

# Rethinking Learning Impact

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Designing for **Performance from the Start**

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**Too often, learning impact is assessed only at the end - when it's too late to influence outcomes.**

This paper advocates for a shift in approach: designing for performance from the outset, to position L&D as a strategic driver of business success.

*“Give executives clear, concrete examples of how trainings are making a real difference in employee performance and how that translates to overall business results.” Forbes (2025)*

**Part 1** introduces how aligning learning with business goals, engaging stakeholders early, and applying human-centric design across three foundational pillars helps to embed performance measurement throughout the learning journey.

**Part 2** provides practical guidance through the *Plan-Map-Measure* approach, emphasising the importance of stakeholder collaboration and clear communication to demonstrate performance improvements and success stories.

It may seem counterintuitive, but measuring learning only at the end is often too late. Evidence and experience suggests that to truly drive performance, learning experiences must be designed with results in mind from the outset - not as a retrospective report. We advocate that every element, from structure to schedule, should be mapped with performance outcomes and aligned with business objectives from day one.

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This paper presents three pillars to consider as you embark on planning any learning intervention, along with some practical suggestions to follow, to help showcase the business and human performance impact of L&D.

- What Do We Mean by Performance?
- Why Is There a Renewed Focus?
- Why Does This Matter and Who Needs to Care?
- Three Pillars for Performance-Driven L&D
- Designing for Performance
- Measure What Matters: From Activity to Impact
- How Do You Know What Matters?
- Practical Measurement Strategies
- Impact Measurement Models

# What do we mean by performance?

***“Human performance is the ability of individuals and teams to deliver outcomes that matter - driven by purpose, enabled by skills, and supported by leadership.”***

***(Deloitte Human Capital Trends, 2024)***

***“Performance is the act of executing a task or function—evaluated by how successfully it is accomplished.”***

***(Oxford English Dictionary)***



## Why is there a renewed focus?

Performance is not a new concept in L&D, for many years there has been ongoing and significant focus on performance management, high performance culture and advising leaders and managers about creating the best conditions for success. So, what's changed and why is there a renewed focus?

Across society, culture, and business, the language of performance is gaining prominence, and this shift is driven by:

- **Competitive and economic pressures:** Need for economic and organisational growth, digital transformation, AI adoption and global economic uncertainty have intensified the need to monitor business performance continuously.
- **Self-optimisation culture:** From sleep and exercise to productivity tracking, individuals now monitor personal performance across multiple platforms and aspects of their life . (Personal Metrics, Kings, 2020)
- **Activity vs. Impact:** In hybrid workplaces, visibility has decreased—placing greater emphasis on outcomes and measurable impact. With data more accessible, organisations can track activities, productivity and performance more than ever before.

*Only 40% of companies align learning strategy with business goals, undermining measurement validity.  
(McKinsey & Company, 2023)*

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*58% of learners don't apply what they've learned on the job.  
(LinkedIn Learning, 2023)*

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*The challenge isn't just gathering data - it's connecting that data to outcomes that matter.  
(eLearning Industry 2025)*

## **Why is measuring the impact of L&D on human performance so difficult?**

L&D programmes are often costly, yet outcomes and results are often misaligned which makes it difficult to track results and demonstrate impact and business value. To be effective, learning must focus on performance improvement and align with realistic, robust, and accessible metrics.

# Why does this matter - and who needs to care?

In times of economic uncertainty and transformation, proving the value of L&D is essential. Human talent is often a company's largest investment, yet it's rarely measured with the same rigor as capital investments.

When talent development is prioritised, it drives productivity and business value. (McKinsey & Company, Feb 2025)



41%

*Just 41% of businesses view L&D as central, and only 26% of L&D leaders feel their ideas are embraced. (CIPD, 2024)*

*L&D programmes aligned with business objectives are 9x more effective.*

*(Docebo, 2024)*

# Strategic vs retrospective

Let's look at an example, both organisations are global enterprises that are market leaders in their respective fields. Where do you feel your organisation sits on the scale?

