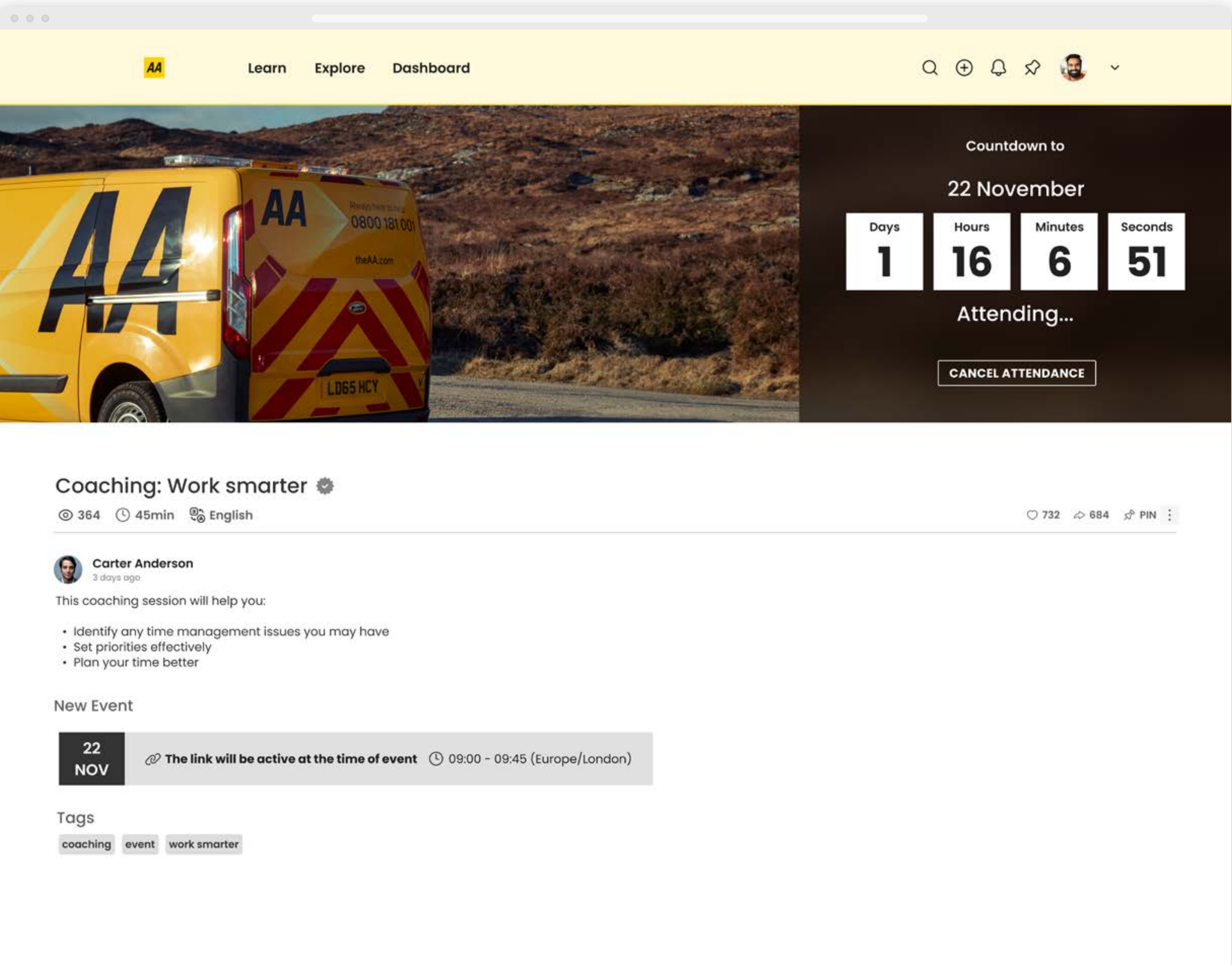
Do you really want to change?

The very first question you need to ask yourself is, do you really want to change? And I mean really, really change?

I’ve worked with a lot of businesses over the years. Some are heavily invested in evolving, and some just aren’t quite there yet (which is okay, by the way.) These changes will likely rely on you learning new skills,

changing the way you work with the business, and relinquishing control.

This isn’t just happening in learning. It’s across the board with things like flexible hours, unlimited holiday, agile projects, remote working and more. They each require organisations to trust and let go.



What does your business want?

I thought I'd start by looking at some of the common challenges businesses face today, as there are typically some commonalities across the board, including:

- Digital transformation
- Employee engagement
- Agile working
- Developing leaders
- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Transparency and improved communication

I'm sure you'll recognise at least one, if not all of these points. And you're not alone. According to IDG's 2018 Digital Business Survey, more and more organisations are evolving into a digital business model to improve customer experience and employee engagement. But their biggest struggle? Culture management.

What's common between each of these challenges is that they will all involve some element of cultural change, whether it be creating a more inclusive environment, convincing employees to change their ways of working or adoption of new technologies.

Compliance alone cannot change cultures

Cultural change (and its challenges) is only something I experienced personally fairly recently.

I started my career implementing LMSs, and the concept of culture was not something I ever really came across. Why?

