

# ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR THE ENTERPRISE THE COMPLETE GUIDE

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# INTRODUCTION We Learn Better Together

Corporate learning is undergoing a paradigm shift as organizations adapt to new ways of working and doing business, in response to the cascade of public health, economic, and social crises that were either caused or exposed by the coronavirus pandemic.

These events have triggered an accelerated digital transformation of learning that goes beyond simply delivering content electronically. Approaches to online learning are evolving quickly as learning and training leaders align more closely with business owners and take on new responsibilities for employee engagement, well-being, and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

What has become increasingly clear is that for organizations to develop the capabilities they need to innovate in increasingly complex and distributed environments, individuals at all levels need to learn with and from each other. Effective learning does not happen in isolation.

#### What is collaborative learning?

Collaborative learning is a research-informed learning framework based on a simple idea: We learn better together.

This guide provides an overview of a comprehensive — and effective — approach to collaborative learning. Fundamentally active and social, collaborative learning can create experiences that lead to deeper learning; develop higher-level thinking, communication, self-management, and leadership skills; promote the sharing of diverse perspectives; and prepare learners for real-world situations.

#### From theory to action and results

This guide to online collaborative learning is broken into three sections. In the first section, we discuss critical shifts in corporate learning that have been catalyzed by the events of the past year and the need for systematic organizationwide capabilities to meet a range of overlapping challenges. In the second section, we review the key components of effective collaborative learning that are active, social, inclusive, and bring experts and managers into the learning experience. In the final section, we review selected case studies of online collaborative learning in action.

# THE CASE FOR ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

2020 was a year like no other. Although the coronavirus undoubtedly was the central feature of the year, its effects were compounded by overlapping concerns about economic equality, social justice, and the environment. The pandemic triggered seismic shifts in how we live, how we work, and how we learn.

COVID-19 certainly caused disruption to life and business as organizations moved work to digital platforms, reconfigured supply chains, and adopted new ways of doing business. Many executives have suggested that their organizations moved 20 to 25 times faster on digital transformation efforts than anticipated before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> According to an IBM report,<sup>2</sup> 55% of organizations say that the pandemic has resulted in permanent changes to organizational strategy.

However, the combination of the urgency required by business disruption and rapid adoption of technology alone do not constitute digital transformation. While the flight to digital solutions has enabled organizations to survive, much remains to be done to ensure that organizations thrive in the neverending new normal. If 2020 was the year of disruption, 2021 will be the year when transformation truly kicks in.

# FIVE CRITICAL SHIFTS IN CORPORATE LEARNING

The business transformation underway at most organizations has been enabled by adoption of new technologies, but has never been about technology alone. The events of the past year have also accelerated changes in how organizations work with and for stakeholders, with a renewed focus on how people collaborate, as well as the cultural shifts required for sustainable innovation and growth. Although we are not yet fully aware of all the transitions organizations will need to make to adapt to an ever-changing environment, several adaptations to how business works look likely to stick, with considerable implications for the scope and operations of corporate learning.



#### **1** Remote work requires new ways of learning

Although the shift to remote work was abrupt and unanticipated, some aspects are likely to persist beyond the pandemic health crisis. Some organizations have already extended remote working policies permanently; others are planning hybrid models; others still are contemplating 'dualpresence' approaches with some workers physically present and others remote. As organizations construct new cultures of working enabled by technology, they will need to develop new cultures of learning. There remains a lot of work to be done. In 2020, only 52% of organizations rated themselves technologically ready for corporate learning that supports remote workers.<sup>3</sup>

#### **2** Organizations and workers align on purpose

Beyond the 'what' and the 'how,' organizations are focusing on the 'why' of their business to address the needs of all stakeholders. Although purpose-driven organizations existed well before the pandemic, the confluence of crises over the past year has tested whether purpose is a feature or a fad. Increasingly, purpose is understood not just as a way to connect the needs of all stakeholders to the business but as an organizing principle that aligns the purpose of the individual, their role, and the business. However, purpose is about more than employee satisfaction and customer loyalty: 84% of business leaders believe that business transformation efforts will have greater success when integrated with organizational purpose.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3 Learning drives employee engagement

Corporate learning and training has long been correlated with engaged workforces. Given the need for organizations to quickly adapt to rapidly changing circumstances with the help of highly engaged employees, learning will take on a starring role in driving employee engagement. This will involve not just supporting individual growth but also building greater alignment with the organization's priorities, mission, and values.

