



Microlearning 101: A best practice guide to supercharge your L&D program

Discover how to implement microlearning to support self-directed learning, increase learning retention, boost learner satisfaction, and save money and time.

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About Learn Amp

Learn Amp is an award winning, Employee Experience platform. Learning, employee engagement and performance management — all in one.

We're on a mission to make work life, work better. We make it easy to map out and deliver the best employee journey. Learn Amp combines learning, engagement and performance management tools in one seamless platform driving better business results and higher employee retention.

1. Introduction

In today's fast-changing world, employee learning has become a key competitive advantage. Enter microlearning – a powerful tool that helps L&D teams provide just enough learning, just in time.

Since it became an L&D buzzword in 2016, microlearning has become a go-to solution to help learning keep pace with rapidly changing user requirements. By breaking down larger learning content into small, bite-sized units of knowledge, L&D teams can speed up the rate of content development dramatically. The resulting micro assets support today's learners, who prefer to build their own unique, self-directed learning pathways.

In this e-book, we'll start by defining what microlearning really is. We'll explore what makes microlearning so valuable to both L&D teams and learners. Then we'll lay out how to implement microlearning in your L&D program and take a look at some common pitfalls to avoid. Finally, we'll provide some pointers on how to choose the right learning management software to support your microlearning program.



Lindsay Fletcher,
Director, Global Talent Development at
Ten Lifestyle Group

“One of Learn Amp's standout features is the way they maximize the value of microlearning. They have sourced paid-for microlearning content for us, supported us with their superb in-house curation, and given us access to integrated AI tools to automatically curate content.

All of these assets are then available for us in multiple places including our learning pathways, our online courses, and as ad-hoc self-directed learning resources that allow our teams to find digestible bite size content to meet their individual learning needs.

Such flexibility, so easy and with great results!”



1. What is microlearning?

Microlearning has been a buzzword in L&D for the last few years. However, it's not always easy to understand what content can be classified as a microlearning asset – and what is just short content. Microlearning content needs to be brief, relevant, easily accessible, and designed to provide a complete learning experience. In this chapter, we'll break down a few definitions of microlearning to see what they can tell us about implementing microlearning the right way.



What is microlearning?

Microlearning means more than just short learning content.

Microlearning has been hyped for years, and is still a key L&D trend in 2020 [1]. In fact, it seems like almost everything these days gets classified as microlearning. A short training video? Microlearning. An online demo? Microlearning.

However, microlearning is a little more complex than that. Learning strategist Clark Quinn describes microlearning as a series of “small but complete learning experiences.”[2] A 3-minute video cannot always be classified as microlearning, because the learning experience is passive, rather than “complete”. If the short video is accompanied by a quick test to confirm understanding, on the other hand, that would be called microlearning.

Typically, microlearning is a program of small learning tasks, focused on very specific areas or ideas. The point of microlearning is not that it is short, but that it achieves a learning outcome through a series of brief engagements with learning content.

In other words, microlearning is about learning, more than it is about content. As learning analyst Patti Shank points out, “Learning involves mental effort and a change in knowledge.” Microlearning can be part of a formal training program, but it can also happen in a far more casual way. Shank gives the example of a colleague showing you how to change your profile on the company intranet, then hanging around to make sure you did it right. Informal microlearning in action [3].

Microlearning should be “just enough learning, just in time”.

Donald H. Taylor of the Learning and Performance Institute [4] gives us another useful definition of microlearning:

“Learning from content accessed in short bursts, content which is relevant to the individual and which is repeated to ensure retention and build conceptual

There are two additional key points here.

Microlearning is not only learning conducted over a brief time period; it is also both relevant and repeated. Picture, for instance, a quick refresher on the key sales messages that a sales rep refers to before every prospect call. Unlike a one-off sales training session, the content is available whenever needed, can be consumed in just a few minutes, and is specifically customized to the individual rep’s role.



Microlearning is becoming increasingly popular outside the workplace too. For example, many people are learning a second language with daily 5-minute language training sessions on an app like Duolingo. Again, this meets Taylor’s standards for microlearning: the content is relevant - the app adapts to the individual learner’s level - and repeated, with similar language concepts returning again and again until retained perfectly.

2. The value of microlearning

Implemented correctly, microlearning can be hugely valuable to organisations. For L&D professionals, microlearning can be a more agile, more flexible, more affordable and more manageable way to support employee development. For learners, microlearning works with our natural learning processes to keep the learning experience engaging and convenient.