Client 1 – strategic alignment		Client 2 – retrospective alignment
Equip managers to keep teams safe, well, and engaged, while driving sustainable business performance.	<b>Requirement</b>	Combine in-person and digital learning to meet diverse needs and learning styles.
Yes	<b>Performance Led</b>	No
Launched a Bespoke Management Development programme to develop management capability.	<b>Solution</b>	Launched a cutting-edge elective blended learning solution.
<b>1500</b> Manager completions Increase in <b>eNPS</b> Increase in <b>retention intention</b> An increase in <b>wellbeing scores</b>	<b>Impact</b>	5,000+ Attendees ( <b>20,000+ Completions</b> ) 30,000+ Visitors ( <b>1,500,000+ Visits</b> ) Increase in <b>development scores</b> Increase in <b>promotion stats</b>
<b>Gold</b> industry award <b>Further investment</b> Programme expansion	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Bronze</b> industry award <b>Reduced</b> investment Limited L&D Transformation

# Three pillars for performance-driven L&D

Measuring L&D interventions matters now more than ever. In tight budget environments, L&D must show how it supports business goals and can close skills gaps, drive innovation, and improve results.

To do this effectively, we recommend focusing on three foundational pillars.

This paper offers practical strategies for L&D leaders to drive measurable performance improvements and demonstrate business impact. By designing for performance - not just participation - L&D can become a strategic enabler of business success.

## Experience Design & Performance Alignment

Ensure learning investments align with organisational priorities to maximise impact.

## Culture & Environment

Consider environmental, cultural, and leadership factors to drive sustained behavioural change.

## Measure What Matters

Tailor measurement plans to the performance purpose and stakeholder expectations.

# Designing for performance: Aligning learning with real-world impact

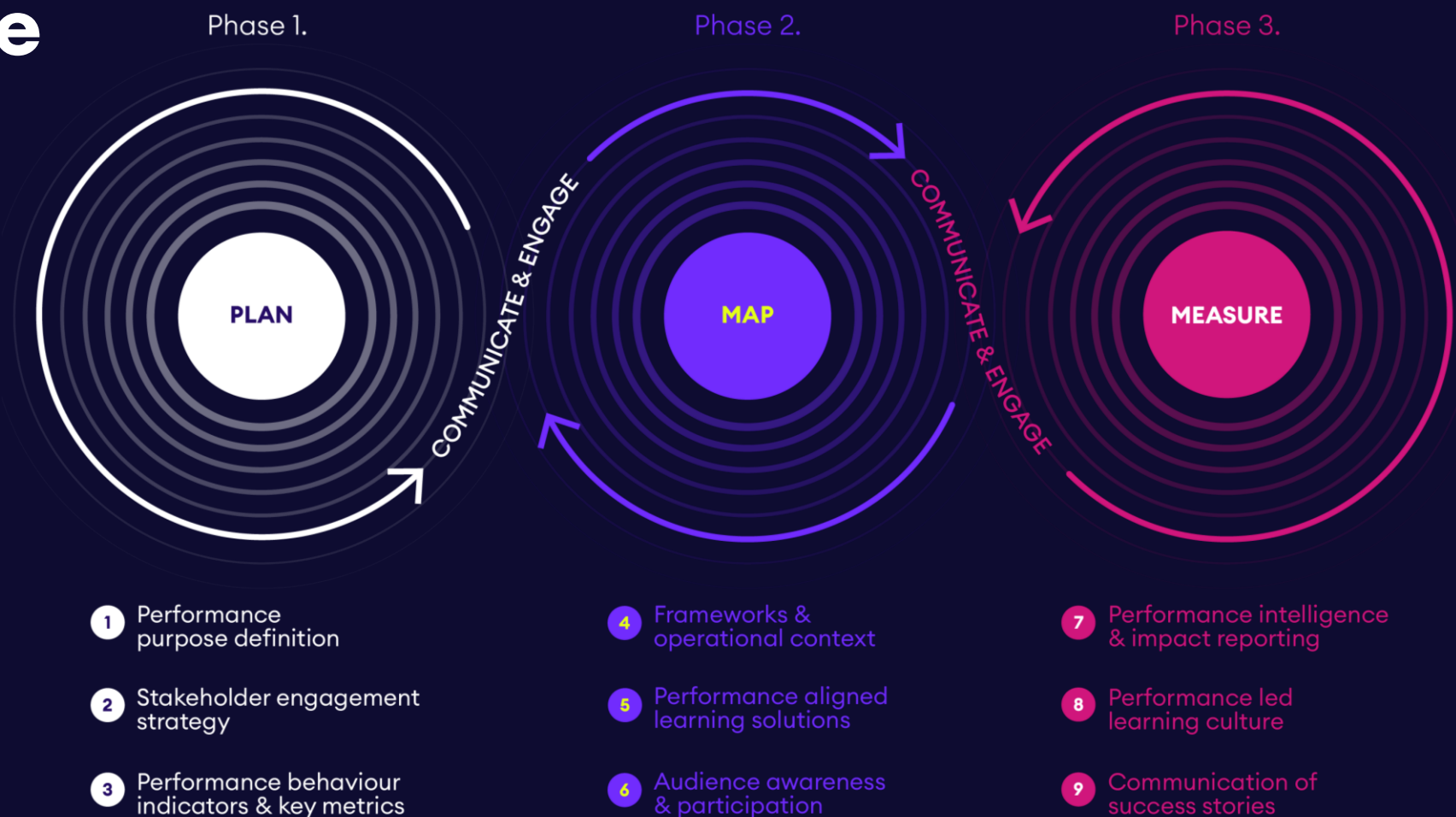
In an AI-driven, data-centric world, learning experience design must evolve. To deliver meaningful behaviour and performance shifts, we must move beyond content delivery and focus on enabling performance from the outset.

