



Product Learning & Development Insights Report

Looking at the importance of continuous learning to product professionals in terms of their development, motivation and retention.



Aligning the needs of organisations and individuals to deliver outcomes

Product leadership recognises the critical role of Learning & Development (L&D) in fostering competent product teams. In the short run, upgraded capabilities directly influence product performance; in the long run, an organisation's commitment to its people attracts and retains talent, thereby improving future outcomes.

Despite recent waves of layoffs in the technology sector, competition in the product talent market remains fierce. Data from Q1 2023 indicates an average of 10-20 daily job postings¹. This intense competition affects organisations by inflating hiring times and salary expectations, particularly for mid-to-senior-level professionals, while also forcing reskilling for junior roles and driving attrition at senior and leadership levels. The unique demand for advanced cognitive and adaptive capabilities in product management positions makes capability building a significant challenge for many organisations.

In this competitive landscape, organisations that can draw, cultivate, and retain critical product talent gain an edge.

Failure to invest in L&D can lead to an over-reliance on hiring and retaining the staff to build and maintain critical capabilities. However, high-performing product managers understand the importance of learning - that's how they maintain their high performance. Organisations that don't demonstrate the same commitment may struggle to retain the very staff they are now relying on. Investing in the wrong resources though could be even more damaging. If teams are required by organisations to engage with learning that doesn't add value, beyond the waste of investment, in the long-term the resulting frustration and disillusionment may represent an even higher cost.

1 Averaged LinkedIn & Seek data searches across Jan - March 2023.

Product professionals have expectations regarding the quality and delivery of learning resources. Their engagement with these resources hinges on their relevance and accessibility.

The highest return on investment in L&D is achieved when both organisations and individuals find their expectations met: individuals want resources that cater to their immediate and future needs, while organisations gain from enhanced capabilities and increased commitment among their teams.

To gain insights into the Australia & New Zealand (ANZ) product L&D market, Brainmates solicited the perspectives of product professionals. Our findings identified several key barriers to effective learning and guided our recommendations to assist organisations in enhancing their product learning strategies for maximum returns.

Findings

The Gap Between Intent and Action in Learning Engagement

When asked how important their learning is to them, product professionals respond with a clear and consistent response: it is extremely important - rating it at a score of 92/100. However, the time invested in learning falls significantly short of this sentiment. A quarter of respondents spent only an hour or less learning each week, and almost half spent between one and three hours. Notably, individual contributors were less likely than managers to devote three or more hours to learning per week (22% versus 36%).

One key impediment to actualising learning intent may be available time during normal work hours. About 40% of respondents reported spending more than 80% of their learning time outside office hours, which added roughly 2.5 hours to their weekly workload.

Interestingly, this gap between intent and action does not appear to stem from a scarcity of resources. Over 75% of respondents reported having access to at least one type of learning support provided by their organisation. Nevertheless, less than a third of respondents accessed structured support for more than three days per year.

This low rate of access - particularly among individual contributors - suggests significant barriers to resource utilisation, such as time constraints or a mismatch between the learning style and subject matter offered and the needs of product professionals.

While organisations are clearly investing in L&D, employees are spending the majority of their time learning using resources they are sourcing themselves. While some independent learning is likely to be beneficial, if the majority of learning happens outside the organisation, it may be difficult to maintain consistent practice.

Findings

The Discrepancy Between Provided Resources and Learning Preferences

One reason why resources are underutilised may be a misalignment between the preferred learning style of individuals and the types of resources offered.

Across all product professionals, there is a preference for structured coaching and mentoring as the most effective way to learn. When asked to rank different aspects of learning according to their importance, “Opportunity to apply learning and get feedback” was ranked third.

These responses indicate a strong preference for learning that is personalised to the individual and their current work, and that includes ongoing support. However, when asked about the types of learning support provided by their organisation, less than 20% of respondents indicated having access to external coaching and mentoring.

Ensuring a return on L&D investment requires greater alignment with learning needs. Failure to do so can only lead to wasted investment.

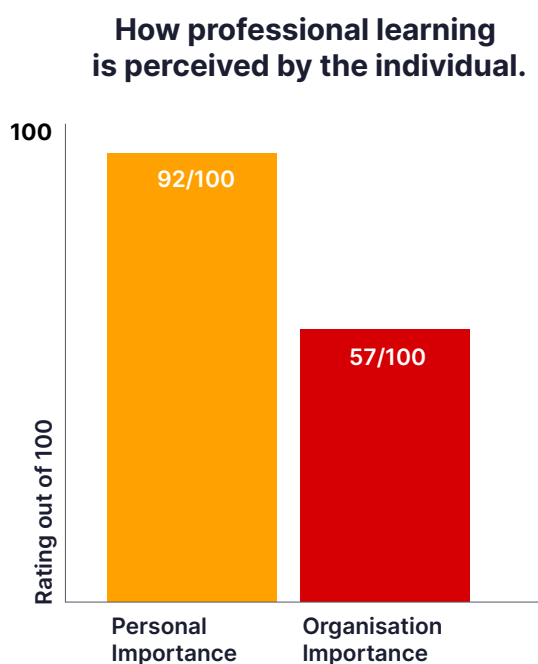
The Need for Impactful Training

Both organisations and individuals desire training that makes a difference. More than 85% of the product leaders we interviewed considered the actionability of training a top consideration. Likewise, product professionals favoured examples, feedback, and learning applicable to their current tasks. This preference underscores the need for diverse learning experiences focused on example, application, and feedback at the right time.

