GUUS VAN DEELEN

ORGANIZING L&D FOR RESULTS

MANAGING LEARNING FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

THEMA.

Contents

1 Unlocking the true potential of your L&D department

Countless books have been written about designing and developing learning solutions, yet almost none about building and refining Learning and Development (L&D) departments themselves. It's time to fill that gap. This book offers practical guidance on how to strategically build and enhance your L&D department, transforming it into a powerhouse of organizational growth.

Many organizations lack a well-structured plan to shape their L&D departments effectively. They often don't have the time or the expertise to think it through. But that's about to change for you! Together, we'll embark on a journey to create a comprehensive plan that brings sharper focus, delighted customers and greater job satisfaction.

I'm Guus van Deelen, an L&D professional who is passionate about transforming organizational learning. Over the past seventeen years, I've worn many hats in the L&D world – from managing large L&D departments at multinational companies to consulting, instructional design and training facilitation for diverse organizations. Along the way, I've gained invaluable insights and, yes, learned some tough lessons.

Throughout my career, I've collaborated with over a hundred L&D departments across various sectors – from government to retail and from industry to financial services. This extensive experience has helped me uncover the root causes of common challenges in L&D. And what have I discovered? Everywhere, things are a bit of a mess – but no two messes are the same.

At conferences, L&D often shines as a cutting-edge field, with buzzworthy topics like gamification, augmented reality and evidence-based evaluation methods. But when you compare these impressive narratives to everyday practice, you might start to wonder how much truth lies behind them.

There is still a significant amount of foundational work needed to organize learning in organizations in a smart, efficient and, most importantly, customer-centric way. My intention is not to sound negative but to put things into perspective. In this book, I will share my knowledge and experiences in what some might call a typically Dutch style: straightforward, concise and practical.

This book is for L&D and HR professionals who want to organize their departments and their work more efficiently, with a stronger customer focus. While it's often the role of the L&D manager to consider the vision, operations and services provided, this book is also invaluable for L&D consultants, HR business partners and HR managers. In short, it's for anyone looking to elevate L&D services and foster better collaboration within their organization.

Freelance L&D consultants and L&D service providers can also gain a competitive edge from a deeper understanding of how L&D departments work and their common pitfalls.

Is this book exhaustive? Certainly not. It provides tools, gives structure to vague challenges, and helps identify logical first steps. Want to go deeper? The appendices include useful models, and additional templates and videos are available at **guusvandeelen.nl/boek.**

The key is to apply and test new insights in practice. Building an effective L&D function requires careful thought, iteration, and adaptability. There's no universal blueprint—organizations operate with too many variables for simple answers. You'll never have complete information, nor will there be a single 'best' solution. This uncertainty can be paralyzing, leading to over-analysis instead of action.

This book is not an academic treatise but a toolbox—a starting point for structured experimentation. It offers frameworks and real-world examples to help shape an L&D function that meets your organization's needs.
Are you ready to make a lasting impact? Let's get started.

Critical voices and ideas are most welcome

My firm tone may sometimes give the impression that I know everything, which, of course, is not the case. I'm eager to learn from you as a reader. If, while reading, you come across any inaccuracies or notice perspectives that feel overly one-sided, please share your thoughts and ideas. I enjoy being challenged and keen-eyed feedback is always welcome! With our combined expertise, the next edition can be even better. You can find my contact details on the website mentioned above.

2 How to use and read this book

The main purpose of this book is to be **practical**. It is designed to help you create a concrete plan and bridge the gap between your current situation and your ideal future. This makes it more of a practice book than a reading book. That doesn't mean you shouldn't read it from cover to cover, but you can also focus on the sections most relevant to you.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part establishes a common language and context, which is essential for understanding the rest of the content. Following this, you will perform a gap analysis: assessing where your L&D department is today and where you want it to be. For this, you will use a canvas that guides you to logical insights through manageable steps. The goal is to gain a clear picture of your current situation and define what you aim to achieve in the future.

Once this foundation is in place, the second part allows you to concentrate on the chapters that are most relevant to your specific plan. You can focus on themes that need more attention to foster growth while addressing areas which are consuming too much time. This might involve developing strategies to improve or even eliminate these inefficiencies. In short, part one helps you determine your destination, while part two outlines the most effective route to reach it.

