

White Paper

A Blended Approach to Optimizing the Learning Journey for Soft Skills Mastery

Digital Transformation and Learning and Development

Digital transformation and learning and development are intricately related. From operations to IT, marketing and human resources, new technologies are being developed every day that are changing how people work. C-suite executives are looking to digital transformation for cost savings, increased productivity and the innovation required to stay relevant in a hyper-competitive marketplace. Crises such as COVID-19 are only increasing that urgency.

The learning and development (L&D) function is no exception to the digital trend; new technologies are revolutionizing how and when people learn. But while L&D technologies driven by artificial intelligence (AI), virtual and augmented reality, and mobile applications are advancing every day, many professionals and practitioners are struggling to make sense of when to leverage these new modalities. Yet, there is little research defining the ideal blend, leaving L&D teams without clear recommendations on when digital or traditional face-to-face training should be used, where it should be used along the learning journey, and for what type of content.

To fill the knowledge gap, we interviewed a cross-section of L&D experts to gather their experience, insights and opinions about whether we can and should be moving the learner journey to digital platforms when developing soft skills is the objective.

In this paper we seek to address this question and, based on those interviews as well as our research and experience, then establish guidance and best practices regarding an appropriate blended learning journey that considers both the type of training and the phases of the learner's journey.

Given the lack of authoritative, independent research and the multitude of opinions that exist on the subject, we recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Nonetheless, we present below what we believe to be an effective learning delivery framework, what we call the Performance Change Pathway™ which, through awareness, experience, and sustainment, reinforces the development of skills and habits learners need to apply and sustain performance change. These three components are also the principles that undergird our learning experience platform eVolve. The eVolve LXP was developed to take advantage of the latest research to deliver a blended training model. Before addressing how this solution works however, it is important to understand the challenges and learning needs facing today's workforces.

The Challenge: Meeting the Needs of the Modern Learner

The needs and behaviors of learners across all generations have changed. For most, time is limited, attention spans are short, and people have strong preferences for when, where, and on what device they learn. Many employees are not content to sit for long periods in a classroom—or even at their computer—listening to or reading dense training materials. In the absence of a highly engaging learner experience, the temptation to multitask instead of focusing entirely on the training can be high.

Employees are also seeking social interaction in their learning experiences. More than half of each generation in a recent *LinkedIn Learning* study said they value the ability to collaborate with instructors and other learners via forums, groups, or Q&A sessions. For example, Millennials and Generation Z workers, say connecting with colleagues is important to them.¹

¹ "3rd Annual 2019 Workplace Learning Report," *LinkedIn Learning*, 2019

Across all generations, employees want access to learning content throughout their day, whether that's on their commute to or from work, at their desk, or during a break. They also value being able to access it at the moments they need it most—e.g., before a presentation, a sales call, or a team meeting. This type of physical learning journey requires a complex blend of digital delivery with just-in-time access across multiple devices (mobile, laptop, tablet, etc.).

At the same time, there has been a significant expansion in the proliferation of online tools to facilitate learning. For instance, in 2021 BCG reported the number of people who use an online educational institution or mobile app for learning jumped from 36 percent to 48 percent since 2018.² The same study indicated that on-the-job, instructor-led training and independent study approaches are still strong and is why a blended method will have the greatest impact in today's learning environments.

"If you can't engage learners, there's no point in going through the trouble of creating a learning program. If people aren't engaged, that means that they're not learning and they're certainly not going to retain the information that they need to."

*-Patricia Franklin
Learning-Product Design and Development
Professional*

L&D teams are trying to work out how to best accommodate these preferences and needs while still ensuring the training effectively engages learners and delivers desired outcomes. After all, as one of learning professionals we interviewed said, "If you can't engage learners, there's no point in going through the trouble of creating a learning program. If people aren't engaged, that means that they're not learning and they're certainly not going to retain the information that they need to."³

A 2021 report on LinkedIn Learning showed that learners who utilized social engagement features watched about 30 times more learning content.⁴ This

type of community-based learning enables learners to connect to other peers as well as experts. particularly engaging younger generations on an emotional level.

Emotions are integral to the learning process; they can either enable or inhibit learning. Live interactions naturally involve emotions, and good facilitators consciously create a learning environment that evokes the emotions that are most helpful in the learning process. They can read participants' non-verbal cues and modify, emphasize, or repeat key elements in real time, leveraging critical moments of opportunity. These are difficult to capture in a fully digital setting, but a skilled facilitator can deliver many of the same benefits associated with face-to-face interactions.

