insights media

Who's influencing L&D?

Welcome

Who influences your thinking? It's a simple but very important question, and one all of us should ask ourselves on a regular basis. Is it your peers? Professional institutes?

Thought leaders, people whose views and experiences you respect? Maybe you rely on different sources for different focus areas. Vendors for tech strategy and/or investment, for example. Or maybe it's peers again, people who have gone through the same challenges and can tell you what did and what didn't work for them and why.

At the end of 2023, we asked 110 L&D professionals the all-important question 'Who influences your thinking?' and received some interesting answers back. Some were surprising, others less so.

We will share those answers shortly, but first of all, we will ask and then answer another question: why is it so important that L&D knows who influences their thinking? Answer(s):

- because the corporate learning sector is awash with marketing driven content from vendors, agenda-driven content from thought leaders, conferences and events, not to mention peer sharing of knowledge, insights and experience and occasional journalism. Information is flooding in all the time from so many different sources – how do you decide who and what to listen to/trust/believe/act on/share….? And what to discard? How do you decide what is truly innovative and what's hype? What will help you achieve your goals and what will just take you down a blind alley?

- because there are significant challenges, changes and pressures on the learning function. AI for example. AI technology has taken a leap forward with generative AI, which is putting pressure on the content side of L&D's operating model. Geopolitics is another - there are more than 50 general elections around the world this year, the outcomes of which will doubtless lead to some political turbulence. Then there's the climate crisis, a challenging economic climate…   There is so much learning professionals need to take on board, stay up to date with and incorporate into their own practice. That's why we wanted a clearer picture of who influences L&D's thinking.

But, there is another reason as well: we think there is a lack of good quality, independent insight in the sector and that concerns us. How can L&D professionals make good decisions if the information that informs them is biased, woolly, masks an agenda or is just plain wrong? Right now there is a danger that content looks plausible but is in fact incorrect. And this has the potential to become a much bigger problem, more quickly, as people turn to generative AI to create content. L&D needs to guard against this by thinking very carefully about who influences them, what's driving their ideas and messaging, and the provenance of the content they consume.

This is our first bit of research in this area and we hope to do more based on how this lands.

Let us know!

The Insights Media team

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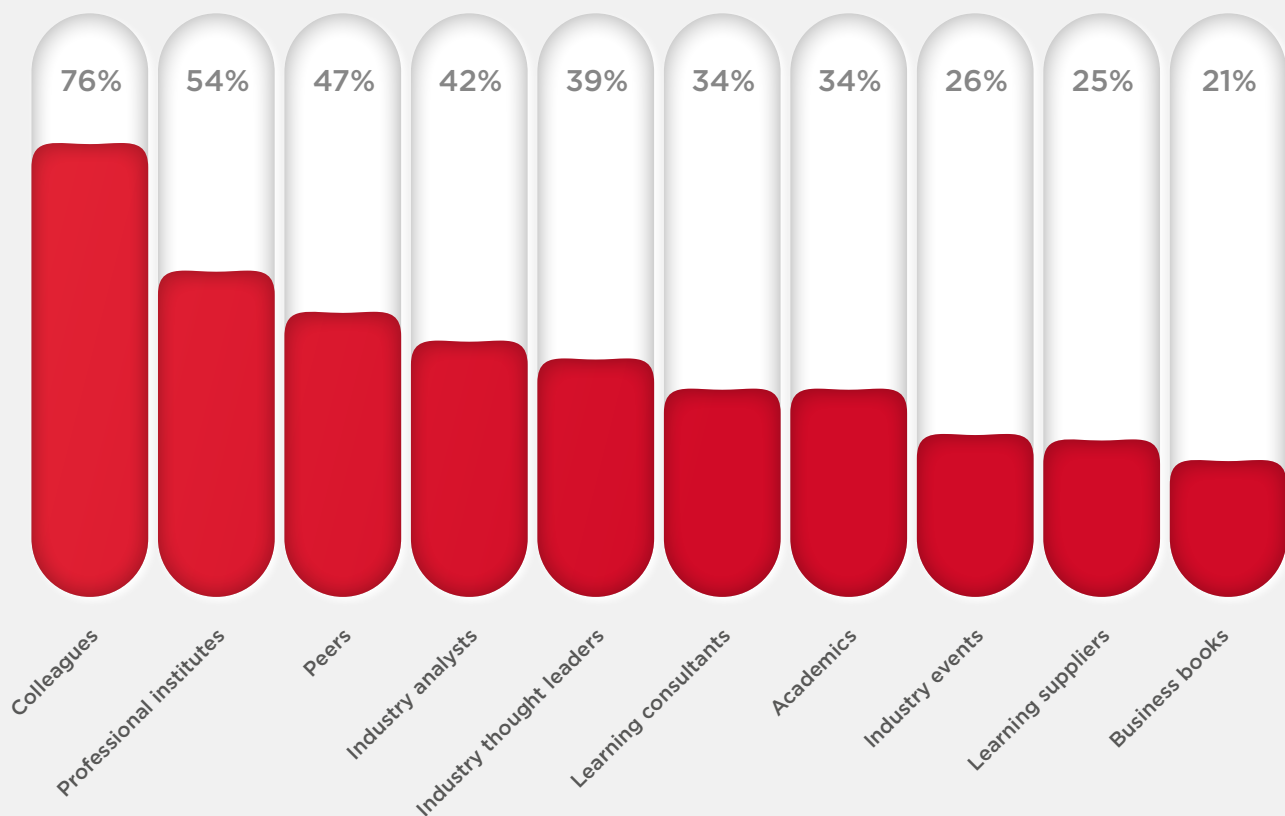
Who does L&D listen to when it comes to learning strategy?

