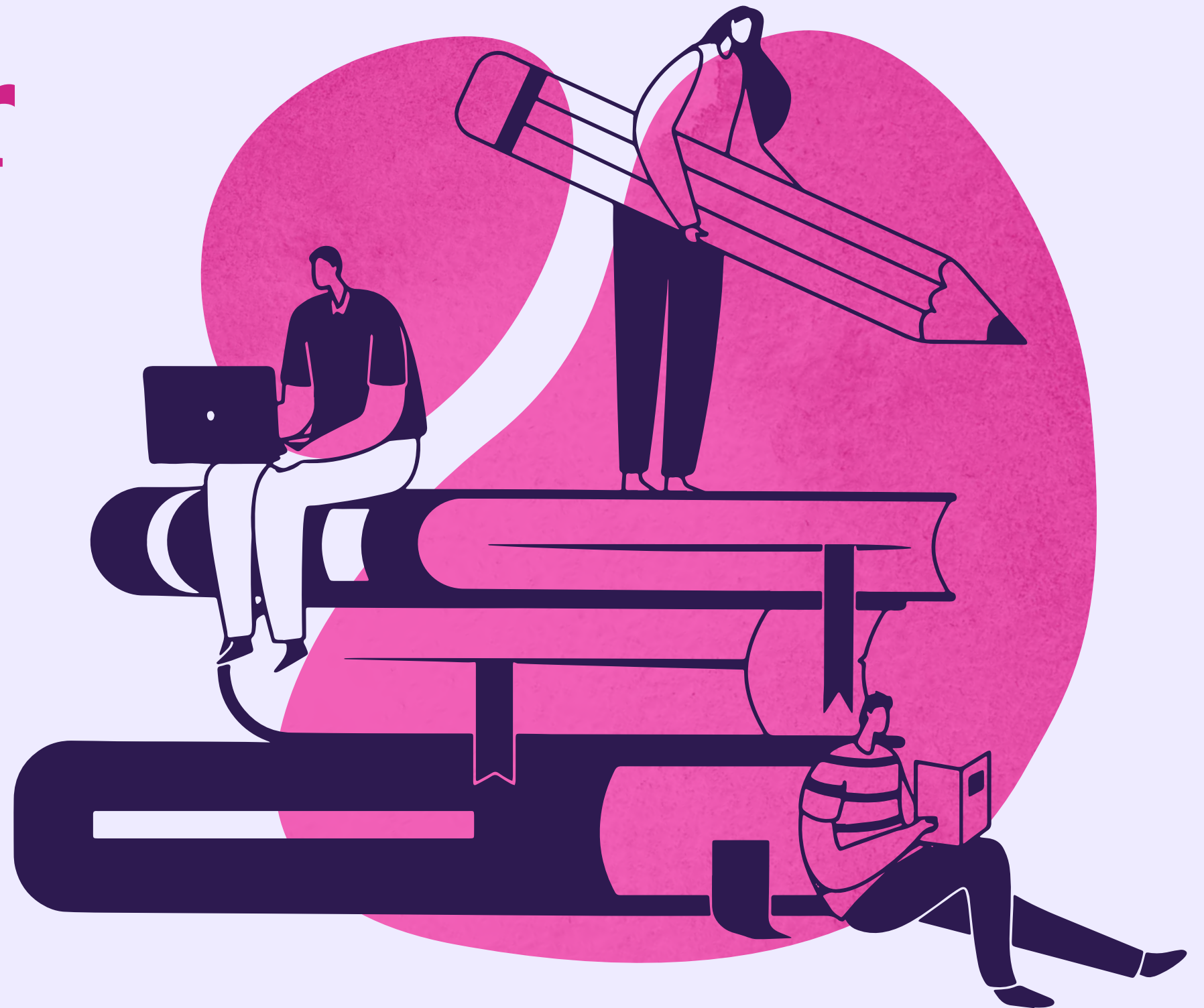


# Cash-poor workplace cultures

How to leverage  
learning opportunities



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# Contents

Foreword .....	3
Workplace culture in a cost-of-living crisis .....	4
A strategic investment in L&D solutions .....	7
Seven ways to leverage L&D in a cash-poor culture .....	11
L&D's role in cultivating a culture of listening and belonging .....	14
Final takeaways .....	19
References .....	20
About the author .....	21
About Culture Amp .....	22
About HRZone .....	23



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# Foreword

Many organisations are commencing 2023 in what is recognisably a tough climate. I'm of the firm belief, however, that we can draw inspiration from the old adage 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going', because those who are proactive in this space will reap the rewards both now and in the future.