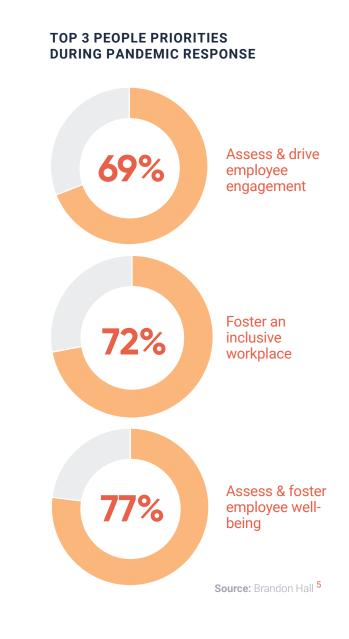
#### 4 Learning shapes inclusive work

Initiatives around diversity and inclusion gained heightened urgency in 2020 when they were bolstered by calls for fairness and justice at work and in society more broadly. Fostering inclusive workplaces was a top priority for 72% of organizations as they responded to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> The challenge for corporate learning is how to move beyond talking about the benefits of diversity to building truly inclusive cultures that value and recognize diverse voices and faces. And this means intentionally building diversity and inclusion into the learning experiences that shape an organization's culture.

#### 6 Learning fosters well-being

Human-centered approaches to HR that consider employees' needs for well-being and belonging are becoming increasingly important and central to success. 73% of organizations are focusing on employee well-being, a broad category that includes health and safety, work-life balance, and stress and anxiety.<sup>6</sup>

Together, these overlapping shifts suggest a new mandate for corporate learning to think and act differently in order to systematically cultivate organization-wide capabilities that shape and renew corporate culture. Targeting group capabilities, rather than a singular focus on the individual, cultivates the resilience, cohesion, and adaptability needed to address the challenges of rebuilding and growth for the future.



# BUILDING CAPABILITIES FOR THE RESILIENT ORGANIZATION



Building resilient, adaptable organizations involves a shift in approach to corporate learning that moves from assembling collections of content that are directed at individuals to cultivating business-aligned capabilities that work across the entire organization. It represents a move from teaching people about things to helping them learn new ways to think and work together.

Although the mix of underlying skills will depend on the organization and on the business function, there are areas of focus that apply to most businesses.

#### Leadership at all levels

The pandemic highlighted the need for new models and methods of leadership. As organizations moved to remote and distributed work, managers have taken on a more significant role as leaders and as connectors to the organization, requiring a consistent mix of advanced cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and analysis, as well as sociobehavioral skills, such as empathy and active listening.

#### Upskilling and reskilling

This category has become a major area of focus at all organizations as they adapt to current and prospective circumstances. Upskilling and reskilling is much broader than just teaching people digital skills. It is about helping individuals, teams, and organizations learn new ways to work.

#### Onboarding

Onboarding as a capability is less about completing forms and more about creating the connections, context, and community that engage and welcome new hires and establish a culture of learning from the outset.

#### Innovation

For organizations to grow and thrive, they need broad-based approaches and processes that can be learned and executed from anywhere. Capabilities in areas such as agile methodologies and design thinking need to be broad-based and understood and practiced in common ways that connect to organizational goals.

#### Diversity, equity, and inclusion

In light of concerns about justice and equity in the workplace, many organizations have made sincere commitments to more diverse and inclusive hiring and promotion practices. However, for these initiatives to stick, organizations will need to develop inclusive environments. Cultures are not dictated or consumed; they are co-constructed at all levels of the organization.

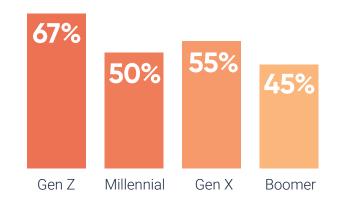
# MEETING EMPLOYEES' DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Despite the proliferation of learning content and technologies focused on skill development, many organizations are falling short of the expectations and needs of their employees. Indeed, there appears to be a disconnect between executives and employees in this regard. According to research by IBM focused on corporate responses to the pandemic, 74% of employers believe their organizations are supporting staff in learning the skills they need to work in new ways. Only 38% of their employees agree.<sup>7</sup>



Learners are looking for more from learning experiences to support both their personal and professional development needs as they adapt to new ways of working. While internet connections have made work and learning possible, social connections are essential drivers of engagement and motivation.