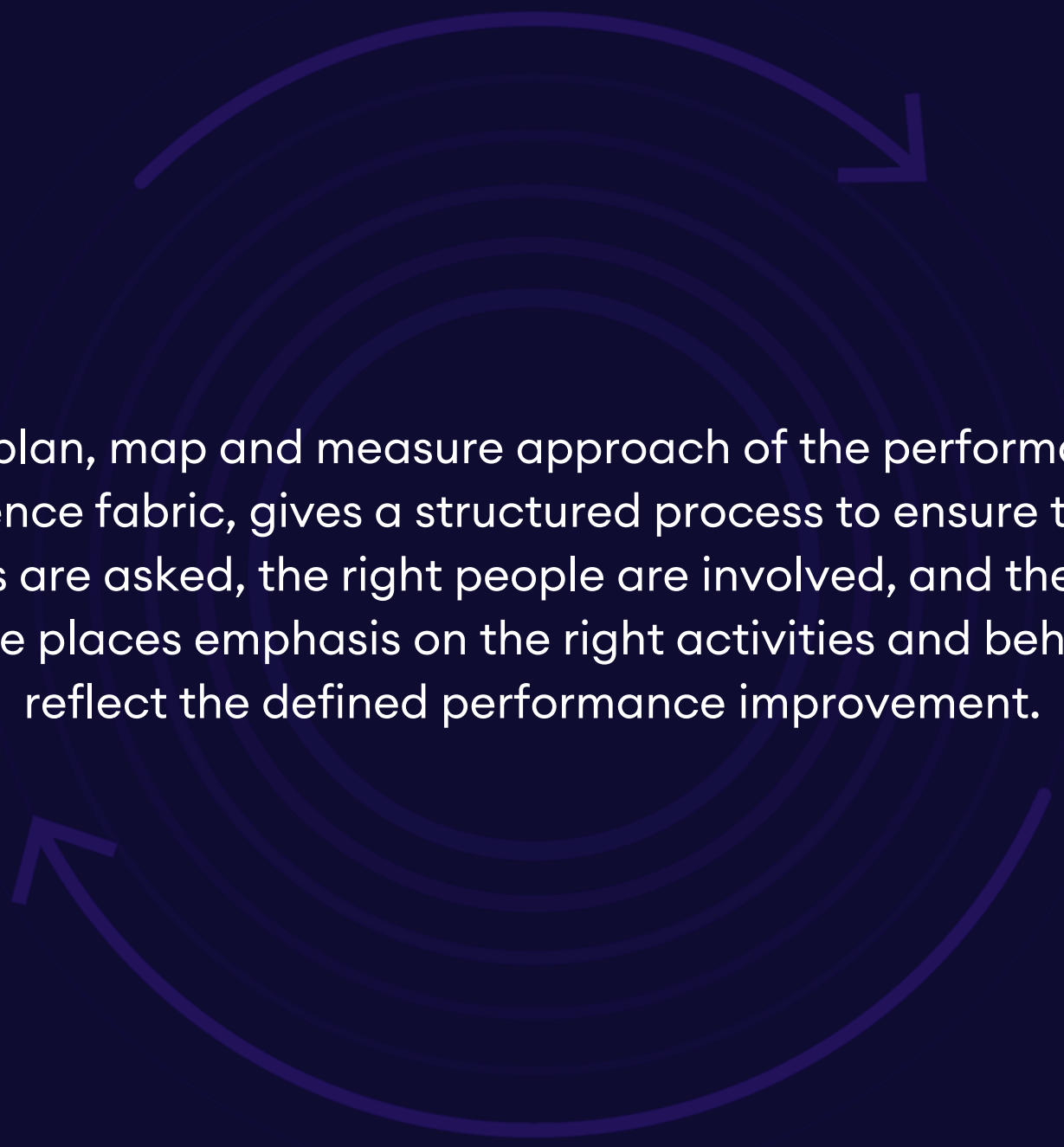
“Learning design must centre on performance improvement, not just content delivery.” Andy Lancaster, CIPD