When it comes to powering an organisation during a difficult epoch – when most companies simply cannot afford to throw money at the problem – it presents an opportunity to execute what we at Culture Amp refer to as 'brilliant basics'.

[Research](#) from Culture Amp's data lake (of 2,400+ organisations and nearly 1.9 million employees) shows that the number one reason people cite joining their organisation is also the number one reason they cite leaving – career development.

The companies that differentiate themselves to hold onto and attract talent, as well as bolster productivity, will be those who double down on developing their people. Investment in your people is always a good idea. It boosts retention, maintains an attractive employee value proposition (EVP) to the talent marketplace and drives engagement and productivity.

It also charges employees with resilience and creativity to solve the immediate challenges the organisation faces, which becomes imperative during an economic downturn.

To my mind, getting creative and looking for remedies that have relatively small costs attached fits this niche of brilliant basics. Maximising all the resources we have and applying them to full effect will be a muscle well exercised over this time period – and this guidebook provides a handy 'warm up' to get us moving in the right direction. In doing so, we will power a brighter future when the going gets easier down the line.



**Jess Brannigan**  
Lead People Scientist  
Culture Amp





# Workplace culture in a cost-of-living crisis

**When a cost-of-living crisis hits the workplace, drastic and innovative action is needed to lessen the impact.**

In the wake of the cost-of-living crisis, we continue to hear about record numbers of employees quitting their jobs and moving to a more financially stable position or sector. These workplace realities demand an ‘all hands on deck’ approach and a renewed focus on culture to avoid fleeing talent.

L&D professionals, particularly in small and medium-sized businesses, must play a role in protecting the employee experience and company culture during this time of economic hardship – especially in the absence of pay rises and bonuses.

How, then, can L&D work with their organisation to retain staff and reinvigorate morale in a cash-poor culture? This guide will share strategies, examples and innovative best practices to help businesses get through financially challenging times and emerge stronger on the other side.

For many employees, the cost-of-living crisis is becoming increasingly dire. According to the Office for National

Statistics, inflation as measured by the consumer prices index rose from 9% in April 2022 to 9.1% in June 2022 – a level unseen since February 1982 and the highest rate in the G7 group of wealthy nations. Utility bills plus food and fuel prices are rising, and many workers and employees are now living in poverty. A pay rise may help ease the strain, but only some organisations are able to offer a salary increase as employers are also being hit with the repercussions of inflation, rising bills and reduced profits. During these financially difficult times, some workers may need to seek additional employment or sources of income.

A third (33%) of workers say they're struggling to cope at work, with 34% citing the rising cost of living as the primary reason for their poor mental health (Lime Global 2022). The impact of how people feel outside of work directly affects how they feel about and perform at work, which in turn ripples into the overall organisational culture.



## Workers want better pay, progression and security

We see all too often a direct correlation between the condition of personal finances and people's priorities when choosing a new job.

A job's financial (and even non-financial) benefits are becoming increasingly important in the current economic climate. For many, the salary offer will be a significant determining factor when deciding whether to apply for or accept a new job offer. This desire for pay and progression growth is where L&D can make an impact, through offering programmes that support career development and engagement designed to attract new talent.

During uncertainty, people also see greater value in job security. When we provide a plethora of high-quality learning opportunities to our existing workforce, we signal our desire to invest in their growth, which can help them feel valued, stable and loyal to the organisation.

*"For many, the salary offer will be a significant determining factor when deciding whether to apply for or accept a new job offer. This desire for pay and progression growth is where L&D can make an impact"*



## Choosing pay over passion

Lydia Brown\* has been working in education for seven years as an early years educator and has seen her personal income stagnate. She has decided to leave the job that she loves to retrain as an IT engineer.

