Engagement and motivation

improving learning outcomes
Introduction

Does engagement encourage real learning?

Learning and development professionals and practitioners strive to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of training initiatives through good design.

At the same time, we’re aware that a large measure of the success of a training programme is dependent on how motivated the learners are.

Importantly, we know that motivation to complete a course isn’t enough – it can cause learners to rush through a training programme as quickly as possible, completing the bare minimum that will get them credit for course completion.

That’s a key reason why, when we design training programmes, we don’t want course completion to be the audience’s end goal – but we have to admit that it sometimes is.

So how can we change the learner’s objective from ‘completion’ to ‘learning’?

A lot of work has been done to find ways of engaging the audience during training programmes, but does that engagement encourage real learning?

This paper looks at different types of motivation, and explores how we can move beyond learner engagement towards learner motivation, focusing on different techniques to engender that motivation and gain improved learning outcomes.
Motivation: the drive to succeed

Intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation.

John Keller, who formulated the ARCS Model of Motivational Design, describes motivation as ‘what people desire, what they choose to do, what they commit to do... Motivation is generally defined as that which explains the direction and magnitude of behaviour, or in other words, it explains what goals people choose to pursue and how actively or intensely they pursue them’ (2010, p3-4). We can recognise motivation in ourselves and others, and understand how it leads people to realise their goals.

But there’s more than one type of motivation, and that becomes important when we try to design training programmes that learners are motivated to take. To show why this matters, here’s an example that shows how two individuals can have different motivations for completing the same task:

Irina works at a company that holds frequent fundraisers for charity. The next planned event is a sponsored 10K run.

Irina doesn’t like running, but she supports the cause so decides to sign up, hoping that her colleagues will give more generously because it’s a tough challenge for her.

Evan is one of Irina’s colleagues, and is a member of an amateur running club. When he sees that there’s a sponsored 10K run he immediately signs up. It’s for a good cause, and since he runs that distance every weekend, it makes sense to do it for charity.

Irina and Evan are both motivated to run 10K, but their reasons are very different. Irina wouldn’t normally be motivated to undertake this activity. Instead, she’s motivated by outside factors – in this case, by raising money for a charity. Evan, on the other hand, doesn’t require any outside reward or motivation to run 10K. He enjoys it, and considers it its own reward.

When we think of types of motivation, we would say that Evan is intrinsically motivated to run 10K – he would do so even without the organised event. Irina is extrinsically motivated by the charitable cause. Take away the sponsored element of the run, and Irina wouldn’t complete it.
These types of motivation apply to learners, too. Intrinsically motivated learners are self-directed, and don’t require external incentives. Because learning is their end goal, they’ll do this regardless of any other external factors.

In contrast, extrinsically motivated learners are driven by external factors or rewards. Learning may occur if it helps them achieve their goal (eg recognition, financial compensation, promotion) but is not their final aim. Like Irina and the 10K run, extrinsically motivated learners don’t choose to learn without an external driver.

Many individuals will not be intrinsically motivated to learn during work-based training situations. If we want to improve learning outcomes, it’s essential to understand these differences in motivations and what this means for training design.

Self-determination theory

Intrinsic motivation leads to better outcomes than extrinsic motivation.

One of the most influential theories of motivation is Richard Ryan and Edward Deci’s Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This is a broad theory that encompasses all motivation, not simply motivation as it relates to learning. Through empirical studies, Ryan and Deci identified three ‘innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as for the conditions that foster those positive processes’ (2000, p68). These needs are:

- **Competence**: Provide an opportunity for individuals to control and master an activity.
- **Relatedness**: Provide an environment that fosters social connections.
- **Autonomy**: Enable individuals to control their own path in life.

If these needs are not met, individuals cannot develop self-motivation (ie intrinsic motivation). This is of critical importance, because Deci and Ryan’s work demonstrates that intrinsic motivation leads to better outcomes than extrinsic motivation:

‘Comparisons between people whose motivation is authentic (literally, self-authored or endorsed) and those who are merely externally controlled for an action typically reveal that the former, relative to the latter, have more interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifest both as enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity... This is so even when the people have the same level of perceived competence or self-efficacy for the activity’ (p69).
It’s clear, then, that intrinsic motivation is preferable to extrinsic motivation. That’s not the whole story, though. SDT breaks down extrinsic motivation further, identifying four categories that fall along a continuum from amotivation (no motivation) to intrinsic motivation.

Figure 1 shows this continuum and details how forms of extrinsic motivation such as integrated regulation are close in nature to intrinsic motivation, and therefore will lead to better outcomes than those closer in nature to amotivation.

When we’re designing courses, we can’t always align with intrinsic motivations to learn. SDT shows that providing extrinsic motivations can still lead to improved learner outcomes.
The relationship between motivation and engagement

When we think about encouraging motivation in learners, we often hit upon engagement as a solution – after all, if a learner is engaged, surely they’ll be motivated to learn. In fact, engagement and motivation are different things; an engaged learner is not necessarily a motivated learner.