Using a human-centric design framework that connects purpose, context, experience, and performance indicators; assists in uncovering behaviours and activities that drive performance—not just learning objectives. This design thinking approach helps to map learner and performance personas, create affinity and empathy maps and analyse data points and workplace environments. This ensures that solutions are contextually relevant, performance-focused, and aligned with work situations, learner needs and business outcomes.

# Performance Intelligence Fabric

At Hemsley Fraser, we use our Performance Intelligence Fabric – a human-centric design framework that connects purpose, context, experience, and performance indicators. This structure helps us build solutions that are strategically aligned with business goals and measurable outcomes.





The plan, map and measure approach of the performance intelligence fabric, gives a structured process to ensure the right questions are asked, the right people are involved, and the learning experience places emphasis on the right activities and behaviours to reflect the defined performance improvement.

# Culture and leadership: Environmental conditions for success

Sustained performance improvement requires more than individual skill and motivation - it demands intentional focus on the environmental, cultural, and leadership conditions that shape behaviour.

Dr. Thomas Gilbert's seminal work, *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* (1978), emphasises that environmental factors often outweigh individual capabilities in influencing performance. Gilbert identified three key environmental factors that significantly influence performance:

- Information – Clear expectations, feedback, and guidance.
- Resources – Tools, systems, and support materials that enable performance.
- Incentives – Motivators such as recognition, career progression, or tangible rewards.

These elements should be considered before any training begins and intentionally embedded into the design of learning experiences and performance support resources to influence success and sustainment. A critique of common learning experience design (LXD) approaches, is that they don't focus enough on the performance issue, or cause analysis and jump straight to training intervention; without considering the wider potential for performance interventions (eLearning industry, 2021).

Focus on cultural, leadership and environmental factors is an essential part of the design process and blending these concepts of Human Performance Technology from Gilberts work with LXD theories can help to influence the right conditions for successful and sustained performance outcomes.

## Environmental

Information & expectations	Tools and resources	Incentives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manager briefings</li> <li>• Launch briefings and guides</li> <li>• Programme orientation videos</li> <li>• Pre learning activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Checklists</li> <li>• Action learning toolkits</li> <li>• Coaching questions to support participants</li> <li>• Mobile resource guides</li> <li>• Role play and simulations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networking opportunities</li> <li>• Promotion potential</li> <li>• Pay progression</li> <li>• Career development</li> <li>• Stretch assignments and shadowing</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> </ul>

## Individual

Capacity	Knowledge and skill	Motivation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bite sized/micro learning</li> <li>• Multiple modalities</li> <li>• Mobile and virtual options</li> <li>• Manager briefings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Immersive workshops</li> <li>• Peer feedback</li> <li>• Manager check-ins / feedback</li> <li>• Coaching on real life situations:</li> <li>• Peer and group coaching</li> <li>• 1:1 coaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stakeholder Endorsement</li> <li>• Benefit campaign statements &amp; examples</li> <li>• Contextual scenarios</li> <li>• Practical &amp; meaningful activities</li> <li>• Celebrating successes – communicating value – optics!</li> </ul>

# Measure what matters: From activity to impact

Organisations invest over \$180 billion annually in leadership and professional development, yet many struggle to demonstrate impact beyond basic activity metrics. While usage and satisfaction rates are high, true behaviour change, and performance improvement remain elusive. Too often organisations measure what's easiest - completion rates, attendance, sentiment - rather than what matters most: performance, transfer, and business value.