Benefits for L&D professionals

Working with microlearning assets can be far easier than large-scale training programs.

Micro assets (the small units of learning content used in microlearning) are simpler to create than longer training content. They take less time to design, less time to record, and can be curated and updated in smaller chunks.

What's more, you can design exactly the asset you need for a specific requirement. As each asset is small, you may be able to simply create it yourselves - whether by pooling information from in-house resources, from the web, or by shopping around for the best vendor for a specific asset.

And, if you decide you want to purchase a particular asset, you can choose exactly the content you need, rather than purchasing a one-size-fits-all learning package.

Microlearning can help keep you agile.

L&D teams may struggle to keep pace with the fast rate of change. Keeping your team up to date with the latest information can be an ongoing battle. Updating full courses can be time-consuming, and will often need to be redone just a few months - or weeks - later.

By contrast, with micro assets, you can respond promptly to learner needs with “just in time” content that keeps up with the pace of change. You can simply archive the component that needs to be updated and replace it with the new information, without having to build a whole new course.

To keep your learning assets current and optimized, you'll also need to constantly iterate and improve them - a process made far easier if you're working with micro assets. L&D teams can create or purchase a basic version of a learning micro asset, and then test, iterate and improve that element alone. Assessing, updating and replacing a micro asset is much quicker than optimising a full-length course from an e-learning package.

Micro assets themselves are also far more flexible to use. Once you've created a small learning asset, you can use it in multiple ways to support employee learning. For instance, the same asset could be used before a training session to inspire interest, and then presented after the session to reinforce and support key learning outcomes. Similarly, the same information can be adapted to multiple formats, to suit different learning styles. The same learning asset could be redeveloped as a video, a podcast, an infographic and a quiz. The user can then select the medium that best suits their approach to learning.



Micro assets are quicker and easier to manage.

By quickly tagging each micro asset, you can make it far easier to get hold of than a learning unit buried in the middle of a large file, e-learning package or course. This is a huge time saver for L&D teams – no more wading through huge courses to find the unit a specific role will need to get started.

It also makes it quicker for learners to self-serve the information they need, meaning they're less likely to need to call on the L&D team for help in the first place.

In fact, bite-sized micro assets are ideally suited for peer learning – employees can pass on a learning chunk they found helpful to a colleague struggling with the same issue, reducing the need to involve the L&D team or a line manager.

As microlearning units come in small file sizes, they are also easily distributed, potentially globally, meaning that L&D teams can keep multiple teams up to date with the same information at an international level.

Microlearning can save your company time and money.

Microlearning is delivered online and does not require the physical attendance of trainers. It's also delivered in the workplace, meaning that employees don't need to take time out for travel.

And finally, it can be adapted to individual needs. No more signing up the whole team for a full learning course, knowing that only 5 of them need the whole course and the rest only need to refresh one section. The company saves money, and the employees are spared the inconvenience and tedium of sitting through an unnecessary learning program.

In fact, because microlearning fits into the employee's working day, it is usually far less disruptive than group training sessions which can take up several hours and may require relocation.

Microlearning assets make L&D analytics easier.

Reporting becomes far more informative when you're working with micro assets. The smaller the chunks, the more granular your reporting can be, and the easier it becomes to measure engagement and monitor user feedback.

Perhaps more importantly, because microlearning is so targeted, it's an ideal way to track the effectiveness of your L&D initiatives. Microlearning chunks are designed to address specific, narrow learning outcomes – so it's easy to measure whether or not they can be considered to have achieved their aims.

And, with easy access to learner data produced by microlearning approaches, L&D teams can begin to harness data analytics to tailor the learning experience, predict learner performance, and improve learner assessment results.



Benefits for learners

Microlearning fits into the daily flow of work.

Microlearning can be accessed whenever the learner runs into a work issue. Employees can quickly transition to the learning asset, then get back to solving the problem - thus reinforcing the learning by immediately applying it in the real world. This is great because studies show that more than half of learners prefer to learn on the job.[5]

Instead of scheduled training programs, learners can choose when they engage with microlearning. There's no need to take time out of a busy work schedule or interrupt colleagues to ask for help.