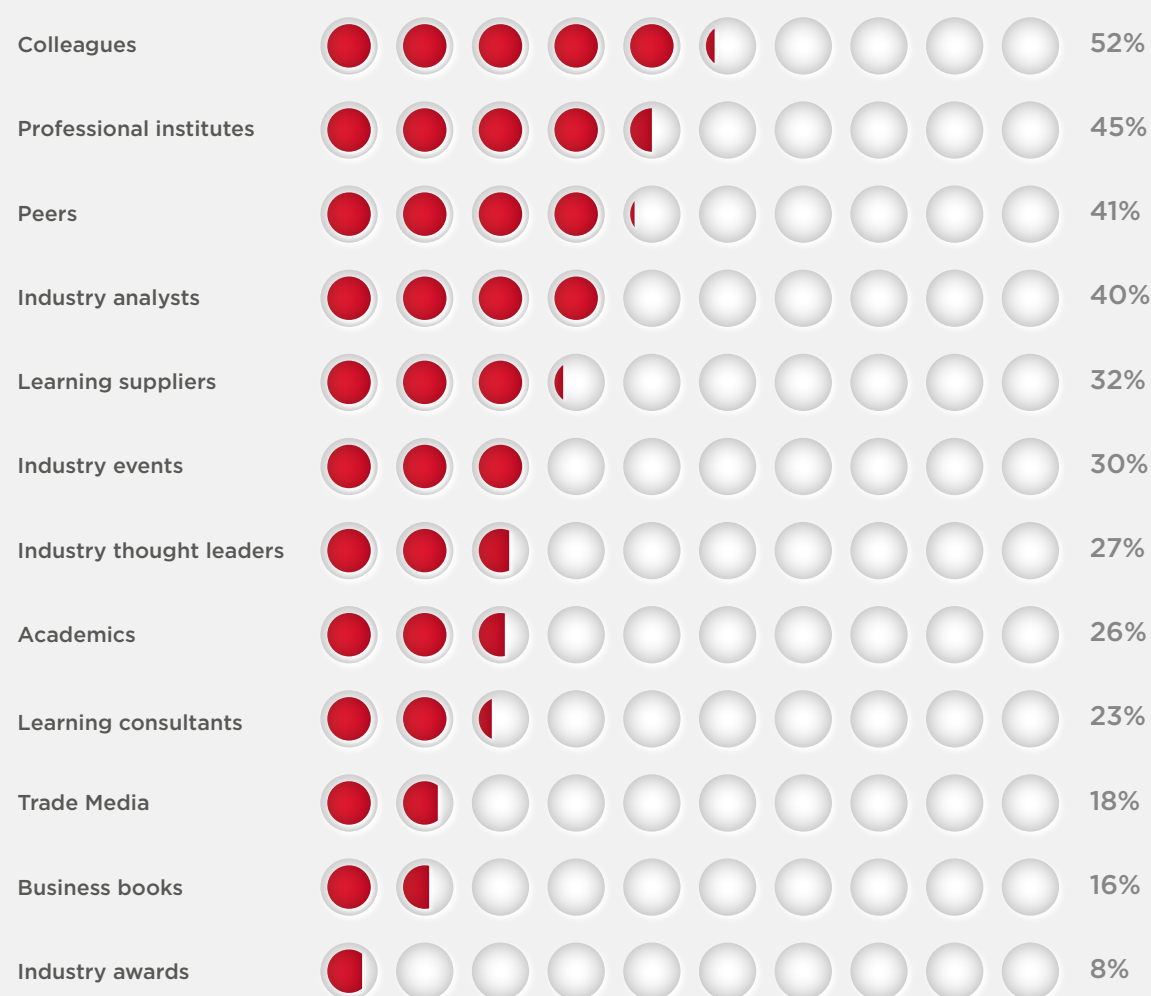**Colleagues are the most influential voice, by a long way.**