The difference between motivated and engaged individuals can be summed up as follows: Motivated individuals are concerned with the outcome – they want to learn. Engaged individuals are interested in what’s happening – they want to continue to completion.

That’s not to say that motivation and engagement aren’t related: an individual’s motivation influences how easily they can be engaged by the training materials. For example, intrinsically motivated individuals are more easily engaged – their aim is to learn, so they pay attention. Extrinsically motivated individuals may be more easily engaged if learning aligns with their goals. In contrast, unmotivated individuals are more difficult to engage.

Even though engagement with a course isn’t the same as motivation to learn, it can still improve learning outcomes. That’s because even though the engaged individual isn’t necessarily participating in intentional learning – after all, they’re completing the course because it’s interesting to them rather than because they are seeking a particular outcome – they may be participating in incidental learning.

While much of our focus falls on intentional learning, humans participate in incidental learning all the time. When you’ve heard a song enough times that you can sing along, you’ve incidentally learned the tune and the words. If you remember answers after watching a quiz show, that’s incidental learning. The more a person pays attention to the world around them – or to a training course – the more incidental learning occurs.
Figure 2 shows how motivation and engagement can interrelate to provide improved learning outcomes.

Where motivation fails, engagement is more important, as this increases the opportunity for incidental learning. That’s one reason why mandatory training courses, which can be seen as tick-box exercises, should be designed to be as engaging as possible. If learners aren’t motivated and the subject matter isn’t considered interesting, the training designer must work particularly hard to design an instructionally sound and engaging course.

Challenges to developing motivated learners

It quickly becomes clear to colleagues whether learning is respected within their organisation. If it isn’t, you’ll struggle to motivate learners.

Motivating learners to do more than complete the training as quickly as possible can be tough, but there are specific challenges that make it harder. Here are some of the most common challenges that L&D professionals face when trying to motivate learners.
With these challenges in mind, what can L&D professionals do to design courses that motivate learners?

| Learners have poor experiences of past training initiatives | Whilst it might seem that poor quality training is better than no training at all, it can in fact be counterproductive. If a learner’s only experiences of training courses have been ones that are unengaging or poorly designed, they are unlikely to be motivated to learn in the future. They’re more likely to start the training with a resistant mind-set, expecting that the training is a waste of time. Motivating or engaging these learners is extra tough. |
| Learners don’t perceive the benefits of the training | A training initiative can be engaging and well-crafted, but if the learners don’t see how the training applies to their work situation they can remain unmotivated. Even when benefits are clearly explained, if there’s no visible improvement, reinforcement or follow-through at work, learners will soon come to the conclusion that the training had no impact – and they won’t look forward to their next course. |
| No time is set aside for training | Classroom-based training courses generally have time set aside for attendance during the working week. As more organisations turn to online training, this dedicated training time can be eroded. Without scheduled time for training, learners can struggle to fit their training courses around their work – and if a learner is faced with targets or time pressures, they’re unlikely to prioritise their training courses. In some organisations, learners are expected to complete training in their own time – something that few learners find motivational. |
| Lack of a workplace learning culture | Some organisations champion personal development and continuous learning. Others recognise some benefits to training; and others only provide training opportunities that regulations deem necessary. It quickly becomes clear to colleagues whether learning is respected within their organisation. If it isn’t, you’ll struggle to motivate learners. |
ARCS model of motivational design

Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction are the four major conditions necessary for learners to become and remain motivated.

A popular motivational model is John Keller’s ARCS Model of Motivational Design. ARCS stands for ‘Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction’, which are the four major conditions that Keller identified as necessary for learners to become and remain motivated.

Keller’s model is a practical one that has been tested among a broad demographic of learners: “All of the strategies used in the development of the model were derived from research findings and from practices that have resulted in motivated learners” (Keller, 1987, p3). He therefore provides guidance for practitioners in how to meet each of these conditions.

Attention

Attention is, according to Keller, not only an element of motivation but is in fact ‘a prerequisite for learning’ (1987, p3), and those familiar with Robert Gagné’s Nine Steps of Instruction will recognise this as the initial step in preparing a learner to gain knowledge.

Keller suggests several different strategies through which learners’ attention can be gained and then maintained. These include incongruity (for example, introducing a fact that seems to contradict the learner’s experience, or playing devil’s advocate), humour (if the topic is appropriate), and participation (encouraging group work or role play in classroom based training, or interactive exercises in online training).
### Relevance

The relevance of the training must be clear to learners if they are to be motivated to complete it. While we may think of relevance purely in outcome-based terms, such as improving a learner’s skills in a particular area that improves their work performance, Keller argues that ‘relevance’ can include aligning with a learner’s psychological needs.