To elevate L&D from cost centre to strategic driver, measurement must be embedded from the start. This means integrating: Business goal alignment, learning design, data metrics and stakeholder collaboration in order to build performance and impact maps, which use data insights to demonstrate value at across individual, team, and organisational levels.

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*“Aligning learning and development with your organisation’s top priorities is critical to driving success and adapting during volatile times”  
(HBR, 2025)*

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*“Give executives clear, concrete examples of how trainings are making a real difference in employee performance and how that translates to overall business results.”  
(Forbes, 2025)*

# How do you know what matters?

*“Align metrics with business performance and strategic priorities. Focus on outcomes and ROI—not participation.” (CIPD)*

Ask the right stakeholders. They hold the key to understanding the performance goals, desired changes, and the types of impact they want to report. Their input shapes meaningful metrics and ensures business alignment.

Ask what they want to see, hear and feel as a result of this learning intervention and explore together what potential metrics there are to track and measure.

## Make a multi-level, holistic approach

Not all stakeholders will prioritise the same outcomes. Different stakeholders have different perspectives and internal PM narratives they want to deliver. In some cases, qualitative insights—stories of change, confidence growth, behavioural adoption and frequency - can be just as powerful as quantitative data and could be the starting point if ROI and ROE measurement is too complex or not appropriate.

- **ROI (Return on Investment)** It quantifies tangible benefits such as cost savings, productivity gains, and efficiency improvements. **ROI** predictions and results can help speak the language of finance to secure investment.
- **ROE (Return on Expectations)** complements ROI by capturing qualitative outcomes—like behaviour change, engagement, and strategic alignment—based on stakeholder-defined success criteria. **ROE** is best to align with broader business goals such as retention, innovation, and speed-to-competency



# Practical measurement strategies

**Clarify measurement objectives early:** Define your performance purpose with aligned business goals (e.g., reduce onboarding time, improve customer satisfaction, increase collaborative conversations) and use them as impact anchors, so you can map data metrics and plan for a range of measurement activities.

**Co-define success with stakeholders:** Ask “What does success look like?” and “What data metrics are available to support this?” Also consider qualitative approaches, as real life stories underpinned with data can help to tell and promote the impact. This can help to foster future engagement with learners and showcase success to other business stakeholders.

**Think about a multi-level impact approach:** Think about impact and results will show up across different levels, such as:

- **Individual:** Confidence growth, skill application, behavioural adoption.
- **Team:** Collaboration, productivity, leadership effectiveness.
- **Business:** Operational KPIs, customer outcomes, innovation metrics.

*“While measurement determines effectiveness, impact tells the story of how learning contributes to business performance.”  
(Forbes 2025)*

# Where to start with measurement?

As an industry, we all strive to align learning initiatives with business objectives, yet we often face recurring realities that make this difficult: tight timelines, predefined content, complex structures, cultural dynamics, or gaps in capability. These challenges are not failures; they are a natural part of the environment we operate in. The key is to recognise them early and build our measurement strategy accordingly.

When alignment with business objectives is limited, our focus should shift swiftly toward measuring learner impact, the area we can most directly influence. The upstream approach allows us to demonstrate success through observable behavioural change, rather than waiting for distant business metrics that may be influenced by countless external factors.

Build measurement maturity gradually—moving from anecdotal evidence with individual and team insights before moving to data-driven impact stories; and if you're not sure where to start speak with HR, for existing HR analytics which can link to pulse survey indicators or trends like well-being and engagement. IT and wider 'data' stakeholders have access to other available data points and productivity metrics with performance outcomes, so widen conversations in order to surface all measurement opportunities.

With an increased level of digital platforms in the workplace, more data and insights become available. Using AI solutions can be a helpful support to be able to analyse data and find trends across datasets. However these are useful tools to improve efficiency, but they are not a panacea; the ground-work of identifying the specific performance and behavioural shifts still requires upfront discovery and human conversation.