*"I'm gutted that I've been put in this position and feel forced to leave a job I love and will miss the children that I work with dearly. However, after combing through Glassdoor and seeing which roles pay well, I have made the difficult decision to leave and retrain as a software engineer."*

\*Name changed to protect identity





## Did you know?

- The number one cited reason for joining an organisation is also the number one cited reason for leaving – **career opportunities**
- If an employee believes their company is contributing to their development, **their engagement is 83%**. This is much higher than the **global average of around 73%**
- Where employees don't believe their company is contributing to their development, their **engagement is a devastatingly low 19%**
- Employees who do not believe their organisation is contributing to their development are **twice as likely to leave the organisation within the year** (vs the average)

(Culture Amp 2022)

## Key takeaway

Thoughtful and intentional L&D programmes designed to address the current economic challenges will retain and attract new talent.





# A strategic investment in L&D solutions

The responsibility of L&D has always been to help organisations navigate uncertainty and chaos in the world; strategic solutions will do this and more.

L&D is perfectly positioned to support culture change by developing a system of learning throughout the organisation that maximises talent, improves performance and gives employees a chance to increase their career prospects in this current crisis.

By championing the development of a **learning organisation**, employers are declaring their commitment to continuous improvement.

*"L&D is perfectly positioned to support culture change."*

## What is a learning organisation?

According to Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, a learning organisation does the following:

- Embraces agility, innovativeness and competition
- Impacts business results
- Fosters aspiration
- Makes space for reflective conversations
- Understands complexity

## Learning as a cultural pillar

The upskilling of the workforce is directly correlated to happier and more engaged staff and increased retention rates.

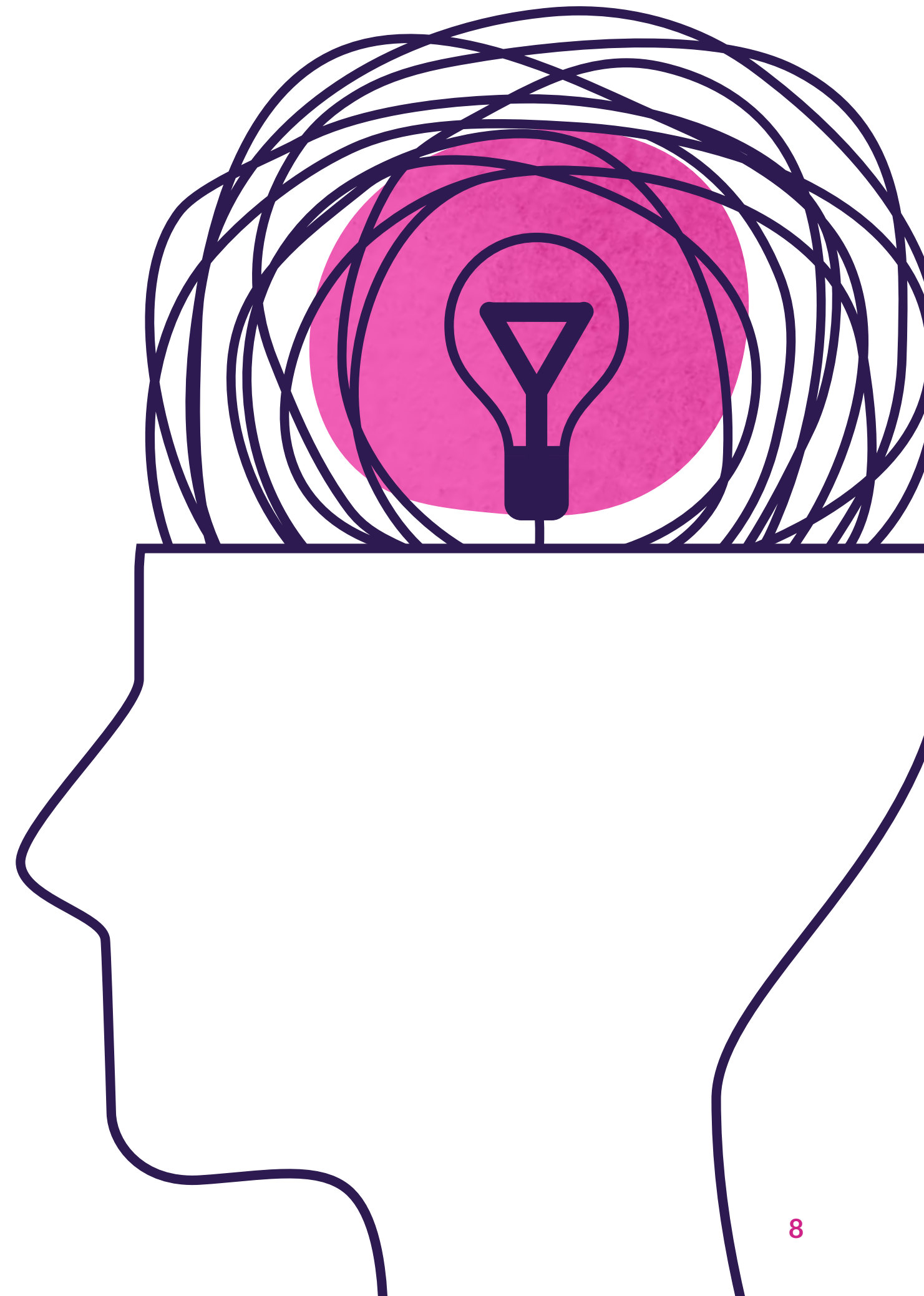
As demonstrated by the 2022 report released by TalentLMS, backed by Epignosis and the Society for Human Resource Management, **L&D is becoming more than a programme operating in the background** of a company. It is a key cultural element that more employees are seeking out.