To connect with as many learners as possible, the use of a variety of strategies is suggested. These include experience (connecting with learners’ interests or past experiences), future usefulness (explaining the benefit of the training and how it will help learners meet future goals) and need matching (to align with a learner’s need for achievement, affiliation or recognition).

### Confidence

For learners to be motivated, they must have confidence in the successful outcome of their study. Confident learners are more likely to persevere even when the training programme is challenging, while those with a fear of failure are more likely to avoid participation.

To encourage confidence, learners should be presented with clear learning requirements and manageable expectations. An important technique that can be applied to all training initiatives is that of structuring the learning so the difficulty increases over time. This helps provide a challenge while ensuring that learners have the information and skills they need before they move on to more difficult material.

### Satisfaction

Perhaps the most challenging condition, satisfaction, requires that learners have a rewarding experience by incorporating ‘practices that help make people feel good about their accomplishments’ (1987, p6).

Strategies include natural consequences (encouraging transfer of the skill or knowledge to the workplace as soon as possible), positive outcomes (giving praise for accomplishments and offering immediate feedback) and avoiding negative influences (such as surveillance of learners or external performance evaluation where self-evaluation is possible).

Keller recommends that his model is applied within the standard design process (define, design, develop, evaluate). While no individual strategy is a panacea, by combining strategies that meet all four conditions, the likelihood of learner motivation and engagement can be significantly increased.
Other motivational tools and techniques

Rewards are actually considered one of the weaker forms of extrinsic motivation.

We’ve looked at the psychology of motivation and a popular motivational model. But there are other techniques that we can use to either foster intrinsic motivation, or provide extrinsic motivation.

Personalising the learning

We’ve looked at ensuring learners understand the relevance of the training. Personalising the learning performs a subtly different role: rather than demonstrating to learners why the course is important to their goals or meets their needs, a personal connection to the learner is forged.

This can be done in different ways, such as by offering role-specific training that puts the learning in a recognisable context for learners. Some Learning Management Systems use the learner’s name to address them through an online training course; face-to-face training courses can offer further opportunities for personalisation.

Gamification

Gamification has been a popular motivational tool for several years. Rather than designing a course as a serious game, gamification applies the cosmetic elements of games to engage and motivate. Common features of gamified courses include avatars, achievements, timed elements, accumulated points, leader boards and unlockable rewards.

Gamification attempts to align with intrinsic motivations and provide extrinsic motivation for learners. It relates to Keller’s ‘Relevance’ by matching a learner’s need to achieve, collect, master or gain recognition.

Rewards for success

From certification to financial or job-related benefits, rewards can certainly encourage learners to complete a course. However, rewards are considered one of the weaker forms of extrinsic motivation. In fact, ‘contingent, tangible rewards and other extrinsic factors such as competition and evaluations can be detrimental to outcomes such as creativity, cognitive flexibility, and problem solving’ (Gagne & Deci, 2005).

It’s therefore better to reward the knowledge and skills application that results from effective learning. That way, learners aren’t simply motivated to complete a course; they’re motivated to truly learn.
The techniques we’ve looked at so far focus on applications to training courses. But L&D professionals will struggle to motivate learners if learning is not valued within an organisation. If a manager doesn’t see the importance of learning, neither will their staff.

If you can, set the tone at the top: if learners see that training and personal development is important to the organisation, their motivation to learn will increase.

Vary the type of learning initiatives you offer. Is most training done face-to-face, or through structured e-learning? If so, consider just-in-time resources or support. A short video, advice from a colleague or even a downloadable checklist may be more appropriate than a formal course for some topics. This way, you can keep the more formal learning for the topics that require the highest impact – and learners therefore recognise that every training initiative is important.
Conclusion

No short-cuts – take an integrated approach.

As we’ve seen, intrinsically motivated learners have the best learning outcomes. They understand that your training initiatives are important, and are willing to engage with all material. Extrinsically motivated learners can do well too, as long as you can align a motivation to learn with their intrinsic motivations.

Remember, too, that learner engagement in good quality courses improves outcomes even for unmotivated learners. It can make the difference between poor and great learning outcomes. If an engaging training programme is well designed and takes into account key cognitive principles such as cognitive load, incidental learning is likely to happen.

There isn’t a quick way to create motivated learners, but these suggestions can help you achieve your goal:

• Spend time on Training Needs Analysis – if you can’t make a case to learners, you’ll struggle to motivate them.
• Focus on measurable learning outcomes, not course attendance or completion.
• Minimise tick-box activities – make mandatory training courses the most engaging.
• Make time for learning – build it in to schedules.
• Celebrate successes – recognition can be a powerful motivator.

This way, you can help build an organisational culture that fosters learning and improves learner outcomes.
Bibliography and recommended reading


If you have any questions or would like to get in touch please call us on 01773 864640 or email info@walkgrove.co.uk.