Our research shows that L&D professionals really value the thinking and experiences of their colleagues, with most L&D professionals (76%) turning to them when developing their learning strategy. Professional institutes are second most popular, then peers. The same is true of the senior leaders we polled – eight out 10 cited colleagues as their go-to option, with several putting peers as their second option.

When thinking about developing your learning strategy who/what influences your thinking?

76%	54%	47%	42%	39%	34%	34%	26%	25%	21%
Colleagues	Professional institutes	Peers	Industry analysts	Industry thought leaders	Learning consultants	Academics	Industry events	Learning suppliers	Business books

Who does L&D listen to when it comes to learning technology?

When thinking about developing your learning technology who/what influences your thinking?

Category	Value
Colleagues	52%
Professional institutes	45%
Peers	41%
Industry analysts	40%
Learning suppliers	32%
Industry events	30%
Industry thought leaders	27%
Academics	26%
Learning consultants	23%
Trade Media	18%
Business books	16%
Industry awards	8%

When looking to develop their learning technology, it's a similar story:
L&D professionals turn to colleagues first and foremost, although in lesser numbers – just over half listen to colleagues, with professional institutes and peers taking second and third place again. Same again for senior leaders for the top spots, although interestingly, learning suppliers tended to be further down the list, either in last place or close to last place.
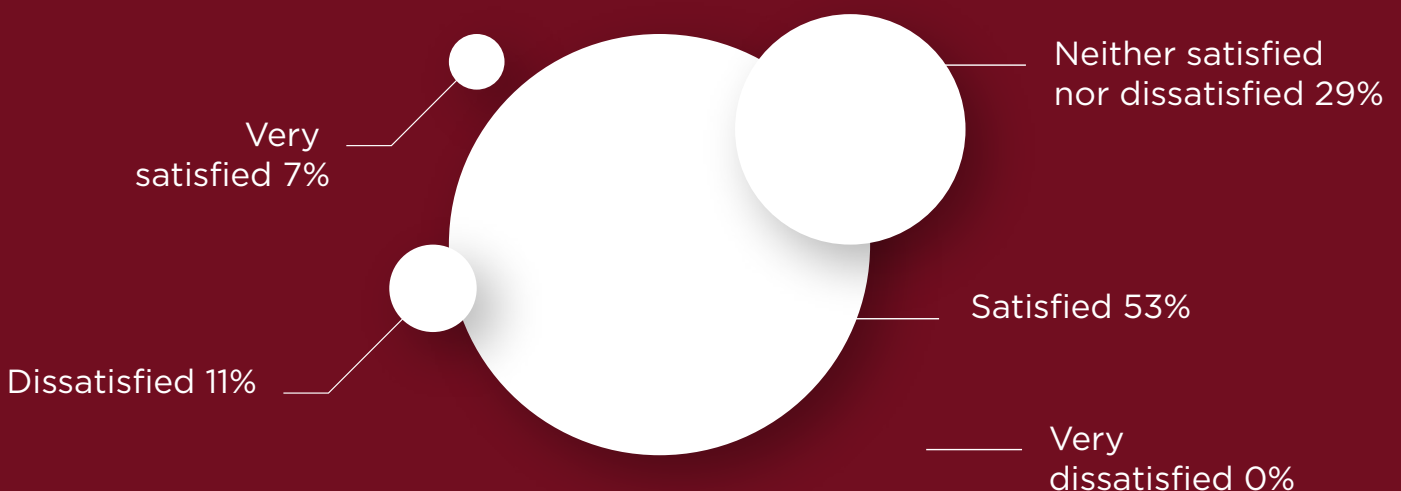
Quality of insights

What about the quality of the insight and evidence out there? Satisfaction rates are so-so (half are satisfied with the quality of insight and evidence around learning strategy, but less than 10% are very satisfied).

It's roughly the same for senior leaders although 11% are dissatisfied. Satisfaction rates dip regarding the quality of insight and evidence around AI: then only 36% of respondents are satisfied, 12% are very satisfied and 16% dissatisfied. What about senior leaders? Just one is satisfied, one very satisfied and one very dissatisfied.