Learners of all generations feel motivated to learn in a social environment with their colleagues

Source: LinkedIn Learning<sup>8</sup>



# USING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TO DEVELOP HIGH-PERFORMING CULTURES

Organizations are, however, increasingly turning to the capabilities of social and collaborative learning technologies to cultivate cultures of learning, establish connections between learners and experts, and drive learner engagement.

### TOP 5 MOTIVATIONS FOR USING SOCIAL/COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES



Source: Chief Learning Officer, 2020 Learning State of the Industry<sup>9</sup>

### THE PROMISE OF ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

As organizations look to the future and plan for the capabilities that will propel them to sustainable growth, collaborative learning technologies can deliver the human engagement required to drive change, at the scale that only technology can support.

"What worked at your company a year ago may be outdated today. Building capabilities in a flexible collaborative learning framework that draws upon the experience of internal experts and mentors ensures the delivery of relevant content and assignments that reflect dynamic business needs."

-Josh Bersin<sup>10</sup>

# THE COMPONENTS of online collaborative learning



Online collaborative learning that is effective in developing organizational capabilities and creating resilient learning cultures goes well beyond liking, sharing, and commenting on content. At its best, collaborative learning is active, promotes discussion and feedback, and engages peers with each other and experts.

In this section, we will explore in-depth the essential components of robust online collaborative learning:

**PRACTICE & APPLICATION** to support learning in the context of work and organizational goals

**DISCUSSION & FEEDBACK** to enhance learning by sharing perspective with peers and experts

**TEAM-BASED LEARNING** that mirrors how work happens and develops interpersonal skills

**MENTORS & MANAGERS** to support learning with expertise and wisdom

**CURATED & GOAL-ALIGNED CONTENT** that connects to business and learning goals

**EFFECTIVE FACILITATORS** who guide learners through high-quality experiences that result in impact.

# **PRACTICE & APPLICATION**

# Apply learning in the context of work and company goals

Research shows that outstanding performance results from purposeful practice and coaching, not from any innate talent or skill.

Practice is about more than improving something you can already do. It's about extending the reach and range of skills, often into areas that might not feel comfortable initially. When practice-based learning approaches are adopted at scale, they can drive purpose, create culture, and inspire innovation across an organization. When practice is directly relevant to work, adult learners are more motivated and more deeply engaged.

### PRACTICE CONTRIBUTES TO ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS

- Establishes alignment with organizational norms and values
- Expands existing knowledge structures and promotes new ways of thinking and acting
- Creates shared meaning that is essential to sustainable growth
- Promotes a culture of reflection and contribution to a community of learners



Practice is the act of improving performance through the intentional application of new knowledge to a mindset or behavior.

#### **PRACTICE IS:**

- Frequent
- Intentionally designed
- Purposefully applied
- Distributed and sequenced
- Supported by peer and expert feedback

#### PRACTICE IS NOT:

- Isolated
- Random
- Rote repetition
- Overwhelming
- Unrelated to the skill(s) one is learning

"Being great at something, comes from purposeful practice, feedback, intelligence, coaching, resilience, hard work, reflection and tenacity."

David Perring
Director of Research, Fosway Group







Application is the transfer of knowledge to authentic, real-world situations.

#### Practice and application are two sides of the same coin

Authentic application moves learning from passive experiences (remembering and understanding) to meaningful impact (applying and creating).

In contrast to approaches that classify application as 'informal learning' (and outside the scope of the typical Learning and Development department), the collaborative learning approach makes application intentional and structured in ways that encourage reflection and social interaction.

Successful approaches to application of learning in the workplace involve learning activities that are:

- **Structured, intentional, and authentic.** Everybody involved in the learning experience needs to be clear on why the application was chosen and intentional on defining the knowledge, mindset, and behavior changes expected.
- Applied on the outside, reflected on inside. Applied learning activities can be conducted in the context of real work but offer the opportunity within a psychologically safe learning space for self-reflection, discussion, and feedback from peers and experts.
- Social and foster community interactions. Novices, experts, and leaders can learn from each other and expand institutional knowledge through shared perspectives, informative discussions, and constructive feedback.

# DISCUSSION & FEEDBACK



"When bringing the classroom experience online, we wanted our employees to retain the ability to reflect on their learning, apply new skills, engage with colleagues, and receive feedback."