The benefit of moving towards a combined data and human centric approach will enable the shift in L&D from focussing on superficial metrics to data-informed evaluation, which can strengthen L&D's role and value as a business and innovation enabler.

## Learning impact - measurement maturity scale

Where would you place your organisation/ department?

1

### Reactive

1. Completion rates

2

### Proactive

2. Attendance / satisfaction scores

3

### Impactful

3. Performance / KPIs / behavioural outcomes

4

### Strategic

4. Business metrics, retention & NPS

5

### Transformative

5. Predicts future skills needs

Measurement model adapted from

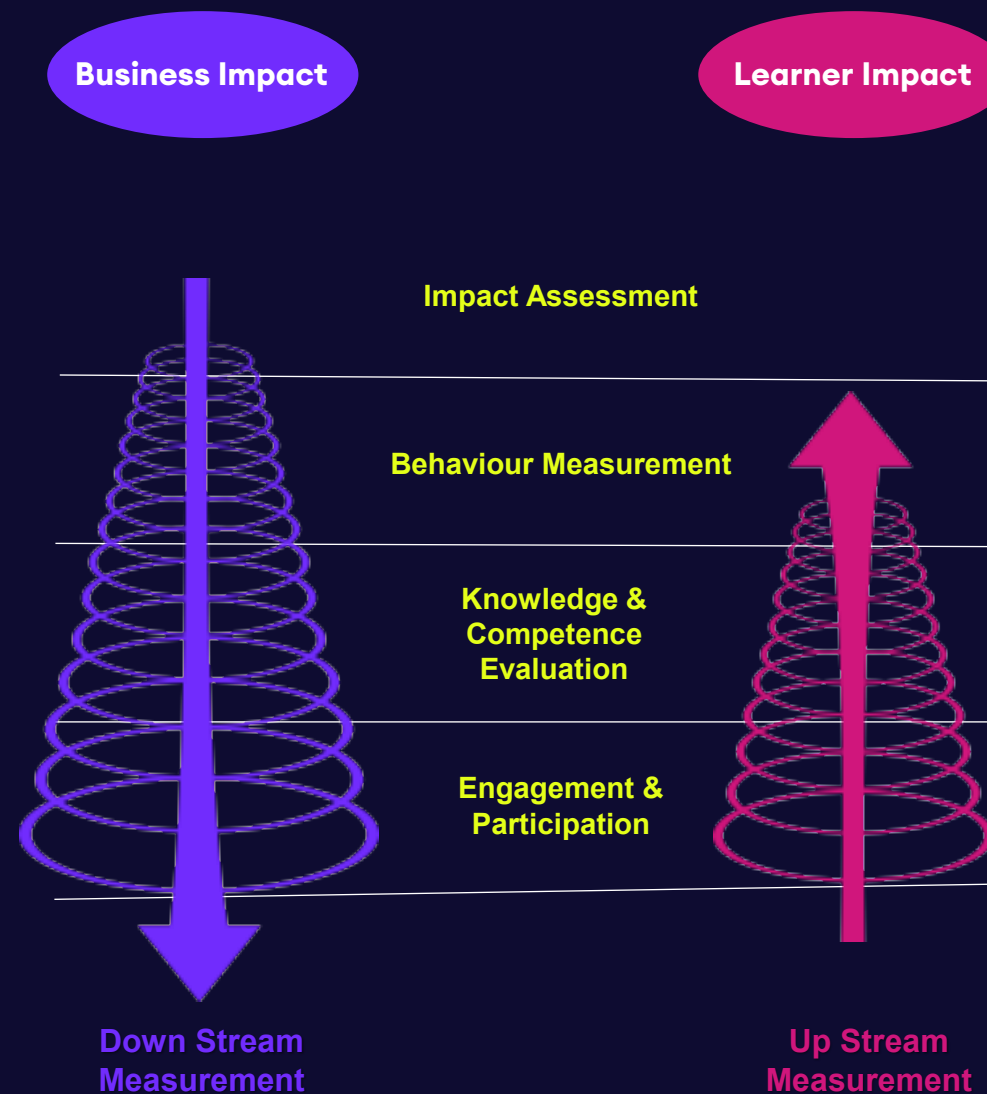
[L&D Maturity Model | 360Learning](#)

# Impact measurement models

In contrast to the downstream model, which begins with business outcomes, the upstream approach starts with the learning objectives and the specific behaviours we aim to develop. From there, we identify what data exists to track those shifts, and where it does not, we create it through tailored 180 or 360 feedback loops that provide meaningful, context-specific insight.