What's more, because microlearning assets tend to be more readily searchable, learners can head straight to the information that will add the most value without needing to skim through unnecessary content first. Each asset can be added to others by the learner themselves to build their own unique learning pathway, like a kind of learning Lego.

50%
more
engaging

20%
increased
retention

28%
faster
reproduc-
tion

58%
prefer self-
directed
learning

Microlearning is eminently practical, a series of useful, bite-sized units of knowledge that can help you solve a problem or give you a quick introduction to a relevant topic. Whereas longer training curriculums can skew towards the theoretical or academic, microlearning should always be highly applicable to the learner's daily life.

Microlearning works with our natural learning processes.

Our brains naturally chunk information to bypass the limited capacity of working memory [6]. By providing knowledge in short, organised chunks, microlearning works with, rather than against, our natural learning processes.

As a result, microlearning can increase learner engagement. One survey by Software Advice found that 58% of employees would be "more likely to use their company's online learning tools if the content was broken up into multiple, shorter lessons." [7]

In fact, some studies suggest that microlearning results in increased retention, when compared with longer learning sessions. Researchers at the Dresden University of Technology found that learners responding to short, frequent blocks of questions took 28% less time to answer questions, and did 20% better than those presented with longer question lists. [8]

These days, we're used to learning information in short bursts.

Today's digitally savvy workforce get most of their day-to-day information in short snippets - think YouTube videos, the omnipresent animated explainer videos, rapid-fire news content, and so on. Matching our expectations for information presentation with bite-sized learning content can make learning easier and more enjoyable.

As a result, short microlearning units are easier to share with colleagues - you aren't sending on a huge ream of information, just the part you want to pass on. In fact, learners themselves are more likely to learn from the benefits of microlearning and start to create learning assets for themselves or their colleagues.

3. The cost of poor L&D

Microlearning is a vital component of a modern learning and development program. And getting L&D right is no longer optional. Businesses who don't invest in employee development can struggle with everything from productivity to engagement and retention. In this chapter, we'll explore why updating your L&D program is worth the investment.



The cost of poor L&D

The lack of a strong L&D program can cost you money and put your business at risk.

We all know the old Peter Baekland quote. The CFO asks the CEO, “What if we invest in our people, and they leave?” The CEO replies, “What if we don’t – and they stay?” These days, most businesses have realised that their employees are the single biggest asset they have – and that maximising employee performance means investing time, energy, and money in their learning.

To future-proof your company, keep your employees’ skill up to date.

Careers today may last 60-70 years, but the average half-life of a learned skill is just 5 years. In some sectors, skills become outdated much faster – software engineers, for instance, need to redevelop their skills every year, or risk becoming obsolete. [9]

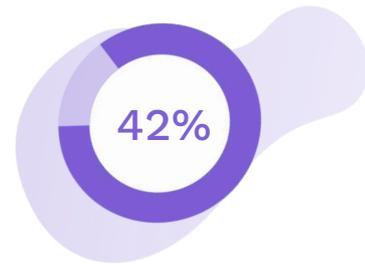
To stay ahead of the competition, a well-managed, rapidly evolving L&D program is absolutely essential. As we’ve seen in the previous section, microlearning can be invaluable for sharing new information quickly. L&D teams can quickly remove any out of date micro assets and update teams with the latest information.

L&D is critical to retaining millennial employees.

Millennial and Gen Z employees now make up 50% of the workforce – at by 2025, they will be 75% [9]. And attracting, recruiting and retaining millennials takes a solid learning program. Deloitte reports that, for today’s employees, “the ability to learn and progress is now the principal driver of a company’s employment brand.”[9] In fact, 42% of millennials said that they are likely to leave if they are not learning fast enough.

Microlearning provides millennials with the short bursts of information they prefer. A study by the Mayo Clinic reported that this Gen Y learners prefer “immediate need satisfaction and instantaneous feedback”. The milestones-based assessment provided in microlearning content is ideally suited to millennials, who expect continuous performance evaluation, personalized learning plans, and opportunities for hands-on, experiential learning. [10]

As a result, millennial employees will be able to perceive their rapid learning pace, making them more likely to stay with your company for the long-term.



42% of millennials said that they are likely to leave if they are not learning fast enough.

Up-to-date compliance training keeps your business safe.