At the core of this book is the L&D Quick Scan:

I developed this model based on years of practical experience with L&D and HR professionals, as well as line managers. It captures the critical leverage points for organizing L&D work, giving you a comprehensive view of your department's activities.

The model emerged from recurring confusion in my conversations with L&D and HR professionals and line managers about L&D services. Although we often believed we were discussing the same topics, we often realized later that we weren't.

The Quick Scan enables clear decision-making and fosters more precise discussions about what you want to prioritize. It reduces misunderstandings and ensures everyone in your department speaks the same language. A practical explanation of this model is provided later in the book.

3 Some necessary terms

Unlike fields such as IT, which many outsiders consider a complex and incomprehensible field, learning is something everyone has experienced and therefore thinks they know something about. L&D professionals often have to deal with clients who tend to provide their own input, give solicited and unsolicited advice and may have even already decided what solution they need or think they need. At the same time, L&D professionals come from diverse backgrounds, meaning many use different terms or assign varied meanings to the same concept. That is why I will first take you through some important terms that will be used frequently in this book. These are not scientific definitions, but my interpretation of various important, commonly used terms.

THE CUSTOMER

If you work in an organization's L&D department, your work involves supporting other departments, especially the primary processes. In other words, you serve the rest of the organization, just like the Finance, IT and Communications departments. We work for our internal 'customers' and our services and products enable others to work more effectively.

Before determining our key customers, we need to define what 'the customer' means in the context of L&D. Here's a simple example about diapers to illustrate why this can be confusing. Is the customer the child or the parent? A good rule of thumb for identifying the end customer is that they are willing to pay for a service or product. They have a specific question or need and purchase a solution. A Service Desk Manager may want to improve the onboarding process for new employees, for example, or a Sales Manager might want to develop an eLearning module for a new sales strategy.

THE END USER

The end user is the person who uses what you offer, like the baby wearing the diaper. In L&D terms, this is usually the employee who follows or uses the learning solution. While their needs and wants are important, they are not always leading. A boring but effective instructional video may be the perfect solution for the customer because it addresses the problem, but employees may not necessarily be excited about it.

Where possible, you should try to fulfil the requirements of both the customer and the end user. In practice, however, these two needs are not always clearly separated. All too often, I come across slogans and visions from L&D departments that focus primarily on making learning interventions fun for employees. As such, they overemphasize the user experience. The main goal should be to contribute to the strategic challenges of the organization, which essentially means defining senior management as the customer. At the same time, we have an ethical responsibility towards our learners. It's crucial to ensure that the solutions we design are meaningful, purposeful and aligned with both individual and organizational goals.

In the world of L&D, you deal with customers at different levels, each with their own specific needs. In some cases, employees may also be your customer, especially when it comes to attracting and retaining employees. A development offering can make a massive contribution to an employer's reputation and attractiveness, as LinkedIn's annual Workplace Learning Report shows every year (more on this below).

Middle managers are often occasional customers. They'll have one-off, sometimes urgent questions. This group mostly want quick, targeted solutions. The issues usually involve a relatively small audience, such as a single team. Later in this book, I'll explain why these managers need a different level of service than managers with an issue that affects the whole organization. In addition, there are structural customers, often in higher positions in the organization. They are responsible for a business unit or staff department and focus on achieving long-term strategic goals. One example is a board of directors that has the ambition to professionalize management across the organization. These are often large and complex issues, which require a different approach, a different type of collaboration and a different level of service from L&D than implementing a simple eLearning module.

Why we should stop using the term 'internal customer'

Ger Driesen (Learning Innovation Leader)

In my 30 years in L&D, I've often come across the term 'internal customer' – a firm favourite among L&D professionals. I always advise against using it and here's why. The connotation of 'internal customer' produces an unequal relationship, in which the customer is more important than the consultant. This notion, reinforced by slogans like 'The customer is king', positions L&D consultants as order takers. Often, as 'kings', managers put their wishes and solutions on the table, making any further analysis seem unnecessary. 'Just fix it and we'll be happy', becomes the motto. In reality, managers and L&D consultants should be partners, contributing to the organization's goals together. Without constructive challenges, there is a risk of superficial solutions that focus on symptoms rather than root causes, leading to learning interventions that fail to resonate with the organization and result in minimal impact. Constructive confrontations are essential for achieving optimal results.