### TalentLMS' research found that:

- 76% of employees are more likely to stay with a company that offers continuous training
- 55% say they need additional training to perform better in their roles
- 38% advise that companies should align training with job responsibilities
- 32% believe training should be both more social and updated more frequently
- 50% of employees are pursuing learning opportunities on their own, outside of training at work

## Getting inspiration from charities

Knowing that training and development are significant contributors to morale and retention, non-profits and charities have learned to navigate the landscape with tight L&D budgets (CIPD 2020). As we progress through the economic recession, continuously juggling and shifting resources, many organisations (including the public and private sectors) can **follow in the footsteps of charities and non-profits** when faced with restricted L&D budgets.







## C-Suite buy-in for L&D investment

Getting C-Suite buy-in for learning investments is challenging in an ongoing climate of uncertainty. Harnessing qualitative and quantitative data is therefore imperative to negotiating additional funds, alongside providing a clear plan on the available low-cost options.

When seeking investment, a powerful question to pose to the C-Suite (and subsequently answer) is:

### What is the cost of doing nothing?

When you do nothing, good people leave and the cost of hiring can be significant.

According to research by Oxford Economics and Unum, the average cost of turnover per employee (earning £25,000 a year or more) is £30,614.

Investing in retaining staff is highly likely to be lower than the cost to recruit, so it makes commercial sense to focus on supporting your most valuable resource at this critical time.

The biggest cost of losing employees is the loss of productivity. Oxford Economics and Unum say that, on average, **it takes 28 weeks for the new hire to produce the same level of work as the person they replaced.** This loss of productivity stacks up to a cost of £25,182.

### Key takeaway

**Training a diverse workforce on a shoestring budget is no small task, but the cost of doing nothing is too big to ignore.**



## The potential solution

When the purse strings are tight and organisations need to acquire and develop skills, it's time to get creative. **A hybrid approach of formal and informal training and development opportunities is fundamental**, with significant consideration to overall accessibility and impact. This will benefit not just the staff but the company overall.

**Upskilling opportunities can set an employer apart in the search for talent.** As the PwC 22nd Annual Global survey demonstrates, workforce quality standards fall and companies are unable to pursue market opportunities or innovate effectively when upskilling is overlooked.

This data further strengthens the case for **focusing on a learning strategy that boosts retention.** To remain competitive and execute goals, businesses not only need to keep people in posts, but they also need to ensure they have the right skills.

### Get started!

As a first step, L&D should carry out a skills audit of existing talent and map it against both current and future business needs.

The results of this audit will enable learning programmes to be proactively designed in a way that plugs skills gaps while creating more defined career pathways.







# Seven ways to leverage L&D in a cash-poor culture

## 1 Skills audits

A skills audit is the process by which employers gather information on their employees' current skills and look for shortfalls to be addressed individually or collectively.

Skills audits also present the opportunity to identify potential knowledge gaps, and you can determine if an employee still possesses (or can gain) the necessary skills for their role.

### Discover more

If you want to learn more about skills audits [this blog from Academy to Innovate HR](#) offers a comprehensive how-to guide.



## 2 Defining career pathways

Defined career pathways offer employees a clear and better understanding of their career options and motivate them to work hard to progress through the organisation.