In many industries, employees must follow specific regulations or compliance requirements. L&D can support this process with up-to-date and accessible learning courses, repeated as often as needed to ensure regulatory compliance. Microlearning can be a great way to support compliance – and avoid serious risk exposure and fines. As we’ve seen, microlearning can boost information retention rates, make the learning experience more engaging, and offer greater convenience for busy employees. And again, as microlearning is chunked into smaller assets, it is easier for L&D teams to make sure employees are updated with any new industry regulations as quickly as possible.

4. Microlearning best practice

Including microlearning in your L&D program can be highly effective – but getting great results requires careful implementation. In this chapter, we'll explore the questions you need to ask yourselves before you start, how to manage implementation, and the potential pitfalls you need to watch out for.



Questions to ask before starting

How will microlearning fit into your overall L&D strategy?

First of all, make sure that you've taken a step back, and identified what learning content is essential to your business, and what is supplementary. For example, are there regulatory compliance issues that employees must keep up to date with? How necessary is technical skill development to the long-term success of your company? Do you need to focus on teamwork or soft skills – or are those just “nice to have”? Are there particular roles that require on-going learning?

Once you've gained a broad overview of your strategic L&D requirements, you need to figure out if microlearning is going to be a part of a broader learning program, or if it's going to form the bulk of your learning content. Will you be using microlearning to fill gaps and support longer learning courses, or does it need to be a stand-alone solution? You should also ask yourselves how you will evaluate your microlearning content, and how you'll monitor results.

What kinds of microlearning content do you need?

To start with, you'll need to decide how you're going to classify content as microlearning. (See Chapter 1 for a detailed description of what microlearning is.) You might also want to ask yourselves which learning formats you would prefer to use. Do you want text, video, audio, blended learning? Do you want tests? If so, what kinds of tests do you prefer?

With your understanding of the strategic role of microlearning, you can begin to define the kinds of microlearning content that will be most relevant to your business. Do you mostly need content that specifically relates to your sector, or do you want to cover more general learning topics?

You'll also need to think about the resources you have available. How much content can you develop in-house? Do you need to outsource content development? If so, will you be able to use the same provider for all the content, or do you need to find multiple sources?

Next, decide how you want to deliver your microlearning content. Do you want mobile-accessible content, or will the employees mostly learn in the office? Do you need content that can be accessed from home?

You should also consider how to adapt your content to changing user needs. How will you make sure that your microlearning can keep up with software updates, changes in roles and requirements, the demands of continuous professional development, global market upheavals?

Finally, ask yourselves how you want to organise your microlearning content, to make sure that it is useful and not overwhelming for learners. Make sure you have a clear, over-arching way for micro-assets to fit together. What is the structure the assets will fit into? How can they be adapted to role-specific learning pathways?

How to implement microlearning

Step One: Identify your organisation's learning needs

Building an effective microlearning program needs to start with careful planning. Start with a skills gap analysis to identify the skills the company requires, and any areas where employees are currently struggling. Don't forget to involve the learners themselves in this process – survey your employees and their managers to find out which kinds of learning they would find most valuable.

Then you'll need to decide on the right mix of learning options – how much of the learning program can be covered by microlearning, and how much will be better delivered in other formats, such as in-person training or longer e-learning courses.

Your initial research (see “Questions to ask before you start”) should also have given you an idea of how much content you can create yourselves, and how much you're going to need to outsource to a learning provider. At this stage, you should take a full review of your options for learning vendors.

When considering vendors, you should get a picture of which kinds of content they can provide, the formats they offer, the level of customization available, and the quality of the learning system they provide. You'll also need to evaluate the cost effectiveness of each option, including how much support will be available.

This preparation stage is also the perfect opportunity to generate interest and motivation within the company. Communicate to the employees how the new learning content will help them with their work and improve their performance.

“This preparation stage is also the perfect opportunity to generate interest and motivation within the company.”

Step Two: Creating microlearning content

If you've decided to create your own microlearning content, there are some fundamental principles that you should bear in mind.

Firstly, simplicity is crucial. Avoid overloading the learner – each micro asset should focus on just one central idea. Make sure that you target content that is suited to microlearning – complex, substantive information is not the right fit for this learning approach.

Secondly, think visual. Strong microlearning content is somewhat similar to great social media content – on-demand, engaging, and media-rich. Images, graphs and infographics are often helpful to visual learners. You should also make sure that you have strong, consistent style and content guides. As you're working with smaller units of content, you need to ensure that the different authors and curators remain on brand.