Interacting with other people has also clearly been shown to be effective in helping learners organize their thoughts, reflect on their understanding, and identify gaps in their reasoning. It facilitates engagement and boosts learning effectiveness.⁵

"You need to be present. We're talking about collaboration and teamwork. How are you going to show that if you are doing e-learning? People need to interact."

*-Wanda Piña-Ramírez
Partner at The Human Factor
Consulting Group*

² "Decoding Global Reskilling and Career Paths," Boston Consulting Group and The Network, April 2021

³ Expert Interviews conducted by ENGINE on behalf of Dale Carnegie Training, January 2020

⁴ LinkedIn Learning Workplace Report 2021

⁵ "Blended workplace learning: the value of human interaction," Education & Training, 2019

Different types of classroom experiences can support peer learning, reciprocal teaching, learning by teaching, learning by observation, learning by doing, and self-other monitoring, all of which can be powerful for improving understanding and retention.⁶

In addition, as relationships develop between participants and the instructor as well as among the participants, it can raise the level of engagement and mutual accountability for learning. As another expert we interviewed stated, “Face-to-face is, of course, very rich. People get to build relationships. It certainly makes sense with soft skills and leadership development skills—and even diversity and inclusion skills—for people to be in a room.”⁷

Also, the dialogue and social interaction that occurs during exercises and group activities enhances learners’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills, two of the skills mentioned earlier as part of the skills gap many organizations have identified. These factors are part of what makes learning in person, as a part of a group, so effective.

To progress further, learners need to apply the new skill to real-life situations in their daily work; finally, people need to truly master new skills during the *sustainment* phase in order to turn them into behaviors they can be relied on to use consistently. Clearly, some of these phases are better suited to being supported by digital modalities than others.

Given the complexity in-person instructor led training and skill development learning journeys of the modern workforce, coupled with the challenges L&D professionals face with limited resources to address the critical soft skills gap, the lack of clarity regarding the most effective and efficient blend of delivering training to implement throughout the learning experience is understandable.

But addressing the soft skills gap and cost/time savings are not the only concerns for talent developers.

The Solutions: Organizational Needs for Talent Development and Employee Retention

Widespread digital transformation and the impact of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) are requiring dramatic upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, and leaders are concerned about the resulting skills gap. A World Economic Forum study recently found that by 2022, 42 percent of core skills required to perform existing jobs are expected to change, and by 2030, over 1 billion workers will need reskilling.⁸ The burden of addressing this mismatch is falling directly on L&D teams. According to *LinkedIn Learning*, in 2019, the number-one focus of talent teams was to identify, assess and close skills gaps—up 32 percent year over year.⁹

“50% of senior leaders believe that their talent development efforts don’t adequately build critical skills and organizational capabilities.”

—Harvard Business Review

⁶ “Social Interactions and Learning,” *Encyclopedia of the Sciences of Learning*, 2012

⁷ Expert Interviews conducted by ENGINE on behalf of Dale Carnegie Training, January 2020

⁸ We need a global reskilling revolution—here’s why. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/reskilling-revolution-jobs-future-skills/>

⁹ “3rd Annual 2019 Workplace Learning Report,” *Learning LinkedIn*, 2019

Several large-scale industry studies, along with our own in-depth interviews with clients, indicate that a significant number of senior leaders—up to half—believe that their talent development efforts don't adequately build critical skills and organizational capabilities they need.¹⁰

Skill gaps encompass both hard, technology (STEM) skills as well as what have traditionally been called *soft skills*: the social and emotional intelligence people need to lead and work together to accomplish goals. As many organizations are now realizing that they can hire and build technical skills relatively easily, L&D professionals are turning their focus to soft skills.

From a delivery standpoint, the Association of Talent Development (ATD) notes that ACCEL skills (accountability, collaboration, communication, engagement, listening/assessing) are far more likely to be taught in a traditional classroom.¹¹ The face-to-face environment continues to be favored by talent developers for providing training in these skill areas. Still, in 2021, 33 percent of L&D professionals were anticipating spending increases in their departments, just shy of reported pre-pandemic budgets.¹² Coupled with the fact that the pandemic has forced many L&D professionals to seek digital solutions for training personnel, L&D professionals have been increasingly investing in LMS solutions to deliver virtual and blended solutions to learners.