Because I was implementing platforms designed to track and manage compliance training. People had to do it; meaning L&D never had to do any persuasion or convincing.

It was only when I started working with Learning Experience Platforms (LXPs) and trying to implement one in my own organisation that I realised:

“Oh my, this isn't just about the technology, this is a whole new way of doing things and is essentially changing a culture!”

What does changing cultures look like?

Here are some of the common concepts and strategies I have seen many L&D departments try to improve on, evolve to or instigate in their business:

- Point of need learning
- Transparent environment
- Self-directed learning
- Equal access to resources
- Opportunities for coaching
- Increased and improved access to content
- A wider variety of learning content

Some of these concepts require a notable shift in skills and attitude, from both L&D teams and employees.

So, what do we do? How do we take a learning culture from a place where learning is something that's 'done' when asked, to an environment where it's continuous, available at the point of need, and so ingrained in the everyday that it's not even identified as learning?

We bring in some shiny new tech and hope that will do the job for us.

But just implementing tech doesn't do much to change existing mindsets, establish new ways of working, or encourage employees to drive their own development.

Here's a scenario I've seen many times:

"I want my employees to take more responsibility for their learning, so I'm going to give them access to an online catalogue of books, videos and PDF's."

That's a really great idea, but how do you know people will use it? "If you build it, they will come" doesn't really apply in this context.

Ironically, in a world where technology is advancing faster than ever, tech can still only take us so far.

The success of a lot of workplace technology is still dependent on the humans using it.

So what else can we do to change a learning culture?

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Reposition learning

First things first: we need to change our perception of learning. Let's look at some things that might occur in the workplace, and ask the question: are these learning?

- I receive an email telling me my company just won a massive new account
- My colleague shows me how to submit my expenses
- My CEO records a little update to tell us what's been going on in the business this week

This conversation is nothing new, but it's still valid. For the purpose of this exercise, the answer is yes! These are all learning. Every time you are exposed to new information, you are learning.

And these days, we're exposed to more information than ever before. It's literally everywhere. That said, part of the problem we cause for ourselves is we segment learning off as a thing that is done separately from work, rather than something that is accepted as a part of the everyday.

To allow us to begin to change this we need to look at how L&D, but also learning in general, is perceived in our business.

What's your L&D brand?

Being aware of how you are perceived is highly valuable when embarking on, well, anything, but especially large scale change management. What are people saying about L&D and training when you're not in the room? What is your brand?

We recently conducted some research that found that 41% of employees said they commit no time to learning every day. This is a huge percentage, which I personally think may be correlated with the brand attached to learning. In reality, this can't be possible. People learn all the time, everyday, but they just don't perceive it as learning. We need to change the perception.

Learning can come from anywhere. YouTube. Podcasts. Cookbooks. Watching other people.

It's no different in the workplace. You might learn a helpful keyboard shortcut from your resident tech expert, or pick up on a good way to start meetings from watching a colleague do it well.

These are all things that you might not necessarily consider to be learning, because they didn't happen in a classroom or while logged into an LMS.

But it's all still learning.

41%

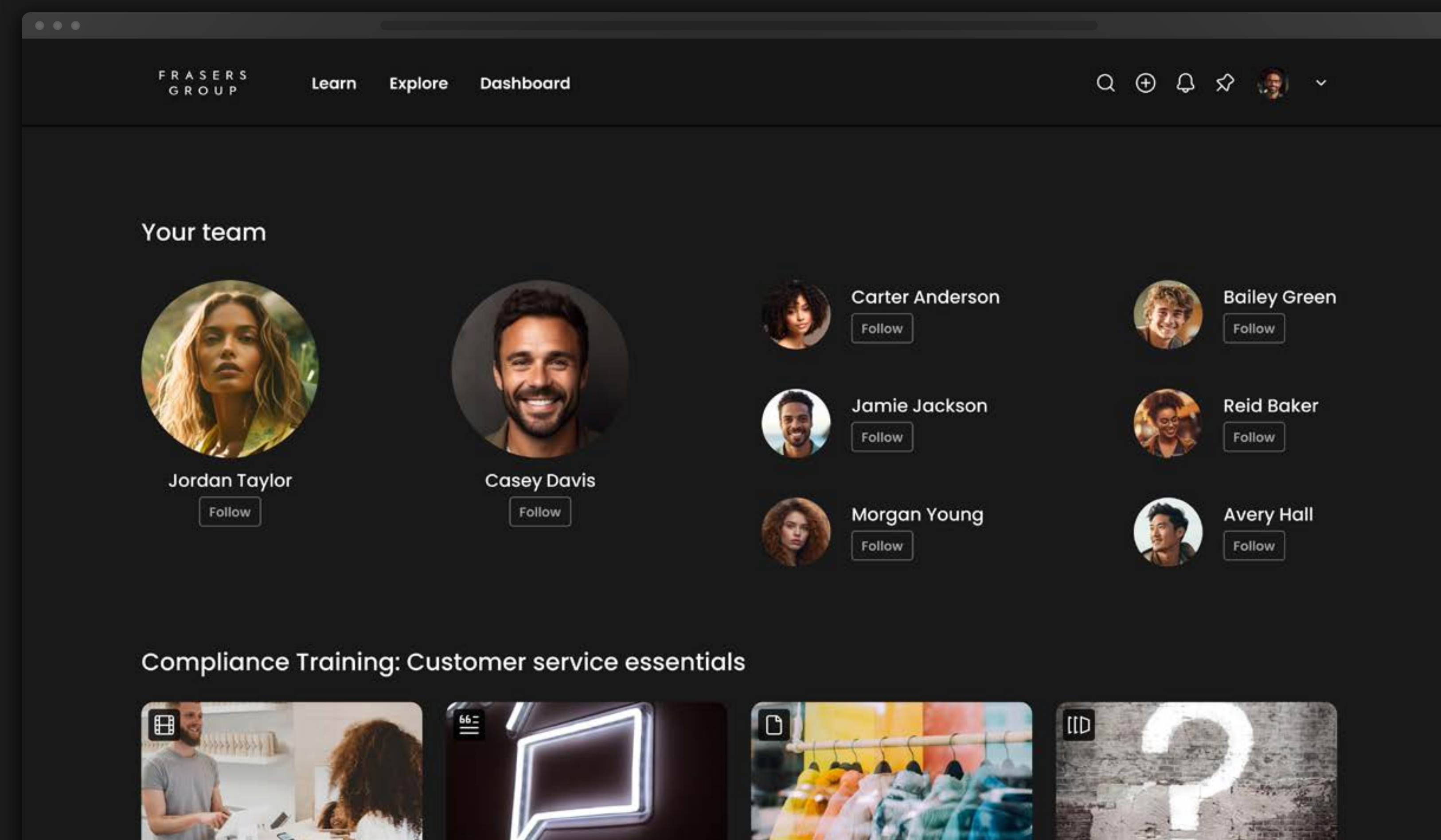
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Connecting people to content & people to people