Digital Learning & Technology Leader
General Electric



Discussions convene groups of learners and experts around specific topics to solve problems, come up with new ideas, or generate approaches to issues of common concern.

# Enhance learning by sharing perspectives with peers and experts

In an organizational learning context, discussions create spaces for colleagues to connect, collaborate, reach out for help, reflect on their experiences, and support one another.

Discussions need not be formal or facilitated by experts, but any learning program should foster and encourage discussion among all participants.

Through discussion, people can develop new skills and ideas and connect with a network of colleagues and experts. Everyone involved benefits from each other's learning. Specifically, discussions in an online collaborative setting can:

- Promote learner understanding of material
- Encourage the practice of reflection
- Develop shared mindsets and reinforce changes in behaviors
- Empower participants to contribute ideas, insights, individual expertise, and reflection
- Lead to insights that no participant would have on their own
- Engage introverted learners who might be inhibited in in-person learning environments





Feedback is the exchange of information that leads to an increase in performance and knowledge retention.

#### Feedback closes the gap between performance and goals

Feedback can be informal or formal, peer-driven or offered by experts. People can share feedback on:

- What they observe from their colleagues' work
- One another's ideas, opinions, and behavior
- Their perspectives and reflections on assignments and experiences.

#### Why is feedback important?

Constructive, specific feedback helps people learn and improve their practice. There are numerous benefits to encouraging and fostering feedback at an organization:

- Colleagues can contribute to each other's learning not as formal, expert evaluators but as fellow learners who can share what they observe without pressure
- Feedback invites exchanges of opinion, expertise, and perspective
- Feedback can help reinforce core organizational values and attitudes
- Good feedback can help learners pinpoint specific ways they can improve their practice
- The focus on observable evidence makes feedback actionable





# TEAM-BASED LEARNING



Team-based learning convenes groups of colleagues to work together on projects and solve problems of mutual relevance.

# Teams promote engagement with learning

On a high-functioning team, everyone contributes their own expertise and perspectives to the collective's efforts, transforming the learning process through application and problem-solving, while also building interpersonal skills and developing a sense of belonging. Team-based learning can take several forms:

- Dedicated small groups who work together on specific assignments and projects
- Affinity groups within a cohort experience
- Geographically and functionally dispersed
- Diverse in terms of backgrounds and experience

Working in teams is shown to increase engagement, elevate critical thinking, develop communication and collaboration skills, and – last, but not least – create a sense of belonging.

In a world where collaborative, shared, and distributed work has grown increasingly more common, it's essential to build the know-how necessary to work together towards a common purpose and become a good team member.

When people learn in teams, they're developing the "soft skills" they'll need to tackle projects and solve problems in concert with their colleagues. They learn the how of collaboration at their organizations.

Team projects and tasks, meanwhile, advance individual and shared learning of concepts and skills. Working in groups promotes accountability among team members, increases engagement in learning activities, and introduces different points of view that can enrich learning and help solve problems creatively and effectively.

"Great things in business are never done by one person; they're done by a team of people."

- Steve Jobs

#### LEARNERS ON TEAMS ARE MORE ENGAGED THAN INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS

Compared to individuals learning on their own online, those who are part of a team are much more active, participate in group discussion more frequently, and are more likely to persevere with the work.

Sign on – frequency +5X

Remain active ' on the site

+2X

Contribute to +3

ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR THE ENTERPRISE THE COMPLETE GUIDE

# **MENTORS & MANAGERS**



**MENTORS** support learner growth inside and outside the collaborative learning experience. By offering guidance, suggestions, and direction, they serve as learning advisors to individuals and collaborative teams.

**MANAGERS** can serve as mentors as well, though their roles are more formal. Managers are responsible for employees' growth, from initial onboarding to skills acquisition and career development. Managers play a critical role in the transmission of an organization's purpose, mission, and values across the workforce.

"True relationship-based learning uses expert and community learning group networks to stimulate reflection and reinforcement." िर

Mentors and managers serve as experts who guide learners through support, advice, and feedback.

#### Support learning with expertise and wisdom

Engaging mentors and managers in collaborative learning experiences provides benefits, not just to the learner, but also to the mentor or manager, and the organization.