These soft skills are also a key component of helping people find internal mobility within their organizations. In fact, 82 percent of L&D professionals report that learners are more likely to participate in internal mobility programs and stay two times longer on average at companies that offer such programs. Learning these skills also helps instill confidence and imparts the feeling of adaptability to changing circumstances, an important mindset for turbulent times.

Of course, time and money are important considerations for most training departments and leaders, and classroom, instructor-led training is often more costly and requires taking people out of their jobs to come together in a classroom. So, while classroom training is still the preferred method of delivery, particularly for soft skills content, the demand for blended solutions including various digital formats has grown rapidly over the last two years.

To address this, Dale Carnegie Training developed eVolve—a modern learning experience platform that elevates the learning journey, creating more powerful and lasting performance change. eVolve capitalizes on the ideas behind the Performance Change Pathway™: awareness, experience, and sustainment.

In the next section, we offer our guidance: a blended solution approach that considers the various strengths and weakness of digital and face-to-face modalities, specifically in the context of soft skills training content.

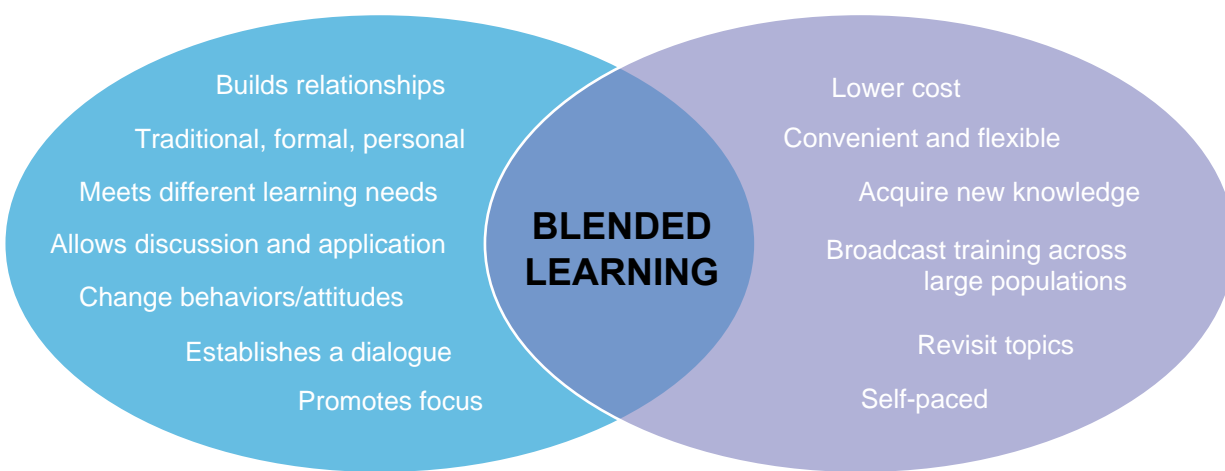
¹⁰ "Educating the Next Generation of Leaders," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2019

¹¹ "ACCEL: The Skills That Make A Winning Manager," Association for Talent Development, 2016

¹² LinkedIn Learning Workplace Report 2021

Why eVolve Is Ideal for a Blended Approach for Soft Skills

As we have already seen, traditional, instructor-led classroom training and digital modalities each have their strengths and weaknesses. There is no one-size-fits-all best approach. Rather, the architecture of an appropriate blended solution will depend upon the technologies available, the geographic scope of the workforce, resources available and a host of other factors. As the figure below shows, is particularly effective for changing behaviors and developing interpersonal skills. A highly skilled facilitator in the classroom—or virtually as a next best option—can create a safe learning environment, accommodate multiple learning styles, ensure focus, stimulate meaningful dialogue, and provide in-the-moment feedback.