These pathways can be critical to employee growth and development. Without them, staff may plateau in their current roles and begin looking for new opportunities elsewhere.

Career pathways take a broader approach than the traditional career ladder; they involve defining goals and identifying the skills and experience an employee must gain to achieve them.

### 💡 Discover more

Learn more about what career pathing is and how to enable your managers to create career pathways in this [article from Culture Amp](#).

## 3 Open lunch and learns

A lunch and learn event allows co-workers from different teams to meet and share their skills and expertise and is usually hosted by a guest speaker.

Benefits of lunch and learns include improving communication, collaboration, and learning; boosting morale; and fostering employee loyalty (decreasing staff turnover). It should be an enjoyable blend of learning and socialising with a flexible concept.

These sessions can be held both virtually and in person, plus you may want to consider holding these open sessions outside of lunch hours to avoid eating into employees' precious break periods.

### ★ Take inspiration

Some companies hold 'breakfast and learn' sessions in the morning or 'cake and learn' sessions in the afternoon as an alternative.

## 4 Supercharging internal trainers

Tapping into existing in-house resources, such as internal trainers and facilitators, has apparent benefits. These subject matter experts are both familiar with the context in which they operate and highly attuned to the current climate within the organisation.

To get the best out of your internal trainers, empower them to develop refreshed content that involves more interactive and reflective sessions.

The focus should be on creating a more positive learning experience by reviewing past evaluations of sessions and taking appropriate action.

### 💡 Discover more

If you're looking to leverage internal subject matter experts to supercharge your L&D efforts this blog post from [Acorn](#) may help you.



## 5 Coaching, mentoring, reverse mentoring and buddying up

Consider promoting the availability of a pool of internal coaches or mentors for employees to reach out to themselves. Such an offering will empower your people to take their development and support needs into their own hands.

By connecting with reverse mentors, leaders can act as powerful role models for this learning intervention and demonstrate commitment to understanding the experiences of their people. The company intranet (or similar) can promote the profiles of coaches, mentors and buddies after a soft launch.

### 💡 Discover more

[The article from TrainingZone provides three powerful questions to challenge learners.](#) Share this with your internal coaches and mentors to ensure they ask questions that enable development.

## 6 Workplace shadowing (internal and external) and secondments

Workplace shadowing involves observing a professional to understand their role better.

Consider collaborating wherever possible with partner organisations or forging relationships with others to enable cross-company opportunities.

Project-based secondments in particular allow employees to get first-hand experience in another industry, organisation or job role – so they can truly understand what it involves.

### 💡 Discover more

If you're interested in organising secondments, learn all the fundamentals to help you get started from [this Work Life article](#).

## 7 Optimising digital solutions

Consider looking at online bite-size learning platforms where many categories and topics are available for staff.

Use your organisation's social media platforms to share links to articles, thought leadership and information on events and courses as your unique way of social learning.

If you use virtual communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams, consider hosting events such as 'Virtual coffees' or 'Bring your lunch' as a way for remote workers to connect socially and informally.

### 💡 Discover more

This [Charity Learning Consortium guide](#) on free L&D resources includes a list of reputable online courses for you to explore.





# L&D's role in cultivating a culture of listening and belonging

A listening culture will provide the perfect safe space for organisations to hear first-hand from those most affected by the cost-of-living crisis.

Offering a suite of learning opportunities that bolster skills and career growth is important in financially hard times. But we must also factor in the mental toll of the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on morale, social wellbeing and engagement.

The following interventions will enable employees to voice their issues, get the support they need and feel closer to their colleagues and leaders.

*"We must factor in the mental toll of the cost-of-living crisis and its impact."*

## Listening circles

Listening circles, which have their roots in indigenous cultures, allow people to speak and listen to each other in a psychologically safe environment. This is important because there is a huge variation in financial literacy among employees.

Providing space for peer-to-peer listening and discussion will ultimately enable employers to gain insight into what employees already know and get a feel for what they might need.

### 💡 Discover more

The [Co-Intelligence Institute](#) offers a deeper dive into listening circles and how to run them.



## Safe space conversations

Safe space conversations work particularly well within a diverse workforce where there may be pockets of difference, and underrepresented or marginalised groups.

A safe space conversation will provide your people with the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences, views and perceptions without the fear of repercussion.