Ultimately, when we break it down to its very foundations like this, learning is just information. Information consumed via content, or via people and experiences.

This is why when embarking on designing the LXP element of our learning platform, our main focus was:

“How do we connect people to content and people to people in the most personalised and effective way?”



Making more of learning content

Let's take content first. Content is something that we know a lot about in our personal lives. We're constantly attached to it.

It's in our pocket all day long and we can't get enough of it - Instagram, YouTube, Netflix, Spotify, LinkedIn, podcasts, articles, the list goes on.

That's a lot of information. The point here, in my opinion, is once we recognise that a large part of learning is just content that we're all familiar with, we can begin to build better solutions for our teams.



300 hours of video consumed



6.9 million videos watched



4.1 million likes



86,805 hours streamed

What does that look like? Now, this is where technology can help. Here are some ideas:

Simplify experiences with single platforms

Some of the most successful learning cultures I've seen have done away with their siloed systems, and used one platform for learning, communications, internal policies and procedures.

After all, it's all just content, whether it be a company update, a how-to video or a policy document.

Consumption of content in this way is very familiar to us in our personal lives - we don't have separate YouTube sites for learning and entertainment.

It's all in one place, but personalised so well and coupled with such powerful search functionality that we don't even really notice. Merging these things together in one platform simplifies the user experience. People get used to relying on the platform daily and learning is easily accessible to the user when they need it.

For example, imagine I have an expense claim form that I need to fill in, but I'm not sure how to do it. How much easier would it be if there was a 'how to claim expenses' video sitting on the platform next to it?

Shake up your content strategy - or get one!

On the subject of content: get some, and a lot of it.

This is another prime example of where technology alone falls down - shiny new platforms, but nothing for people to look at.

At the same time, generating all of this content is a huge task for L&D departments. So move away from more traditional methods.

Embrace external, web-based content, use tools and knowledge you have internally, share content and resources with other people and fight the desire to make everything bespoke. This is one of the areas where we need to let go.

Auto-curation tools can help you populate your platform, and make the initial content curation process even more efficient.

Provide consumer-grade experiences

Bringing our content in line with how we experience it in our personal lives is one thing, but it also needs to be presented to people in a way that is familiar to them.

First things first, your learning platform has to look good - we're competing with the Instagrams of the world here. It's got to be personalised, easily accessible on a phone or tablet, and have a killer search feature.

There's no point having all this lovely content if you don't give it a good home and people can't find it.

But if you can do all this, you're really getting to a place where you're essentially creating an internal Google.

Your platform truly becomes a one-stop-shop for anything an employee would want or need to know about. And that's where we really need to be trying to get to.

Connecting people with people

So what about people? How can we use technology to better support people learning from each other and creating more human connections?