- They model the work and how to get the work done. Simply observing experts practicing their craft is invaluable. Modeling accelerates learning by demonstrating to novices what proficiency looks like in action.
- They accelerate capability building. Mentorship introduces expertise and experience to collaborative learning groups, thus accelerating participants' acquisition of skills and competencies.
- Mentors and managers support, encourage, and guide. Effective experts are generous with their wisdom and experience, providing individuals and groups with skilled, constructive feedback (both formal and informal), accounts of their own learning process, and guidance.
- Mentors and managers transmit an organization's culture. In return, they are exposed to new perspectives and "deep sensing," which can strengthen the organization.
- Mentors and managers are also learners. Through engagement in a learning process with others, they build their own coaching, leadership, and management skills.



# CURATED & GOAL-ALIGNED CONTENT



Content refers to information and material created or curated for the purpose of advancing participants' learning and understanding of relevant concepts.



#### Content drives collaborative learning and results

Given the centrality of human connection and community in collaborative learning, content plays a supporting role in the achievement of learning outcomes. While content is sometimes thought of in terms of third-party libraries, organizations generally have additional assets that can be re-used in learning. And, with easy-to-use content creation tools, organizations can create bespoke resources that emphasize proprietary values and processes.

With measurable learning outcomes in place, it's relatively easy to source and develop content that leads to those outcomes and aligns with organizational goals.

- **Good content leads to action.** Well-aligned content provides participants the information they need to practice, reflect, and build capabilities.
- A variety of content keeps learners engaged. Instead of a diet of webinars and click-through courses, short videos, infographics, podcasts, and selected readings can often be more effective in engaging learners.
- **Content can showcase culture and values.** Short videos and interviews with company leaders transmit what's important to the company.
- External content can expose learners to new ideas. Curated content lightens the workload for organizations while inviting "outside" ideas and perspectives to the learning experience.
- Curation allows for effective learning sequencing. Good learning plans set the stage for applying lessons into practice; the best plans also provide "just in time" content which takes into account what people need to know when and helps them develop proficiency over time.

# **EFFECTIVE FACILITATORS**



# Guide learners through high-quality experiences that result in impact

In online collaborative learning experiences, facilitators play a different role than they do in a classroom setting. Instead of acting as the "sage on the stage," in collaborative learning, facilitators play the role of "guide on the side." This approach both transfers the locus of learning to the participants, and enables facilitation at scale for hundreds, not tens of learners.

Part teaching assistant, part performance coach, a facilitator may be an expert, but she serves primarily as a guide focused on engaging and supporting participants' learning experiences. How a facilitator does so can vary in terms of time-commitment and intensity. Even with limited time and few resources to spare, a facilitator can make lasting impacts on participants' learning experiences.



Facilitators help provide every participant with a successful and high-quality collaborative learning experience that leads to results.

#### Facilitation drives engagement at scale

Tempting as it may be to put an online learning program into place, enroll participants, and let the learning happen organically, assigning facilitators can play a critical role in achieving success with learning programs — and delivering results — at an organization. Without some sort of structured guidance and support, it can be difficult to engage learners to achieve a program's learning outcomes — or even complete a program, for that matter.

Facilitators:

- Help orient participants to a learning program
- Increase program engagement and completion rates among participants
- Answer technical questions about how to navigate online platforms and complete assignments
- Foster collaboration and community among participants
- Offer a spectrum of support at any scale, from coaching "at-shoulder" to engaging hundreds, if not thousands.

# ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

While many organizations are new to online collaborative learning, others have led the way in the digital transformation of learning. In this section, we highlight some of their achievements, which are excerpted from case studies.

CEMEX ENGAGE & SCALE

PERKIN ELMER PRACTICE & CONNECT

FORRESTER CONNECT & COLLABORATE

# **ENGAGE & SCALE: Capability Academy**



CONTEXT

- Global building materials company based in Mexico
- 42,000 employees in 50 countries operating under One CEMEX culture
- Digital transformation changing how employees interact with internal and external customers

#### **CHALLENGE**

- Change mindsets and behaviors to meet new demands for customercentricity
- Scale consistent delivery of prior ILT programs to a global workforce
- Adopt a growth and lifelong learning mindset

"I thought this initiative was centered around technology, but it turns out that it's also about a passion for the learning experience."