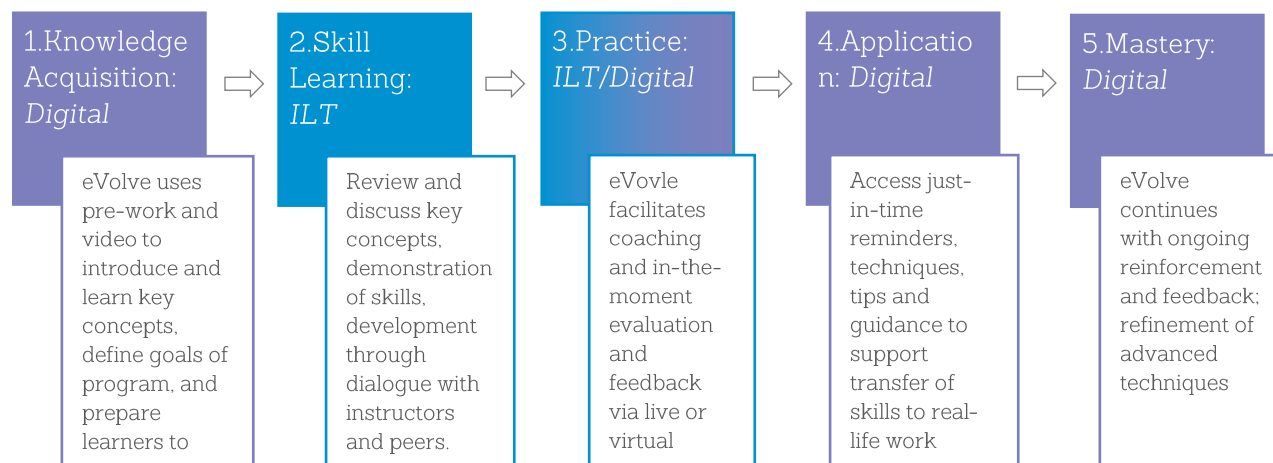
Instructor-Led Training is ideal when:	e-Learning is ideal when:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is important to change behaviors.• The content covers multiple areas of development and skills proficiency.• The desired learning seeks to involve the five senses in higher level developmental learning.• The desired outcomes are improved focus, skills practice, increased adaptability, and face-to-face dialogue.• It is vital to have a safe place with trust and confidentiality so that feedback can occur.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is necessary to broadcast a common training across a large population of users or when training a decentralized workforce.• The outcome is to improve compliance, such as software and technical skill-building courses.• There is need to revisit a topic.• Pre-work is a desired option.• Training is focused on knowledge acquisition.

Source: "A Blended Learning Approach for Success in Today's Global Workforce", Cultural Awareness International, February 2016

Digital modalities have been found to be effective for acquiring knowledge, performing pre-work, and revisiting concepts for reinforcement and sustainment. The obvious practical benefits of digital delivery include the ability to reach large numbers of remote learners and the convenience and flexibility that come with on-demand availability on learners' devices of choice. Providing a self-paced option also accommodates those who learn at different speeds.

Any blended training delivery solution should take into consideration these strengths and weaknesses for supporting the specific learning journey in question.

The blended training delivery model depicted below is based on our research and years of experience in offering classroom and digital instructor-led training. eVolve capitalizes on the ideas behind the Performance Change Pathway™ approach, which considers the stages of the learning journey and defines a recommended modality and objective for each phase, taking into consideration the importance of the awareness, experience, and sustainment components of an effective learning program.



1. Knowledge Acquisition

The knowledge acquisition (awareness) phase uses audio, video, and interactive online tools to introduce participants to key concepts, program goals and structure. Additionally, participants prepare to interact with others. Here is how eVolve delivers this principle:

- Assessments establish on performance baselines and focus on individual learner objectives and development critical competencies.
- Trainer and peer introduction videos maximize the training room time and help build the community of support and practice.
- Microlearning introduces foundational topics, allowing for more impactful conversations in the training room.
- Suggested pre-reading materials build context, increase learner engagement and instill confidence in the material.
- Social collaboration allows participants to get to know their trainer and peers before the first instructor-led session via online social forums. This enables learning to begin immediately, maximizing instructor's time.

2. Skill Learning

During the skill learning (experience) leg of the journey, participants are brought into a live training room environment. A blended learning environment includes live training that encourages social interactions and engagement as well as virtual instructor-led training. Here is how eVolve delivers skill learning:

- Live interactive training sessions feature breakout rooms, practices sessions and real-time coaching to help shift attitudes and behaviors while building new skills.
- Archived videos used in outside live sessions support the learning of key concepts.
- Certified trainers drive performance change through coaching in the moment and between sessions.
- Discussion boards help learners interact and engage with each other, sharing key concepts and their application, discovering how others implement these ideas and building trust in knowing they aren't alone.

3. Practice

During the practice phase eVolve supports the participant's experience through role play, coaching and real-time evaluation and feedback via live or virtual instructors. These areas are other where live instruction is best. L&D expert Wanda Piña-Ramírez, a partner at The Human Factor Consulting Group, contends, "You need to be present. We're talking about collaboration and teamwork. How are you going to show that if you are doing e-learning? People need to interact." eVolve allows participants to practice new skills through:

- Role play in breakout rooms that encourages the immediate use of methods and exercising of skills and is supported by personalized feedback from trainers and peers.
- Access to peer video talks and reports as well as samples from trainers help participants prepare their own.