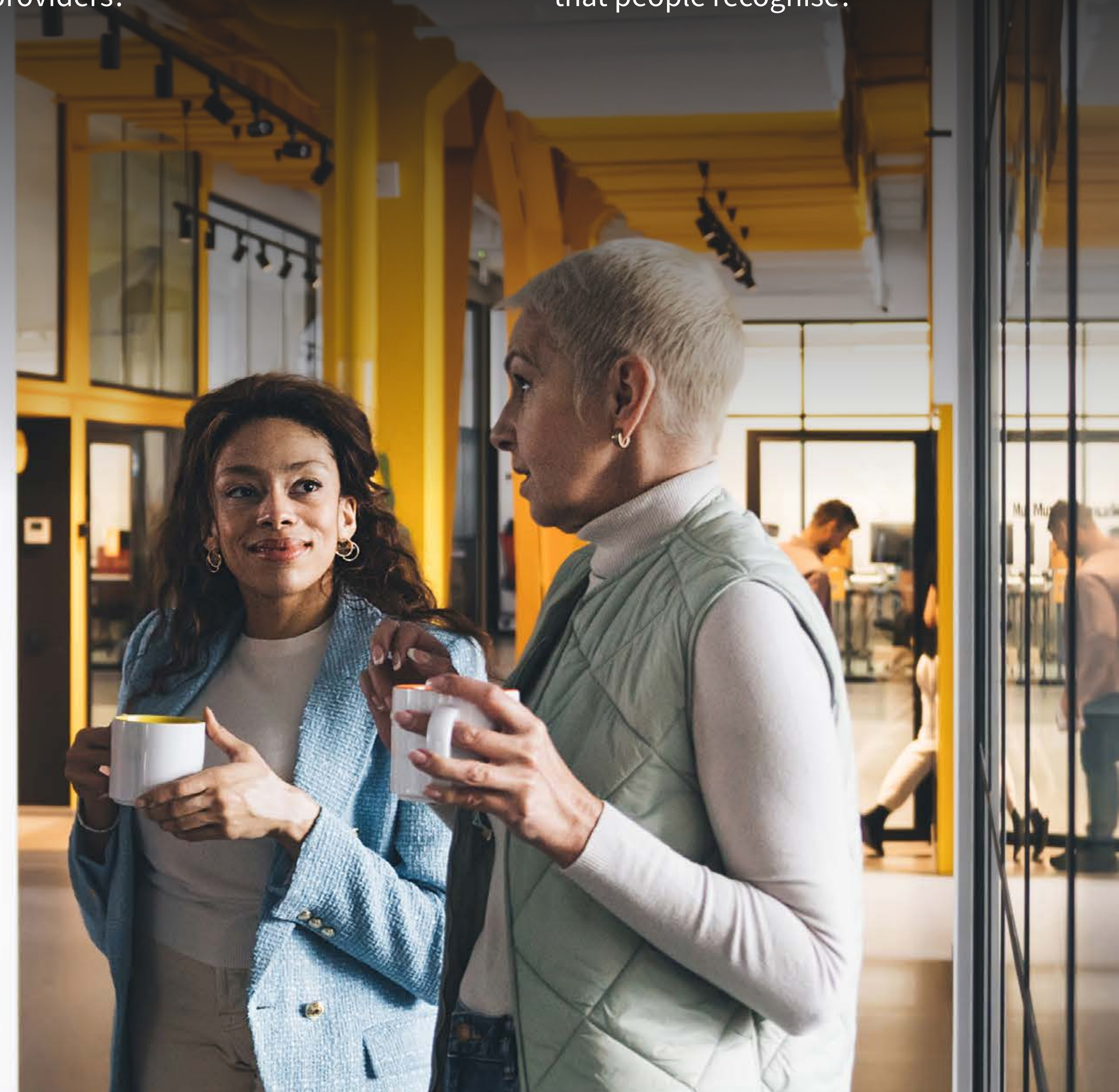
I'm not going to harp on too much about what social learning is, but I will say what it's not.

Social learning is not a controlled, sectioned-off part of an online course which includes a forum for people to discuss what they've learned...

...and it's not something that can be put to one side and ticked off a checklist.

Social interactions are so innately embedded in human life that the concept of having a place where I go to 'do' social learning seems wildly illogical. So why is it that I still hear phrases like 'Social Learning Module', 'Add-on', 'Plug-in' from so many providers?

This, to me, suggests there is a single place you go to 'complete' social learning and, more importantly, that it's separate from where you do your 'non-social' learning. But this is not how people behave, so what can we do to promote social learning in a way that people recognise?



Support User Generated Content (UGC)

92% of people are more likely to trust a recommendation from another person over branded/official content.

And this isn't just people they know, this is any random person. This is why things like reviews and user-uploaded photos of products are so important to us. We trust them more as they have no alternate motive.

UGC can be really powerful. There is so much amazing knowledge in the heads of your employees, it needs to be let free! I'm sure you all have that one person in your team that you think: "If they left tomorrow, we'd be absolutely screwed." This is what UGC can help protect you from and gives employees some real practical control over their learning.

Also, if you look at it selfishly, it's also really going to help you with all that content you suddenly need to build too - your teams can do some of it for you.

User generated content is one of the biggest steps you can take towards modernising your learning culture as it sends a very clear message that you are embracing change.

Managers can suddenly communicate instantly with their teams, people can ask others questions, get quick answers and, at last, share all the knowledge that's been bottled inside them.

Foster and support human connections

A really interesting area we've been looking into recently is how we can use technology to better connect people.

Now I'm not just talking about online, I'm also talking about the real world. How can we simply get people to talk more?

In the past I've worked for very large organisations - one with 70,000 people! As a result, I really struggled to grow my network, know who to go to and who could help.