### 💡 Discover more

[Gary Rogers](#), Head of Investigations & Audit Services at The TCM Group, explores how to enable psychologically safe conversation through the 'CARE' model.

## Action learning sets

An action learning set is a group of people explicitly intending to solve workplace problems. The main aim of an action learning set is to come away with a range of realistic actions that will help solve or understand the issues at hand.

Like the listening circle, participants actively listen and ask clarifying questions, then share their observations and suggestions for the speaker (**who is now silent**) to reflect on. At the end of the session, everyone takes away clear actions to resolve the specific challenge.

*"The focus on recognition allows CAA to create moments of gratitude, safety, and joy within the company that help employees feel valued."*



## Doubling down on recognition at CAA

CAA is Canada's largest not-for-profit automobile association, with more than 2,000 employees. The organisation built a high-quality company culture by considering how it could create a meaningful and consistent experience for employees.

With the goal of cultivating a culture in which team members support one another and collaborate effectively, CAA launched an innovation award and recognition solution that created lower turnover rates and a heightened workplace atmosphere.

The focus on recognition allows CAA to create moments of gratitude, safety, and joy within the company that help employees feel valued.

## Feedback loops

It is important to gather genuine insight from your staff whether through surveys or face-to-face chats, and engage with their concerns and issues.

From this feedback, you can make an assessment of your current workplace culture, looking at the systems, policies and pain points in the workplace that are helping or hindering your organisation to live its values authentically.

### 💡 Discover more

Learn the difference between positive and negative feedback loops and how to implement an effective loop from the [CPD](#).

## Team building

Team building events have a poor reputation but when executed effectively, group exercises can build trust, address conflict and encourage open communication and collaboration.

Team building can take shape in various forms and, depending on the needs, can be designed to support better communication, problem-solving, decision-making, collaborative planning and trust-building activities. Team building sessions also provide an opportunity to explore teamwork satisfaction and engagement levels.

It is essential to take the time to identify, specifically, what you are trying to address and the desired outcomes before designing the session. It is also necessary to ensure participation from the whole group so all team members can contribute and their voices are heard.

## Staff development networks

Staff development networks can be a lifeline of support whilst providing a safe space for employees to have real, honest conversations on work-life experience, highlighting both areas for improvement and areas of success.

They provide supportive environments, help bring people together (meet peers), enhance careers, contribute to personal development and improve in-house (organisation) knowledge.

These networks can support individual staff members who may face challenges at work by giving easy access to colleagues who can empathise, share their own experiences and offer practical advice. These communities help to build communication and can provide the ability to champion an individual and call for change.

Well-organised and empowered networks greatly benefit organisations genuinely looking to foster and enhance a diverse culture of inclusivity in the workplace.

### 💡 Discover more

The [CIPD](#) offers a practical guide for organisations and their employees working to set up or improve a staff network.



## Senior management roadshows

Roadshows can effectively share important business leadership messages face-to-face without having to address all employees at one large event.

The roadshow event can be great for getting teams together to communicate strategy and business updates and share key information. It can also help to bring together all remote workers, making them feel valued and aligned with the business strategy. Therefore, it's essential that the event is well-timed, accessible to all and given/received by all in the same way and with consistent messaging.

### Discover more

Explore how different types of roadshows work in this quick guide from [the balance](#).

## Townhalls and roundtables

Townhalls can give business leaders a forum for sharing insight into the organisation's overall direction, goals or special projects – all of which are particularly invaluable during difficult and transient times.

These company meetups can also enable employees to feedback from the front lines and discuss critical issues that will enhance organisational success.

The intention is to create an open space for employees to engage in conversations. A modern workplace seeks ideas and viewpoints from all business areas and flips the top-down approach on its head. It allows for dialogue between groups that might not normally engage with each other. They are motivational, align everyone with what's happening, show employee ideas are valued and can indicate overall employee satisfaction.

## Shadow boards

A great way to further understand the internal and external business context and employee experience is to create a shadow board – a group of non-executive employees working with senior executives on various strategic initiatives.

This will help the organisation understand employees' pain points in the employee experience and the current climate and potential solutions for tackling these. It will also provide insights and perspectives to which senior leadership may need to be exposed.

### Discover more

Learn how shadow boards can bridge generational divides in this [Harvard Business Review article](#).