You might accuse me of nit-picking or arguing semantics, but that is not my intention. Throughout my career, I have discovered the power that words have in shaping our mindset and behaviour. During training sessions, I had trainees replace the term 'internal customer' to redefine their professional identity. The term does not suit the professional identity of an L&D professional; it is misleading and counterproductive. So, let's get rid of it.

While I share many of Ger's views, I do believe that the term 'customer' still has value in L&D contexts, mainly because L&D professionals are often rather internally focused. We frequently get lost in our methods and visions of learning, forgetting to connect with the reality of the business. At the end of the day, we are a department that has an indirect impact on other people's work. Managers have a direct impact on results; our strength lies in advising and enabling others to be successful.

Later in this book, I will explain that this does not mean that you should never question orders. On the contrary, you can work excellently as a business partner with your 'customers'. The term 'customer' emphasizes that they are the initiator and problem owner of the issues we address. The customer mainly determines the 'what' – it is their problem that needs to be solved. L&D provides support and mainly determines the ‘how’. L&D does not take on the role of problem owner. So, while the term ‘customer’ has its drawbacks, it also has its advantages. It makes it clear for whom we work and who bears what responsibility.

STAKEHOLDERS

A stakeholder is someone who has an interest, concern or involvement. It is a broad term that sometimes causes confusion. Stakeholders are not necessarily the initiators and they come in all shapes and sizes. Some can get in your way, while others can help you. For example, a CEO may be enthusiastic about a five-day training course, while an operations manager may not want to miss their team for that long. Or consider an IT manager concerned about the cyber security risks posed by a new performance support tool.

On the website accompanying this book, you will find a project document template. This helps you map out stakeholders in a structured way. Ideally, when you start working on a challenge, you and the customer/initiator should map out important stakeholders and determine how, by whom and when these stakeholders will be managed.

COLLABORATION PARTNERS

Finally, L&D departments often collaborate with others to achieve customer value. These could be internal colleagues with specialized knowledge (Subject Matter Experts), a communications department that helps you launch a campaign for your employees or an HR business partner (HR BP) that supports local implementation. In addition, external parties can also play a role in realizing the solution, such as a training agency to whom you outsource an issue or the supplier of your Learning Management System (LMS). The difference between a collaboration partner and a stakeholder relates to the fact that a partner contributes to a part of the solution.

As you can see, terms that seem closely related can have quite different meanings within the context of the L&D field.

CUSTOMER VALUE

Customer value is a central concept in this book and stems from the Lean Management philosophy. It represents services and products that your customers actually perceive as valuable. Imagine: you have managed to capture the entire employee onboarding process in an intuitive app, dramatically improving the experience and onboarding time for new employees and eliminating admin work for managers. This solution would certainly be very valuable to management.

Customer value refers to the attributes of a service or product that bring satisfaction to customers. In the context of L&D, this often translates to employees who are onboarded effectively and equipped with the skills to perform their roles successfully. To get there, you might need online courses with appropriate, organization-specific examples or an experienced trainer who understands the organization's context. The better you score on these attributes, the more satisfied your customers will be.

However, there are additional, less obvious ways in which L&D can deliver customer value. For instance, consider developing a dashboard that tracks the remaining training budget and monitors whether everyone has completed their mandatory training courses. Customers are not always aware of what is possible and may have quite one-dimensional ideas about solutions. It is crucial to understand their challenge but avoid adopting their requested solution too literally. With our expertise, we can exceed expectations by incorporating surprising, unexpected features that customers did not specifically request but will appreciate.

> *"People don't know what they want until you show them"*
>
> — Steve Jobs

Customer value is often contrasted with two other concepts – necessary activities and waste.

NECESSARY ACTIVITIES

Necessary activities are the minimum requirements that your product or service must fulfil. Customers expect any solution you propose to meet these standards. For instance, they expect an eLearning module to function properly and invitation emails to contain all the essential information. If these requirements aren't met, customers will be dissatisfied. However, if you do meet them, customers will likely take them for granted.