> - Digital Learning Advisor **CEMEX** University

#### SOLUTION

- CEMEX University: Leadership Development + 5 Functional Academies
- 16 programs running on NovoEd platform including Leadership Development, Digital Transformation, Onboarding, Soft Skills, and D&I
- Mix of self-paced and facilitated, 1-12 weeks, 1-3 hours/week









# **PRACTICE & CONNECT:** Leadership Development

"We made a deliberate decision to prioritize a superior learning, content authoring, and course facilitation experience."

> - Chief Learning Officer Perkin Elmer

#### CONTEXT

**PerkinElmer**<sup>®</sup>

- US corporation focused on diagnostics, life science research, food, environmental and industrial testina
- Rapid growth through acquisitions and market expansion
- 12,000 employees in 37 countries diverse generational mix

#### **CHALLENGE**

- Increase organization effectiveness through employee engagement, performance, productivity
- Provide equitable access to learning 90% of existing training in classroom; <20% annual penetration of learning
- Meet learner expectations for engagement, accessibility, practice, and networking in the learning experience

#### SOLUTION

- 100% Digital My Path Leadership Development Program - 10 weeks, 2-3 hours per week
- Structured and facilitated learning curriculums
- Self-paced content









### **CONNECT & COLLABORATE: Customer Experience** Certification

**FORRESTER**<sup>®</sup>

#### "We needed a collaborative, interactive, modern learning environment that would help working professionals immediately put into practice what they are learning."

- VP & Global Product Lead **Forrester Certification** 

#### CONTEXT

- Global research and advisory firm
- 300-member cross-industry CX Council frustrated at lack of training and recognition in their field
- Demonstrated link between CX and revenue growth

#### **CHALLENGE**

- Expand and enhance CX learning experience and community
- Enable cohort learning because CX projects are large, collaborative, cross-functional
- Learners need to be exposed to different viewpoints and interact with peers

#### SOLUTION

- CX Certification program with three levels, 8-weeks long, monthly cohort starts
- Lessons include content, discussion, reflection, and practical application
- Assignments can be completed by individuals or teams, and shared for peer and expert feedback









# **PARTING THOUGHTS**

Just as work in the future will look nothing like work in the past, workplace learning too is undergoing a radical shift that looks likely to endure well into the future.

Online collaborative learning can support dynamic learning cultures that bring people together with their peers, managers, mentors, and skilled facilitators; engage participants; foster inclusion, promote accountability; and create the resilience and purpose needed to survive in a constantly changing world.

As individuals and organizations look hopefully towards the future, learning together will help sustain the social connections and institutional expertise that move business forward, even from a distance.

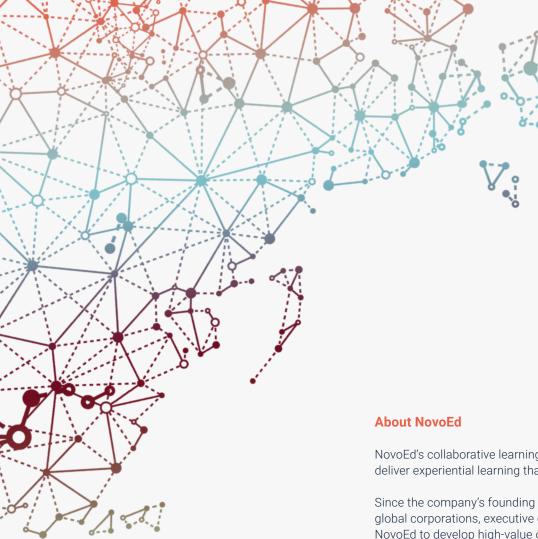
While technology has been a critical enabler of business transformation, it is not the driver. Ultimately the human capabilities for creativity, problem solving, and collaboration will provide the basis for business resilience and charting a path to our next, new normal.

# Interested in learning more about collaborative learning?

This **Collaborative Learning Guide** is just the first installment of a series where we further explore the individual components of collaborative learning, including practical advice, case studies, and 'learning recipes' that span a wide variety of use cases.

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NovoEd's collaborative learning platform empowers organizations to design and deliver experiential learning that accelerates business performance on a global scale.

Since the company's founding at Stanford's social algorithm laboratory in 2012, global corporations, executive education providers, and training firms have relied on NovoEd to develop high-value capabilities through purposeful practice and application, coaching and mentorship, and group collaboration. NovoEd's proven approach to learning connects diverse groups of learners, mentors, and leaders in a high-impact online environment which unlocks an organization's collective knowledge and drives measurable outcomes.

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