Thirdly, target your audience effectively. You might want to start by breaking down job descriptions and competency frameworks to identify the knowledge, skills and behaviours that each role requires. That done, you can build content to benefit the roles that need the most support. Alternatively, you could think about your learners as target markets, and use “buyer personas” to make sure that you're meeting their needs.

Step Three: Organise your microlearning content

As we've seen, microlearning can feel disconnected and random for learners if it's not part of a clear organising structure. Make sure that all content is presented within a clear context to make it attractive and relevant to the learner.

To be valuable, microlearning content needs to be very easy to find. Make sure you're conscientious about tagging, categorising and describing your own content thoroughly, to make it effortless for users to get hold of it when they need it. You may also need to tag purchased content with the most relevant keywords to help learners find it.

You can also use the recommendation and "More like this" content suggestion tools to showcase valuable micro content. Otherwise they can get a bit hidden away, if the marketing and indexing of the content haven't been well thought through.



Step Four: Monitor, review and improve over time

As we saw in Chapter 2, microlearning content can lend itself very well to reporting. Take advantage of this to assess user uptake and engagement. Actively seek feedback from users on a regular basis. Make sure that you have a learning management platform that allows you to tag and categorise content, so you can spot trends across the more fragmented micro assets.

You'll also need to define a process to manage reviews and updates. For example, microlearning content about a particular software platform will need to be updated in line with new software versions. As you'll be working with more units of content, you'll need a solid system in place to manage this process and make sure you don't overlook any outdated information.

As your business changes and grows, your learning needs may also change. By regularly assessing the performance of your microlearning program and tracking engagement and effectiveness, you'll be able to spot when you need to upgrade your learning resources more broadly.

Finally, make sure that you explicitly link the microlearning framework to competency frameworks. You need to build a relationship between learning content completion and improvements in professional capability. That way, you can measure the real-world effectiveness of your microlearning program and how it affects performance and productivity. You might also want to incorporate learning goals and reviews into your employee's regular review process or personal development plans.

How to avoid common pitfalls

Think carefully about when to use microlearning.

Microlearning can be fantastic – but not every subject should be converted into bite-sized information chunks. Microlearning is often pretty foundational, as it is so short. It is not always suitable for deep or complex learning.

As microlearning is delivered online, it is also not suitable for learning which requires an element of interpersonal communication. If you're working on developing employees' leadership or customer service skills, you would be well advised to integrate microlearning with other learning formats such as role plays or group workshops.

10
minutes per
session

2-3
activities
per session

2-5
minutes per
activity

2
month booster
session

Set limits on time and content.

Research suggests that the ideal amount of time spent on microlearning is around 10 minutes per session, broken up into 2 or 3 short learning activities of 2-5 minutes each. [11] Studies into spaced repetition also suggest that a booster session of even a few seconds, roughly 2 months after the microlearning session, can help learners retain the information learnt for a year or more.[12]

You also need to avoid overloading learners with too much information. Consider carefully which micro assets should be shared with everyone, and which would be better to showcase to a specific audience who would find it relevant and helpful. Set some limits on the number of assets you create or curate for each learning area. Microlearning can become unwieldy without a clear strategy and system to manage it.

Provide support to learners but let them make their own decisions.

Microlearning is ideally suited to allow learners to self-direct their learning. Individuals are often in the best position to know their own strengths and weaknesses and will be able to design their own learning pathways by accessing the content they know is most relevant for them. In fact, learning may not be as effective if the learners feel like it has been imposed from on high.

However, most learners will benefit from some guidance on the microlearning content and how it can help their long-term development. Make sure that you provide some initial training to all employees to introduce the microlearning program, show what resources are available, and how they can be accessed and used.

It may also be a good idea to involve line managers in the process. 56% of employees said that they would spend more time learning if their manager recommended courses to them.[5] To get the most out of microlearning, make sure that employees regularly discuss their learning objectives with their managers, and understand how their learning progress relates to the overall goals of the business.

5. Choosing a microlearning solution

With so many options on the market, it can be hard to know what to look out for. A great microlearning platform should give you flexibility, make it easy for anyone to create content, and help you manage your micro assets without a lot of hassle.



Choosing a microlearning solution

Find a microlearning platform that offers flexibility.

The best microlearning solutions will integrate with multiple authoring tools, content vendors and content curation tools, so you can pick and choose the learning assets you want, then integrate them into a single subject area or course.