## Spark social bonding moments among teams

When times are tough, social events are more important than ever to create strong bonds and mitigate feelings of loneliness or exclusion. Consider the following low-effort, low-cost approaches:

- Breakfast days
- Escape rooms (Online versions are available for remote/hybrid workers)
- Online bingo (brilliant for remote workers)
- Decorate your desk competition
- International food day – communal eating



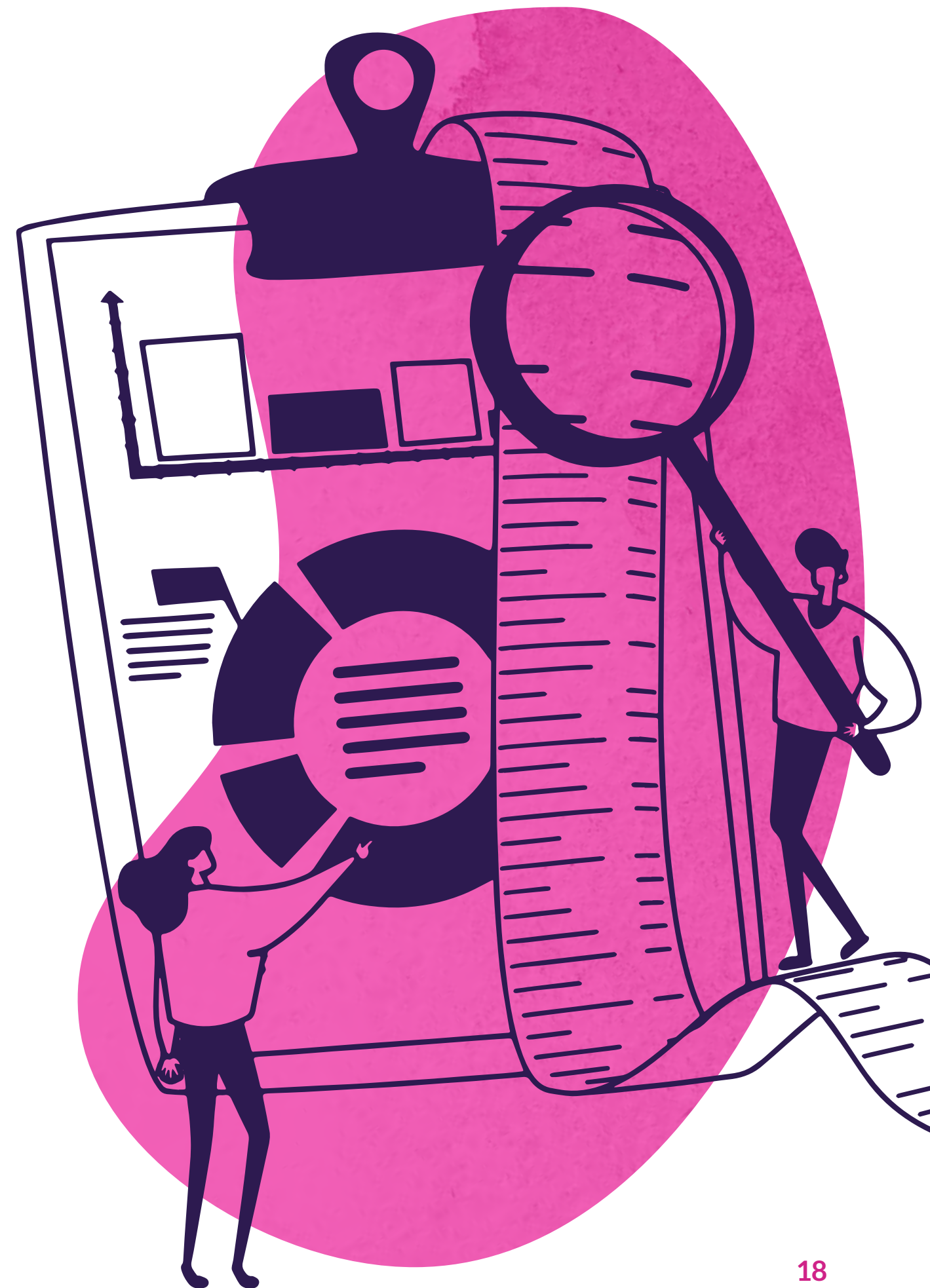
## Creative ways to address financial challenges

This guide has primarily focused on the many ways L&D interventions can support cash poor cultures. But it is also important to flag that financial support and wellbeing cannot be overlooked too.