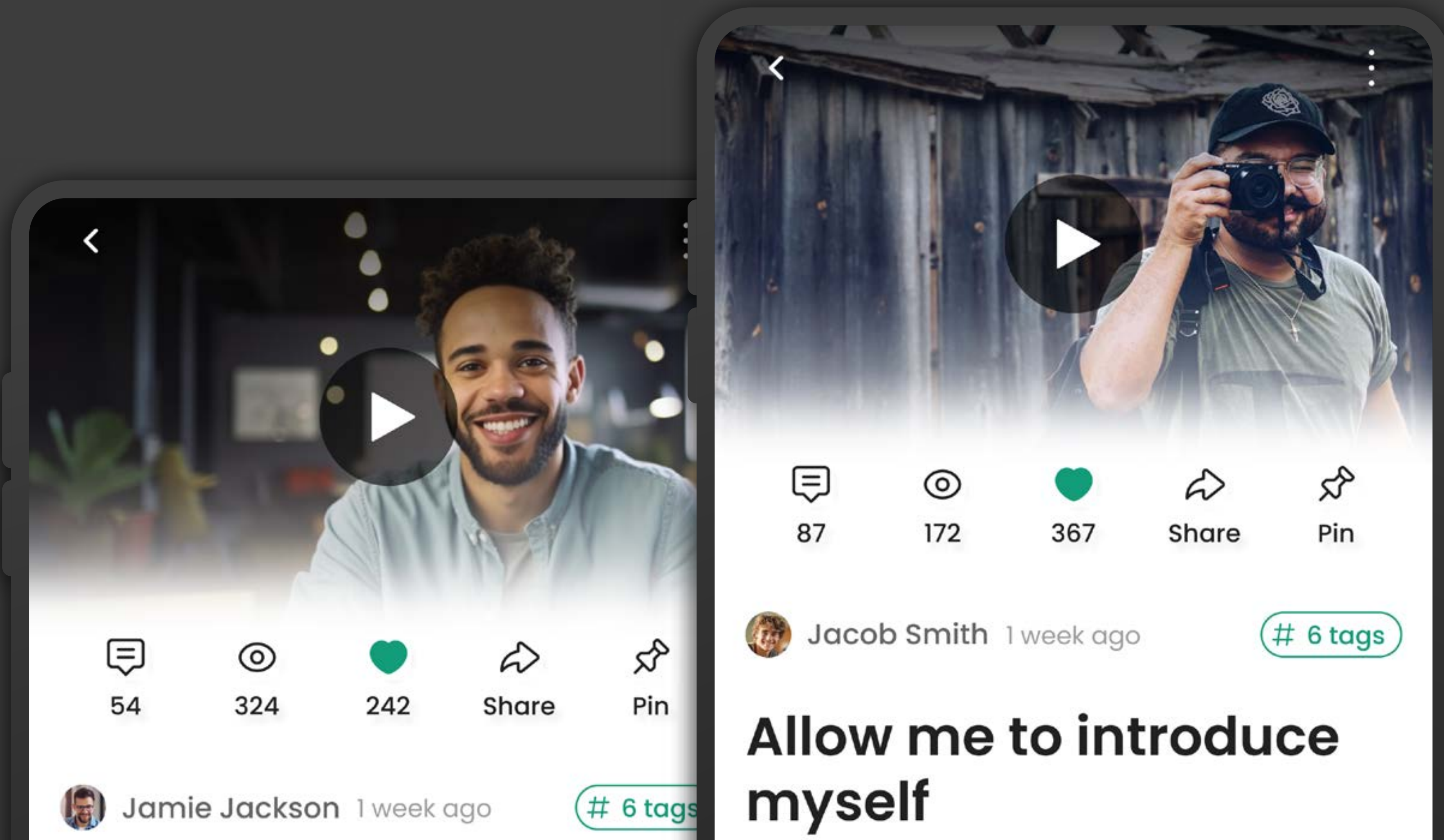
I just didn't know where the knowledge sat in the business and had no way to find out other than asking people. I think this is a real problem for a lot of businesses and is one area where technology can help.

This is something that can be done in many ways but I'm going to share how we've approached it with our learning platform to provide some inspiration. We've created tools that allow users to search for certain skills, and it will also suggest recommended people who are skilled in those areas.

They can also search for people by name and choose to follow them if they like - much like you would on Instagram.

The idea is that we allow people to find people at the point of need - i.e. 'I need a PM for a project I'm running', but also to seek out experts to help mentor them in their areas of interest.

While the connection is on a digital platform, we hope this will actually prompt more people to connect in the real world, face to face and encourage things like mentoring, coaching and cross-departmental working.



Better understand learner motivation

So we've seen how we need to reposition learning in our own minds before rolling this out to the business, and indeed how to use content to connect people, but what do we do if our audience doesn't come on this journey with us?

This brings us to the third element of this culture change journey we've embarked on. Motivation.

How do we encourage people to embrace this new approach to learning and development? They may be very familiar with it at home, but people's attitude at work and at home can be different.

It's the biggest cliché, but you need to take the time to understand your audience and what makes them tick. To allow us to begin to change this, we need to look at how L&D, but also learning in general, is perceived in our business.