Findings

The Perceived Lack of Organisational Commitment to Learning

A striking discrepancy was revealed between the perceived importance of learning to product professionals (personal importance rating of 92/100) and how important they believed it was to their organisation (organisational importance rating of 57/100). This gap was even wider among individual contributors, at 45%.



Less than 9% of respondents reported receiving regular, high-quality learning support from their manager. This lack of managerial support, coupled with the perceived discrepancy in learning priorities, may skew the perception of the organisation's commitment to learning.

Regardless of its validity, this perception could influence how professionals engage with organisational training resources and their likelihood of remaining in the organisation long-term.

Findings

If the unstated purpose of the organisation's learning strategy is to be able to communicate that the organisation has a learning strategy, then this will be equally apparent to those who are intended to benefit from the strategy, and those who should be implementing it. The best performing team members on which future performance relies will not be satisfied by just ticking the box.

Recommendations

Incorporate Learning into Routine Work

Embedding learning into everyday work alleviates the burden on individuals to pursue learning outside of work. This shift indicates an organisational commitment to professional development, promotes knowledge sharing and best practices, and fosters a more collaborative and productive work environment.

Align Resources with Needs and Expectations

Underutilised resources signal a misalignment between what is provided and what is needed. Instead of attributing low usage to a lack of commitment, it is more likely that resources do not meet the expectations for content and delivery.

Organisations cannot afford to waste their investment in L&D on resources that don't meet the needs and expectations of their product teams. L&D strategies should be created with the direct involvement of staff to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and better utilisation.

Prioritise Effectiveness

Despite the surge in online and asynchronous learning, the human aspect of learning remains significant for many product professionals. Coaching and mentoring - particularly when separated from line management - can build trust, structure, and diversity in experience and style - all of which contribute to an enhanced learning experience.

Recommendations

Demonstrate Long-term Commitment to Learning Goals

A perceived discrepancy in learning priorities can be bridged by a top-to-bottom approach to learning, where learning is a priority at all levels, from the CEO to the front-line employees. Consistent resources and a focus on effective solutions aligned with expectations are also crucial.

In the same way that product development needs to focus on outcomes not output, L&D objectives cannot be limited only to the provision of resources, but instead should be focussed on learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Product professionals are intrinsically motivated to improve and contribute more effectively. This motivation is evident in the time they spend learning outside of work.

To foster long-term commitment, learning should be ingrained in the work culture, providing continuous development opportunities during work hours.

Product managers value pragmatism, a principle that extends to their learning and development. They seek training that equips them with practical skills and insights applicable to their work. Investments in learning resources, such as structured online training programs, only pay off when they are utilised.

On-the-job coaching and mentoring programs offer personalised, immediate learning opportunities in context. By committing to such a program, an organisation can align its developmental needs with those of its employees. This alignment supports both the organisation and the employees in achieving their respective goals, and it can also boost job satisfaction, engagement, and loyalty among employees.

Conclusion

Learning & Development should not be viewed as an expense - begrudgingly agreed in order to tick a box - but as a critical investment in capability development. As with any investment, there is no guarantee of receiving a return, but a sound L&D strategy is the necessary first step. Learning objectives that describe outcomes rather than activity, combined with a consistent commitment at all levels of the organisation, will provide a foundation for future product performance and sustained competitive advantage.

To communicate the potential impact of training, tech entrepreneur Ben Horowitz quotes Andy Grove - author of 'Measure What Matters' - when saying that:

“Training is, quite simply, one of the highest-leverage activities a manager can perform. Consider for a moment the possibility of your putting on a series of four lectures for members of your department. Let's count on three hours of preparation for each hour of course time – twelve hours of work in total. Say that you have ten students in your class. Next year they will work a total of about twenty thousand hours for your organisation. If your training efforts result in a one percent improvement in your subordinates' performance, your company will gain the equivalent of two hundred hours of work as the result of the expenditure of your twelve hours.

How Brainmates Can Help

Founded in 2004, Brainmates is the leader in product management professional services in Australia and New Zealand. We deliver practical, product-led change to scale-ups, SMEs and enterprise organisations.

We have helped hundreds of organisations **improve their product talent & learning outcomes through:**

- **Product Organisation & Capability:**

We have improved hiring and capability outcomes through the design of tailored capability frameworks and product management processes.

- **Coaching Services:**

We have helped close the learning-doing gap through our specialised coaching programs supporting both individual and team development.

- **Product Management Solutions:**

We have facilitated the delivery of outcomes by product teams with focused programs in areas like roadmapping, discovery & strategy.

- **Practical Training Courses:**

We have helped develop key product skills through courses that combine practical examples and feedback from product experts.

The Brainmates Approach:

**When you work with Brainmates,
you get a trusted partner.**



We don't teach you and then leave you to decipher how to implement on your own.

We don't use a one-size-fits-all framework that your competition uses too.

We find your competitive edge and create a unique framework that sets you apart from your competition.

Our unique approach means we not only teach you how, but, we also help you do the work until you can do it on your own.

We set you up for success, and are there as your partner to help you sustain it.