Is this because gen AI tech is newer and changing all the time, so the need to know is greater and less easily met? Is it because professionals think there is a lot of hype and a lack of hard evidence? Certainly senior leaders think there is a lot of hype around AI and learning, with six saying it is over hyped.

The numbers are slightly lower for the other respondents – 39% say it's over hyped already, with 54% saying it's starting to get hyped. Ask this question again in six months' time and it would be interesting to see what the answer would be.

How satisfied you are with the quality of insight and evidence on learning technology that is available in the market?

Very satisfied 7%

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied 29%

Dissatisfied 11%

Satisfied 53%

Very dissatisfied 0%

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AI insights

What insights into AI in learning would practitioners like to see? One of the (if not the) most powerful ways to demonstrate the potential of technology is to showcase how it's being used already, which is why two thirds of respondents said they would like to see how other customers are using AI.

Case studies are eternally popular, with 47% wanting more case studies and 43% wanting to know a company's technology roadmap and where AI fits in. Ethics and bias are also a concern. The majority of senior leaders (seven of 10) are most interested in seeing tech vendors' technology roadmap, then how AI is being used by other customers.

We were also interested in finding out where L&D people go for thought leadership. It was a question many couldn't answer, with a surprisingly high number saying they didn't know. A few individuals cropped up more than once – Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Sugra Mitra, Jeff Bezos, George Siemens, Steven Bartlett and Elon Musk. The CIPD got a lot of mentions, with a few other organisations featuring as well, although less prominently (Google, Meta and Tesla).
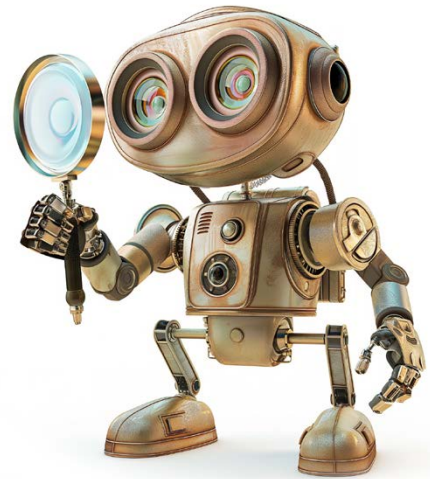
Senior leaders were much clearer on this question – three said they weren't influenced by thought leaders, with one respondent saying 'I know pretty much what will work for my organisation'. One respondent said many, with Josh Bersin, Fosway, the Learning Network and Association for Learning Technology all being named.