This is where pragmatism becomes critical. Retrofitting business impact measures onto programmes not originally designed with them in mind often produces spurious or purely correlative claims. The result can be damaging leaving stakeholders questioning validity, credibility eroding, and genuine progress being overshadowed by questionable data.

Instead, our goal should be to celebrate the true success of the programme: the measurable growth in learner confidence, competence, and behaviour that creates the conditions for long-term business impact. That is the story worth telling.



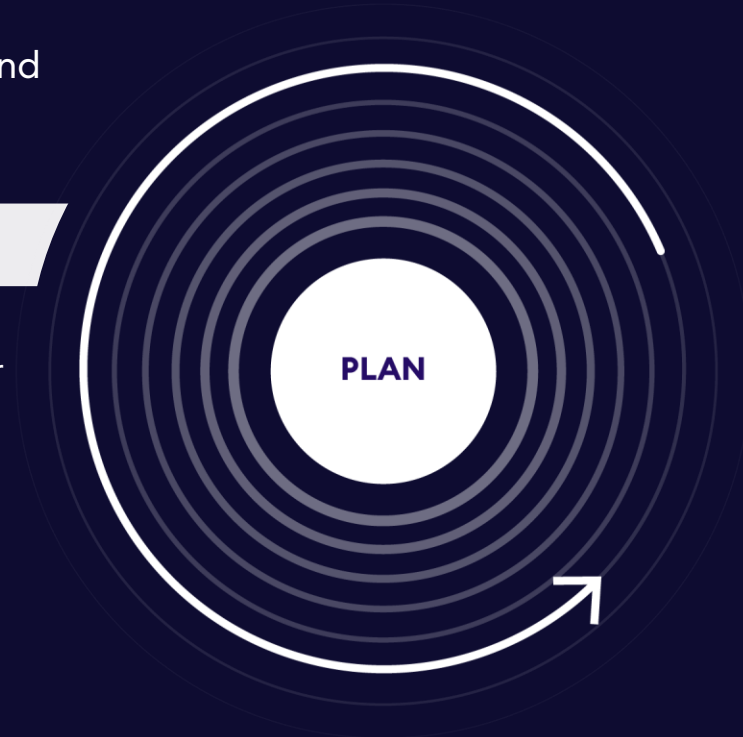
# Our Performance Intelligence (1/3)

If you are planning a future programme or solution we recommend using our plan, map and measure approach to help ensure performance and impact are factored throughout the full learning experience.

**PLAN** - Focus on setting clear, aligned goals and engaging stakeholders early.

- **Define clear, business-aligned goals**  
Use strategic objectives as anchors for evaluation. (e.g., reduce onboarding time, improve customer satisfaction; increase employee engagement scores)
- **Clarify objectives early**  
Ensure goals are relevant to business priorities and individual performance outcomes; making them meaningful to individuals, teams and the business.
- **Engage stakeholders early to define success and measurement expectations**  
Ask “What does success look like?” and co-create expectations to shape outcomes, metrics and measurement aligned to what stakeholders really care about.
- **Co-design messaging with business leaders**  
Embed follow-through structures and accountability from the outset; planning engagement strategies for multiple audiences and stakeholders; using language which resonates with all levels.
- **Start small, scale over time**  
Begin with ROE or proxy indicators (e.g. pulse survey metrics, reduced turnover, time saved) and build measurement maturity gradually; not forgetting the human centric stories of change along the way.

Phase 1.



- 1 Performance purpose definition
- 2 Stakeholder engagement strategy
- 3 Performance behaviour indicators & key metrics

# Our Performance Intelligence Fabric (2/3)

Phase 2.