What motivates you?

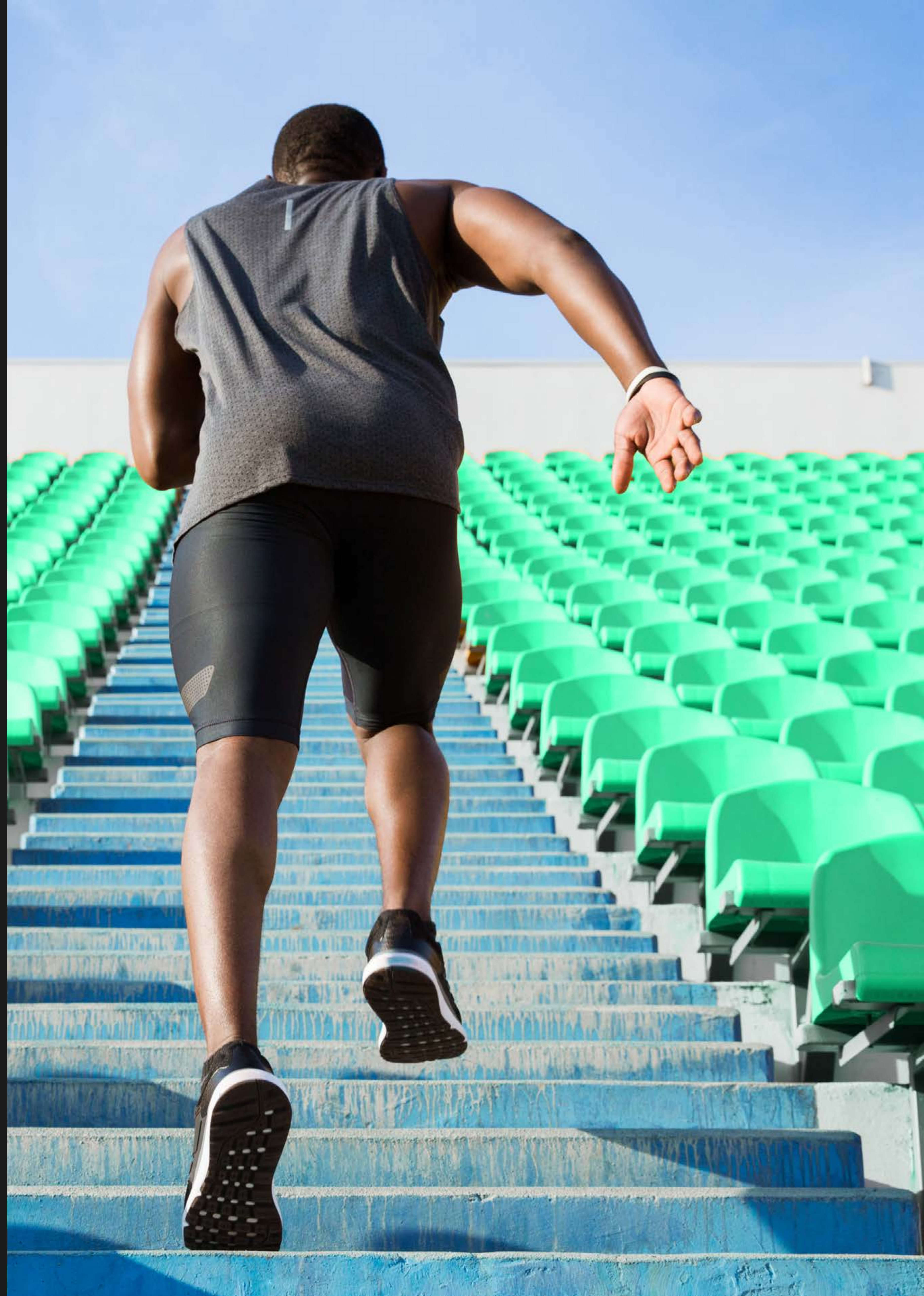
Take a moment to think about what motivates you to learn, both in your personal life and at work.

Some people want to get ahead in their career, which can be linked to security and financial gain.

Some people are more interested in becoming a respected expert, a thought leader people look up to.

Others are genuinely motivated by helping others and making their lives better. Then you've got good old fashioned curiosity. Finally, let's not forget our old friend, fear, e.g. "If I don't do this, I'm going to fall behind."

Understanding motivation is super important, but how do we do this?



Make it real

This brings me onto my next point: making it real for people.

This is often an easy sell. An example of this could be how to convince people to start creating UGC.

This isn't an easy thing to do sometimes. But let's say you can find that person in your business who gets asked the same question five times a week and is tired of repeating themselves or sharing the same document. If you tell them that they can save time by simply sharing the answer on an easily-searchable platform for everyone to see, it's a game changer.

Right there, you have identified a real problem and provided a solution.

Another way to make things real is to clearly link content to what someone wants to achieve, or what motivates them.

If development is what drives them, then make sure your content is structured in a way that makes it clear what role they could do with this new knowledge they acquire.

For someone to embark on self-directed learning, they need to have a clear understanding as to where it could take them. Create pathways that represent the journey your end users need to take, or empower them to build their own.