Here are a few ways in which employers can help their people deal with the crisis through financial support.

- Provide access to financial education online
- Offer non-fiscal benefits (salary sacrifice)
- Allow offsite working to save on childcare or carers' costs
- Offer flexible holidays (buy and sell annual leave)
- Provide access to subscriptions that your employees would otherwise pay for, such as Audible book service or a gym membership

*"When times are tough, social events are more important than ever to create strong bonds and mitigate feelings of loneliness or exclusion."*







# Final takeaways

**Maintaining a positive work culture in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis will require employees, managers, leaders and L&D to pull together to maintain a cohesive workforce.**

But as this guidebook has shown, there are many creative ways in which you can protect the employee experience and company culture, even when budgets are tightened.

## Not sure how to get started?

If you are committed to reinvigorating learning and protecting culture, but unsure of how to get going, here's what you can do next...

### ***Host a listening circle and be fully present***

Take note of body language, and non-verbal cues and be ready to answer any questions that come your way. Transparency is critical.

### ***Build a strategy from employee feedback***

With this insight gained from the listening circles, create a strategy to rebuild the culture of your organisation and ensure that employees are involved in every step of the rebuild.

Active participation from those most affected will build trust, break down barriers and make what is currently a difficult time, more bearable.



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# About the author

**Michelle is the CEO of an Executive Coaching and Training Consultancy, The People's Partner, specialising in building future fit and diverse leadership pipelines with organisations who are keen to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence of their emerging leaders.**

Her team helps organisations reduce organisational risks by ensuring that the leadership pipeline is fit for purpose with executives and potential leaders that are culturally and emotionally intelligent, inclusive and critical thinkers that are ready to advance to the next steps in becoming part of the company's senior leadership team.

Currently running UCL's Emerging Leadership Programme and Executive Coach to UCL's senior female leaders, Michelle's two decades of HR management have spearheaded her diverse skills in management, leadership development, leadership agility and resilience, presence and personal branding.

Michelle is a non-executive director for two boards and has delivered training and keynotes for FTSE 250 organisations including Amazon, BT and Deloitte and has been featured on the BBC, ITV and SKY. She

is a property investor in Dubai, helping entrepreneurs source their first or next Dubai property and she is a strong advocate of supplier diversity. Her coverage in publications has included People Management, HR Grapevine, The Guardian, Good Housekeeping, The Daily Mail, Business Insider, HRZone and Hays Journal.



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Culture Amp revolutionises how over 25 million employees across 6,000 companies create a better world of work.

As the global platform leader for employee experience, Culture Amp empowers companies of all sizes and industries to transform employee engagement, develop high-performing teams, and retain talent via cutting-edge research, powerful technology, and the largest employee dataset in the world. The most innovative companies across the globe, such as Salesforce, Unilever, PwC, KIND, SoulCycle, and BigCommerce depend on Culture Amp every day.

Culture Amp is backed by 10 years of innovation, leading capital venture funds, and offices in the U.S, U.K, Germany and Australia. Culture Amp is recognised as one of the world's top private cloud companies by Forbes and one of the most innovative workplace companies by Fast Company.

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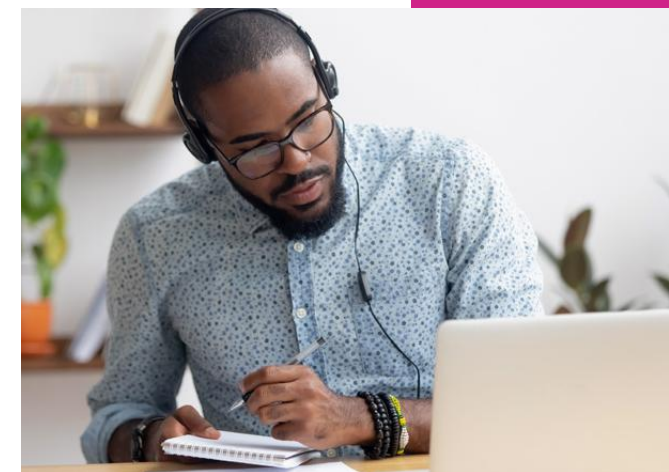
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