**MAP** - Align learning design with performance indicators and stakeholder needs.

- **Build measurement into programme design from day one**  
Integrate KPIs, control groups, and productivity tracking into the learning architecture and ensure design is focussed on practice activities, practical application and, has accountability built in to drive the desired changes required.
- **Embed evaluation frameworks**  
Consider models like Kirkpatrick, Phillips ROI, or Brinkerhoff Success Case Method (SCM) and discuss these evaluation frameworks with business stakeholders to define most suitable approach and identify the data points available. This helps to plan your analysis and measurement roadmap and helps to determine how AI tools can support efficiency.
- **Define multi-level messaging and impact**  
Map outcomes at individual, team and business levels. Linking learning to real-world performance and use this information as part of the communications campaign, and collateral with participants but also their line managers, to ensure the future performance benefits are widely understood.
- **Reinforce learning and application to ensure sustainment**  
Think about environmental factors: Include manager debriefs, microlearning nudges, follow-ups, and impact presentations aligned to objectives.



4 Frameworks & operational context

5 Performance aligned learning solutions

6 Audience awareness & participation

# Our Performance Intelligence Fabric (3/3)

Phase 3.

**MEASURE** - Track and communicate success stories frequently – highlighting performance outcomes using meaningful data.

- **Quantify both soft and tangible benefits**  
Blend financial ROI with qualitative outcomes like behaviour change and customer satisfaction; to communicate human centric stories along with business impact results.
- **Leverage technology and baselines**  
Use dashboards, control groups, and baseline tracking to isolate learning impact, leveraging AI tools to support analysis, and surface meaningful insights across multiple datasets.
- **Communicate visually and simply**  
Translate metrics into clear, stakeholder-friendly visuals and stories, that show alignment with business objectives; define frequency of reporting, review cycles and content channels to support promotion.
- **Build long-term measurement strategy**  
Consider a multi-year framework; and identify what metrics have longevity value, then capture cumulative results to show strategic trends and ensure continuous improvement cycles. Help to evolve solutions and the overall learning, performance and development strategy.



- 7 Performance intelligence & impact reporting
- 8 Performance led learning culture
- 9 Communication of success stories

# Conclusion

As organisations face disruption and transformation, L&D must evolve to support performance in context.

By planning with purpose, mapping experiences to real-world outcomes, and measuring impact across multiple levels, L&D can support meaningful change and innovation.

Don't struggle in isolation. Driving performance and impact is a team sport, use the Plan, Map, Measure approach to ask better questions, engage stakeholders early and get better results.

To demonstrate the value and potential of L&D, remember to share these data driven and anecdotal human impact stories across company communications channels in videos, photos and testimonials far and wide.

*Companies with aligned L&D are 46% more likely to be industry leaders. (C Suite, 2024)*

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# Impact Stories (1/2)

## Leading Beverage Company

### Objective:

To enhance employee capability to drive business growth.

### The solution:

- Learning campaign with launch activities and champion support network.
- Interactive workshops with social learning & supplementary digital content

### Measurement approach:

Closely monitored learning impact data through, participant and line manager assessments, coupled with employee engagement surveys.

### Impact:

Learner NPS rose from **35.1 to 56.8**, wellbeing scores increased by **7 points**, and participants rated retention likelihood at **8.3/10**.

## Global Pharmaceutical

### Objective:

To improve development opportunities across our client's global workforce, to retain top talent.

### The Solution:

- Bespoke suite of elective workshops
- Supported by tailored digital learning journeys.
- Comprehensive data-driven promotional strategy

### Measurement approach:

Combining our learning data with client HR data we produced ROI analysis measuring the impact of the award-winning learning solution.

### Impact:

The participants of a global were **270%** more likely to be promoted and **98%** less likely to leave, showing clear links to retention and internal mobility.

# Impact Stories *(2/2)*

## Global Engineering / Aerospace

### Objective:

Drive business transformation by attracting new diverse talent and reducing attrition through provision of development support opportunities.

### The solution:

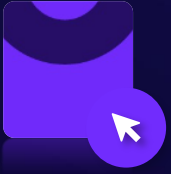
- 2 × Multilevel leadership development programme
- Practice-based workshops, peer discussion groups & 1:1 coaching
- Senior stakeholder sponsorship and networking opportunities

### Measurement approach:

Learning impact data, combined with HR and recruitment insights monitoring business results in collaboration with the client.

### Impact:

Company attrition reduced by **5.3% from 15% → 9.7%**, **15% increase in talent acquisition** with increase of female hires by **10%**.



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