Ask people

This sounds obvious, but ask people what they want!

This seems like the most ridiculous thing to say, but you might be surprised how little it is done. It is the best, most practical advice for understanding motivators out there. This applies across the board, but particularly when trying to implement

anything new - be it tech, processes or similar.

If you can survey, interview or use focus groups to better understand who your audience are, what their real problems are and what motivates them, you'll find the change management process much smoother.

Trust is necessary for self-directed learning

In all of this, trust is key.

Trust in your people to take charge of their own learning, and connect with others in a way that doesn't require you to over-moderate or restrict them. Let it go. Give people time to explore, let them set their own path and encourage self-directed learning.

For example, I used to give my old team one day a week for self-directed learning so they could try new things out and learn new skills.

And, honestly, the best things came out of this. It was a benefit to both them individually and the business as a whole. If you really want to encourage a real, organisation-wide learning culture, you will need to carve out time so they can get on board.

Otherwise, it'll just be seen as something else they need to do, or just another platform to deal with.

Create a buzz

Now we have the right content and have spent some time understanding our people, we need to promote and drive these changes forward. You've probably already heard this a lot, but it's true that in order to be successful L&D needs to behave more like marketing.

You cannot approach what is essentially change management by sending out a few emails, no matter how good your product or your understanding of your people is.

That's a bit like Apple bringing out a new product with no research about their end users, conducting no testing, and doing absolutely zero advertising or marketing. It just wouldn't happen. We need to be treating anything that affects our employees in the same way we would treat our customers. There's no way you'd roll out a new product to your customers without doing these things.

We need to be getting out into the business to promote change.

So how do we do this?



Develop buy-in from stakeholders

The first - and often most debated - important factor that can help with change is the development of buy-in.

70% of change management projects fail. Culture is often cited as the number one reason for this. There's so much focus on the technical and process deliverables, that the people and the culture are forgotten.

Developing buy-in seems obvious, but 72% of all failures in change management are put down to getting this wrong - whether it be from resistance from managers or employees.

The message from the top must be consistent and senior leadership must be invested in the change, for real. They have to really be in it, not just saying they are. We must practise what we preach.

Managers can be the hardest to get on board. They need to be given more ownership of change, rather than just passing down messages. For example, if you want your learners to be completing more self-directed learning, their manager needs to be allowing them time for this and actively encouraging it, rather than saying 'that's not important, do this instead.'

Get in the trenches to build advocates

Going back to motivation, we need to really find out about our managers and work closely with them to get them on side. I'm talking literal one-to-ones here. You'd be amazed how much good a ten

minute conversation can do compared to twenty emails. In the past when I've been trying to convince people to change a behaviour, I've had to sit down with them, find out their problems, and show them how this new thing can really help them. They'd come in sceptics and leave advocates, also feeling much more included. You don't even necessarily need to do this with everyone; once you get a few on side, it'll spread.

If you can get even a handful of people genuinely excited about what you're doing, it can be really powerful. But don't force this on people. Instead, provide the opportunity to become champions, invest time in getting people excited, and position it as a great thing to help them extend their network and add another string to their bow.

Get in there early

Finally on buy-in, get people to participate from day one. Give them an amazing onboarding experience that introduces them to new ways of working, and get them involved early so it becomes the norm to them.

Take this example from a company I previously worked for: Each new starter was encouraged to record a video of themselves saying who they were, before sharing it across the business. This was a great way to welcome people and make everyone seem more human. As it was done on their first day no one objected, and it sent a clear message that video communication was something we do.

Communicate continuously

Taking another page out of the book of marketing, communicate more than you think is necessary. This all starts with the vision, and really selling why you're trying to do whatever it is you're doing. You have to get hearts and minds on your side.

Linking back to our consumer-grade experiences, market to your users like you would your customers. Don't just send out a boring, 1000 word email. Instead, create a fun video, do something more inspirational, create teaser trailers, bake a cake, whatever you need to do to get people genuinely excited. And if you do make a video, don't just film your CEO sitting behind a desk spouting out the party line. Use real employees, people who genuinely benefit from the changes you're implementing, and make it feel relevant.

Once you're into the thick of the change/project, celebrate wins. It's all about communicating the positive messages and behaviours and separately addressing more negative grumblings. So if you find an individual or team have really been demonstrating whatever it is you're looking for - say, sharing their knowledge online - make sure you shout about it.

But you and your team have to stay strong and stay positive, as it will be challenging at times. The only thing which will make it succeed is your tenacity, passion and enthusiasm. Trust me, it will be infectious.

Finally, make your communication relevant. This is another page we can take out of Marketing's book. There are loads of great resources available online around content marketing and how to run a great campaign, and these principles also work in learning.

For example, if I'm trying to encourage more people to self-direct their learning and I know there's a group of users who are interested in learning about design, I might send them a YouTube series about design and simply say, "Hey, did you know this was here?"

Benchmark and measure impact over time

Imagine you've put loads of time and energy into an initiative; you've talked to people, you've changed your approach, you've upskilled the team - but then, you don't really have any way of measuring the impact. For me, that would be totally demoralising. Data collection and measuring what we're doing is all part of being curious, and is essential to creating more curiosity within your organisation.