"I think you can't replace the power of face-to-face. The best thing that we can do is, from a practical perspective, capture that face-to-face excitement — that sort of almost visceral meaningfulness — that you get from being in the same room with an expert."

—Patricia Franklin
Learning-Product Design and
Development Professional

"[T]here is so much richness in being together. Whether that's getting to know each other, having that interpersonal interaction face-to-face or building networks, there are a lot of benefits to being in that face-to-face environment."

—Judy Tso, MAA, PCC, CMF
Leadership Development Expert

4. Application

The application stage (sustainment) of the Performance Change Pathway™, focuses on ongoing reinforcement and coaching through microlearning modules. As the learning journey progresses to real-world application, digital modalities again become more relevant. Here is how the application phase is applied:

- Just-in-time reminders, techniques, tips and guidance are digitally delivered and support the transfer of skills to real-life work situations.
- Students refine advanced techniques through quick, on-demand reinforcement videos and exploration of growth opportunities.
- The training room experience and classroom community is supported throughout with social engagement tools.
- Social learning comes in the form of continued access to instructors and/or fellow participants for practice, reflection, and support.
- eBooks review applications, provide real-world context and share success stories.
- Short videos remind participants of key skills and applications, especially those which show demonstrations of the skill(s) to build confidence.
- Participants share application and successes within the training room.

5. Mastery

During the mastery (sustainment) phase, digital modalities provide ongoing reinforcement and feedback, helping learners revisit key takeaways and sustain their behavior change. eVolve helps participants master their newly acquired skills and techniques through:

- Value-added content that is constantly updated to bring contemporary topics to reinforce learning just in time.
- Enrichment packages that offer sustained practice for program graduates.
- Additional training and coaching packages that provide real-time feedback and personalized guidance.

The Bottom Line

When it comes to the optimal blend of training modalities for effectively building soft skills, industry experts agree on one fact: While digital modalities can be implemented effectively for certain phases of the learner journey, face-to-face training remains the gold standard for the core work of learning and practicing soft skills.

Nonetheless, the eVolve LXP helps shore up these gaps in learning by using the latest research to help keep learners engaged. When constraints won't allow for live face-to-face, virtual instructor-led training programs offered through eVolve can offer many of the same valuable benefits, since they are facilitated by highly skilled instructors using platforms that allow for meaningful dialogue and interactions between the instructors and participants as well as among learners themselves.

While the digital transformation of the training industry continues to advance, evidence of the value of human interaction and engagement remains irrefutable. When developing soft skills is the objective, L&D professionals who leverage the best of both worlds are taking a smart approach.



What Makes Dale Carnegie Trainers So Effective?

Dale Carnegie trainers are uniquely skilled in delivering training, whether live online or in person.

The primary reason clients report such consistent success with our training programs is our trainer development process. Becoming a certified Dale Carnegie trainer requires candidates to complete a rigorous curriculum with checkpoints, evaluation and coaching at every point along the way. Before delivering any of our products, trainers participate in a minimum of 158 hours of training, plus an additional 20 hours to become certified to train online. During this extensive process, our trainers-in-training must:

1. Complete the course(s) they will train as a participant themselves
2. Demonstrate a deep understanding of — and the ability to exemplify — Dale Carnegie's core values, training techniques and trainer behaviors
3. Successfully facilitate the course(s) by meeting or exceeding all training standards in an assessment performed by experienced Dale Carnegie trainer coaches
4. Serve as a graduate assistant to deepen their understanding and enhance their skills
5. Facilitate the course(s) — on average at least twice — alongside an experienced trainer

Only then do our trainers become certified, ensuring that your training program, whether delivered in person or live online, will be led by someone highly qualified and fully prepared to deliver the transformational learning experience your participants want and deserve.

Dale Carnegie trainers are specialists in bringing material alive in any setting, making course material relevant, facilitating social learning and ensuring learners are engaged throughout. They create psychologically safe environments that build trust and confidence, encourage full participation and help learners accept the coaching in the moment that enables real progress.

In addition, our expert trainers must recertify every three years to maintain their high level of proficiency in delivering our wide variety of products, which include programs, seminars, coaching and assessments, all designed to work together to meet your training needs and exceed your expectations.