Lastly, what did respondents think of the quality of the content and thought leadership provided by tech vendors? Is it good, bad or indifferent? A little over a third are satisfied with the quality of AI-related content they provide, with 8% being very satisfied and 11% dissatisfied. Approval rates are a bit higher regarding tech vendors' thought leadership, with almost 50% being satisfied, and 10% being either very satisfied or dissatisfied.
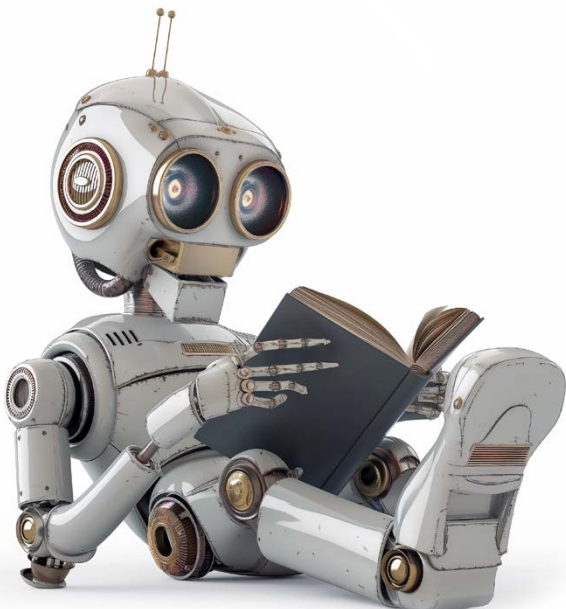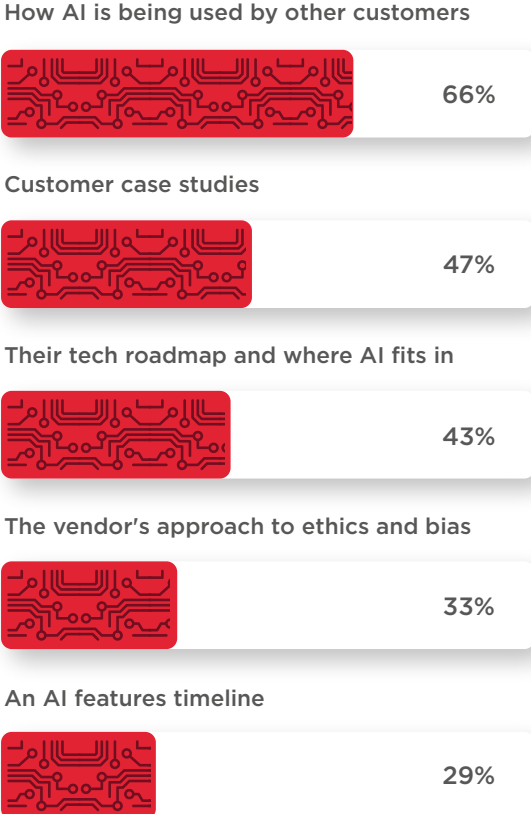
How satisfied you are with the quality of insight and evidence on AI that is available in the market?