You should look for a platform that offers inbuilt authoring tools, so you can create your own content on the fly in video, audio, or html digital formats. You should also think about a solution that lets you pool knowledge from your own in-house experts, with social features like Q&A that can then be turned into FAQs or other assets.

You'll also be better off with a platform that lets you reuse assets in multiple subject areas. That way, if you want to change or update an asset, then that change will be reflected throughout the system. This is important for keeping microlearning content up to date.

Choose a platform that anyone can use.

You shouldn't need to be an L&D expert to use your microlearning platform, either as a content creator or as a learner. Gone are the days of needing to be an instructional designer to make great learning content. Creating micro assets should be simple enough that the learners themselves can create their own content.

Managers and SMEs should find it easy to upload new information or learning content. Users should be able to curate learning content from the web and add it to their own personal learning library.

You should also look for features like quick, easy-to-use self-recording video and audio tools so you can stitch together curated content and context-setting videos. That way, you can give users a consistent journey from internal to external curated content, helping to make sure that the learning makes sense to the end user.

Make sure your microlearning tools support content management and reporting.

To make microlearning works for your business, you'll need strong content management tools. Look out for content scheduling tools, so you can decide when the content appears, expires, or needs a review. To keep your content up to scratch, you'll also need a range of feedback tools like ratings, reviews, discussion forums and survey feedback.

Reporting is also key to managing microlearning programs. Keep an eye out for platforms that allow very granular reporting – this will help you decide which micro assets are working, and which need polishing up or updating.



Microlearning has had a BIG impact

“With Learn Amp, our employees get the right information to solve their problems.

Bite-sized content means learners can easily find what they're looking for, when they need it and it fits into their day!”

Svetlana Bogdanova, Head of HR, Adarma

Conclusion



Is microlearning the key to a supercharged L&D program?

With the right tools in place, microlearning can power up your L&D.

Adding microlearning to your L&D toolkit requires some strategic planning, the right learning platform and a thorough understanding of your company's learning requirements. But, with those elements in place, microlearning can save you hours of content development time. It can increase your employee's engagement with learning content, boost information retention, support larger learning frameworks, and provide an entertaining way to assess learning performance.

When carefully structured, microlearning can be a powerful way to support employee development. With small, targeted micro assets, L&D teams can take a granular look at the effectiveness of their learning content. Using reporting to spot trends in engagement over time can drive the overall success of a broader L&D program.

“Micro-learning has saved us hours of content development time.”

- Simon Lancaster, L&D Lead

Used correctly, microlearning can be a secret weapon for L&D teams, helping organisations to stay ahead of the competition with powerful, up to date, lean learning programs.



About the authors

Learn Amp

Learn Amp is an award winning, Employee Experience platform. Learning, employee engagement and performance management — all in one.

We're on a mission to make work life, work better. We make it easy to map out and deliver the best employee journey. Learn Amp combines learning, engagement and performance management tools in one seamless platform driving better business results and higher employee retention.



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Aside from founding Learn Amp, Duncan has spent over 20 years championing UK enterprise working with hundreds of successful entrepreneurs through The Super Club; which he set up in 2003 and is now home to around 500 of Britain's most innovative, high growth entrepreneurs.

Duncan sits on the Chartered Management Institute's Board of Companions, was a co-founder of StartUp Britain (launched by the Prime Minister in March 2011) and was a non-exec of the Start Up Loans Company. He has also sat on a variety of Advisory Boards including the Centre of Entrepreneurs and the Sheffield University Management School.



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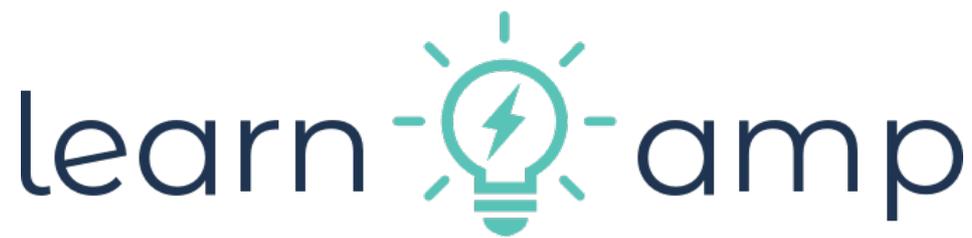
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