Before you start any project, in particular one that requires a culture change, do some benchmarking. Get some surveys out there to better understand how people currently feel, collect data when you interview, and look at existing data sources such as employee engagement, happiness scores, NPS scores, sales or any other metric you have.

Not doing benchmarking is a bit like not taking a before photo of a house renovation, but still expecting people to be wowed when they see what you've done. Think about all the hours scraping wallpaper, pulling up carpets, glossing skirting boards, all for someone to say 'yeah, it's nice.'

You put in the work, you should be able to impress people. Equally, you need to be able to monitor and track impact over time (failures and successes) in order to iterate and continuously improve.

I think sometimes people don't do these things as they're worried that by using data, they might reveal things they'd rather keep hidden. I understand this. I would hate to work hard on a project only to show it's made no difference, but at least we can see what went wrong and improve.

This is why it's also important to track and measure as you go and adapt based on your findings. Maybe you've rolled out a campaign and the first touch point was a video. Most people who watched it only watched the first 20 seconds. This is great feedback to allow you to adapt.

This is partly why we've included a campaigns feature in our learning platform, so you can schedule as many campaigns as you like, run them automatically and track how well they've been received.

Changing cultures is hard, *but not impossible*

The reality is, evolving your learning culture is a really challenging task, but it's also a necessary one.

We're suffering from endemic levels of employee apathy, disconnection and frustration with access to information. We know what our learners want and need in order to better engage with the business - so why aren't we giving it to them?

Sometimes, the hardest things are the most rewarding. So get out there and start understanding what it is your learners want.

Remember, changing cultures is for long-term gains, not short-term wins. The change will be worth it, I promise.

If you want to learn how a learning experience platform could support you in changing your learning culture, [why not get access to a free on-demand demo now?](#)

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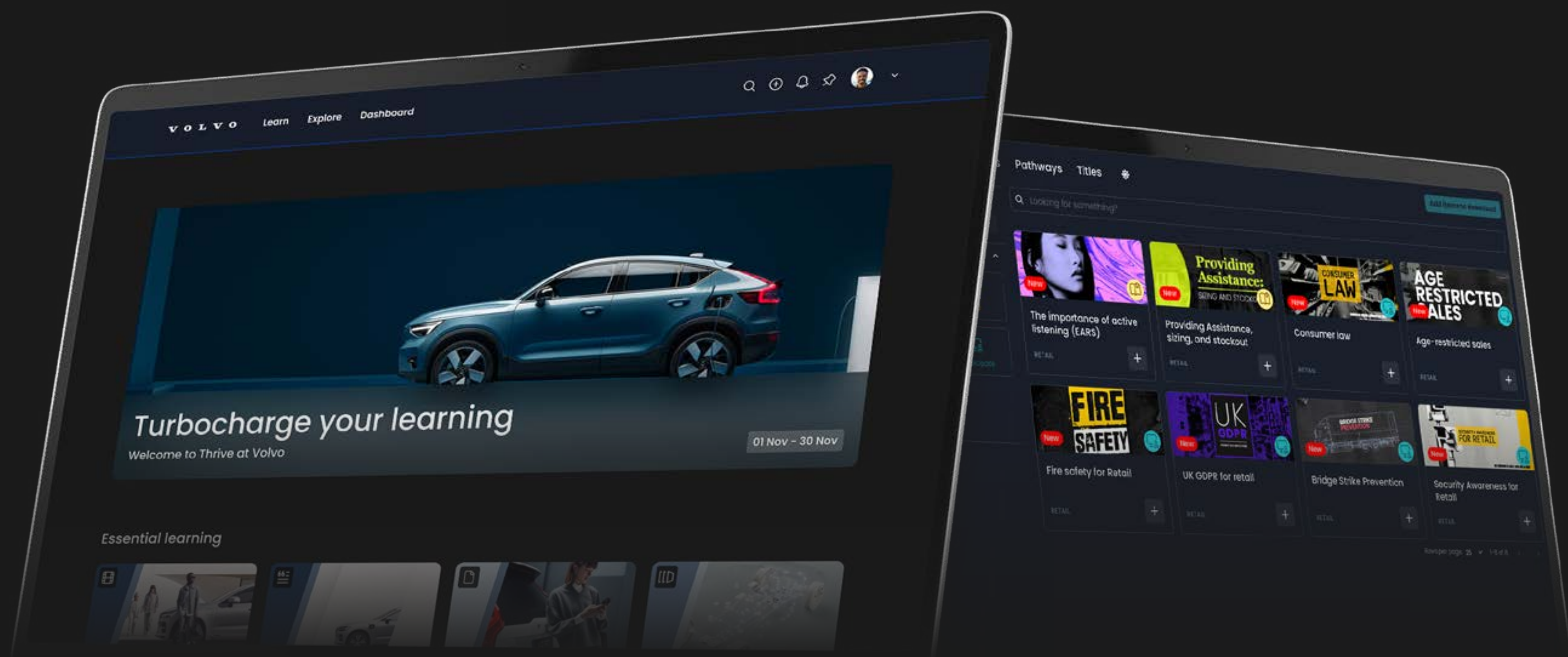
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