Meeting basic requirements is crucial, yet customers may not explicitly acknowledge this as added value. Consider it like cleaning plates in a restaurant: customers expect it to be done, but don't tip extra for it. Many coordinating activities within

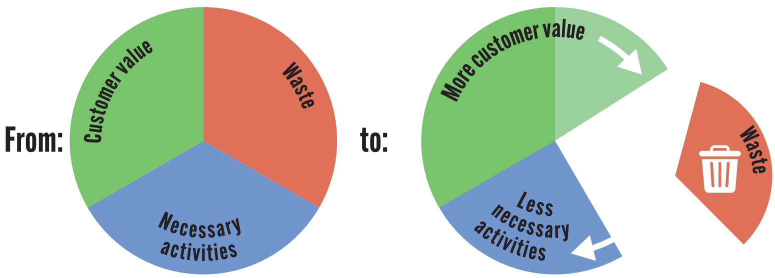
L&D departments, such as scheduling training sessions, updating the learning management system and running reports, fall into this category. These tasks, while time consuming and essential, often go unnoticed by customers.

It is vital to perform these tasks accurately while minimizing the time spent on them. This allows you to allocate more time to activities that customers truly perceive as valuable.

WASTE

An L&D department will sometimes provide services that customers neither requested nor wanted. This often happens due to incorrect assumptions or established routines. If almost no one notices or complains when a particular service or product is discontinued, it was probably unnecessary and a form of waste.

For instance, I spent years as a trainer working for a large training provider. Each training session came with stacks of printed exercises, yet I rarely used them. After each session, I ended up discarding stacks of paper. This is a typical and common example of waste within L&D departments.



THE ESSENCE OF THE BOOK

Understanding what your customer truly values – and continuously enhancing this value – is essential. This requires looking beyond the customer's literal request and focusing on the underlying intent of their needs. It's important to acknowledge that conflicting interests are in-evitable. For instance, a middle manager might prioritize resolving an issue quickly, while headquarters may emphasize standardization to ensure consistent data collection.

To address this, we must maximize our focus on work that truly adds value. We should eliminate tasks perceived as wasteful. Additionally, we must simplify, automate or even robotize tasks that are necessary but do not provide immediate value. Sounds simple, right?

No, it isn't! Our role extends beyond merely serving our customers. We also have values and principles that we must uphold and promote. If a customer requests a poorly designed "NEXT NEXT NEXT" eLearning course, it is our responsibility to guide them towards a more effective solution. If they ask us to deliver harmful content, we have a duty to say, "No."
This means focusing on client needs while maintaining the balance between fulfilling client requests and adhering to our professional responsibility to deliver meaningful, ethical and high-quality work. It also involves solving root problems rather than merely addressing symptoms.

What can we learn from EasyJet?

Before EasyJet entered the market, most airlines offered similar services. Passengers could always check in a suitcase, enjoy a sandwich on board and fly to large, well-known airports. Then EasyJet arrived and made bold choices: extremely low prices, direct sales without travel agents and additional charges for all extra services. This approach became a success and inspired many other budget airlines.

Great new companies often disrupt traditional services by challenging the status quo. They make bold decisions to focus on what customers truly care about, even if it means underperforming in other areas. This is a key lesson for us as L&D professionals. It's crucial to know what matters most to your customers and excel in that area. However, this increase in focus may come at the expense of less essential services - like luggage or in-flight meals in EasyJet's case.

That said, you'll rarely have only one type of customer. You might have business clients, tourists or family visitors, each with unique needs. The region you operate in also plays a significant role. For instance, an airline in Poland may need to compete on price, whereas one in the Emirates might focus on service and exclusivity. Once you've identified all the variables and truly understand what your customers value, you can make informed choices in designing your L&D organization. This will help you decide where to spend your time, money and attention. Many companies end up in the middle ground by trying to be good at everything, resulting in mediocre execution.

Ultimately, excelling in your customers' most important needs leads to greater differentiation and ultimately, success.

With a bit of creativity, we can apply this aviation example to L&D. We, too, serve different types of customers, each with unique needs. It's essential to understand which goals are most and least important to them.

Our context also matters. Running an L&D department within a low-cost supermarket, for example, would probably require a focus on practical and cost-effective learning solutions. An international consultancy firm, however, might prioritize different goals. Not all clients in your organization should receive the same service. We need to make strategic decisions about our 'business class' service and reserve it for specific clients, while others may receive 'economy class' treatment. Once you've clearly defined these service levels, it's crucial to communicate and refine them to prevent unexpected disappointments once the 'passengers' are on board.

And always provide alternatives. You can't simply leave travellers stranded because you're at full capacity or keep them waiting for months. At the very least, offer an alternative, even if that means outsourcing services or bringing in extra capacity. For example, you could partner with another provider to ensure that clients reach their destination, even if indirectly.