Very satisfied
12%

Satisfied
36%

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
35%

Dissatisfied
16%

Very dissatisfied
1%
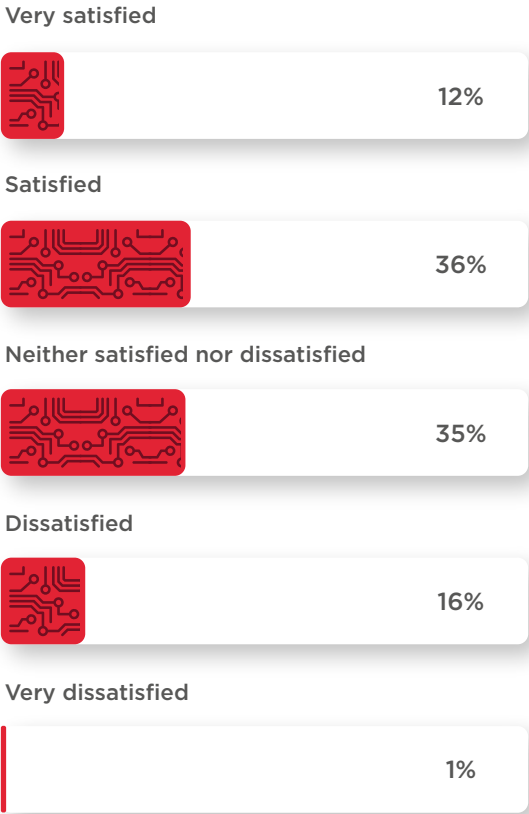
As a customer, what insights into AI in learning would you like to see from your technology vendor?

How AI is being used by other customers
66%

Customer case studies
47%

Their tech roadmap and where AI fits in
43%

The vendor's approach to ethics and bias
33%

An AI features timeline
29%

Take-aways

Colleagues and peers are the biggest influencers for L&D professionals. We didn't ask why – that could well be a part of follow-up research – but we do know that colleagues and peers tend not to have an agenda.

What they do have is experience of doing the job, working with suppliers etc. And the L&D profession is one that likes to share, which is a good thing. So colleagues and peers are largely viewed as credible and trusted, as well as being accessible.

That's not to say that external influencers are completely out of favour. Professional institutes, analysts and events all hold some sway. As do suppliers, but they have the least amount of influence. This would suggest that the amount of marketing noise does not equate to influence.

AI developments move at pace but what L&D professionals want to see is use cases, case studies, technology roadmaps and how customers are using the technology.

This wish list is nothing new and the supply side of the industry has found it hard to create and share these sorts of insights in the past. Maybe AI will change that?

And when it comes to thought leadership content, the findings suggest that many L&D managers do not know where to go for thought leadership. Some discount it altogether, while others say thought leaders do have some influence on their thinking around learning strategy and technology. It's a mixed picture, which indicates that this is an area for improvement.
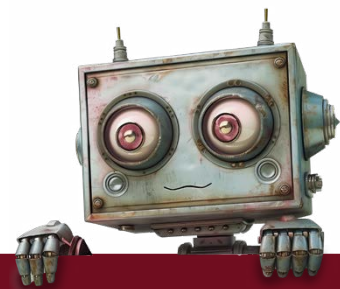
Final word

This is a small survey aimed at getting a sense of what or who influences learning professionals. Influence is important because it affects decision-making which affects strategy and tactics and ultimately employee and organisational success.

We were surprised to see that so many L&D professionals did not know where to turn for thought leadership. Does this reflect on the quality of the thought leadership available or is it that learning professionals are not doing enough to seek thought leadership out? Are learning professionals operating in their own bubble?

This is a cause for concern. Learning does not want to be left behind but there is a real danger that it will be if it is unable to seek out ideas, evidence and emerging thinking in order to support continuous improvement.

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Web: insightsmedia.co.uk

Email: team@insightsmedia.co.uk

Phone: +44 (0) 7787 548178

Research methodology

100 UK based L&D professionals were surveyed between Nov and Dec 2023. Of these 23% work in orgnisations employing 1001-5000 employees, 19% more than 5,000 employees, 12% 501-1,000 employees, 8% 251-500 employees, 14% 101-250 employees, 8% 51-100 employees, 9% 26-50 employees and 6% in organisation with less than 50 employees. During the same period, Insights Media interviewed 10 senior L&D leaders in organisations employing 500+ employees.

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Contact

Web: insightsmedia.co.uk
Email: team@insightsmedia.co.uk
Phone: +44 (0) 7787 548178