

L&OD Reinvented

The Ecosystem Architect

Co-evolving with AI
Paper #7



Winter is Coming

At a recent HR conference, a speaker shared an observation that was met with stunned silence: executive coaching uptake was falling. People were finding they could explore their challenges and professional dilemmas in the privacy of an AI coaching conversation, with outcomes that compared favourably to the human alternative.

Then, after a moment, one L&OD professional said what everyone else was sitting with: “This is really confronting. How I do my job when I know it is under threat.”

And the silence in the room acknowledged it.

Across the organisations we work with, a pattern is emerging that might be described as the Winter is Coming problem. The change is coming, regardless of whether we are ready for it. The disruption that AI represents for L&OD is not distant or theoretical. It is already here, reshaping the landscape. But many teams are still operating as though the storm is someone else’s concern, focused on the next programme cycle, the next cohort, while the fundamental way that learning happens in organisations is changing, largely out of sight.

This paper is written primarily for L&OD professionals, but the questions it raises about how organisations learn, develop and adapt in the AI era are ones that CHROs and CEOs will find equally pressing. It explores how AI is disrupting organisational learning and what genuine reinvention might look like in practice.



How Organisational Learning is Changing

Four shifts are reshaping the landscape simultaneously.

Continuous Learning Ecosystems

AI can now support highly personalised learning in real time, often experienced as a personal coach. This is a vastly different proposition to the trainer-centred model that still prevails in many organisations. It makes the traditional course-and-cohort rhythm feel increasingly disconnected from how people learn and develop.

AI-Augmented Learning Design

AI can radically accelerate the design and structuring of learning initiatives. It can also create highly customised visual artefacts and rapidly generate bespoke reports that analyse developmental or performance trends. This can free L&OD to focus on strategic culture-shaping and partnership with the business. It can also be confrontingly disruptive for L&OD professionals whose identity is built around existing craft and expertise.

In-the-Flow Learning

AI can now deliver just-in-time guidance directly into work tools. This can be very powerful, with immediate nudging and learning. It can also lead to an erosion of personal agency as judgment becomes increasingly shaped through interaction with AI. This is a dynamic that L&OD professionals must actively consider in AI systems design - how to harness the great productivity potential without compromising the individual's agency and engagement.

The Shadow Learning Function

Much of the vital learning happening in organisations right now is coming through people's private AI accounts such as Claude, Gemini, ChatGPT, and others. This is driven by the extraordinary opportunity for highly contextualised self-directed learning that formal structures have not kept pace with. This speaks volumes for how and where people want to learn, with AI as a new learning partner.

Beneath all four of these shifts runs a significant risk. If AI can answer any question instantly, the temptation is to stop developing the capacity to hold the question. Why build judgment when AI-generated judgment arrives faster? Why sit with complexity when coherent answers are always available?

Many people in organisations do not yet have the capacity to notice when they are deferring to AI, or the fortitude to stay with the question long enough for their own judgment to form. This has dire consequences for the organisational return on AI, unless learning is deliberately designed to overcome this.

This means that L&OD professionals have a crucial role in designing a learning ecosystem that can leverage the benefits of AI-augmented learning and development, while also building the collective muscle of discernment.

Before We Reinvent Anything

Before architecting the new ecosystem, L&OD professionals also need to come to terms with the skills or crafts that are becoming automated out of existence.

Every knowledge worker in the organisation whose expertise, identity and sense of contribution is being reshaped by AI faces this same reckoning. The accountant, the analyst, the lawyer, the marketer: everyone whose professional identity was built around a body of knowledge that AI can now access faster than they can.

The roles being automated, the expertise rendered obsolete, the professional identities built over decades. These are real losses. Losses that go unacknowledged don't disappear. They go underground, becoming the quiet resistance and performative compliance that no engagement survey ever quite explains. Holding space for people to process their grief sits at the heart of L&OD work, even more so in times of significant disruption.

People need to grieve.

The L&OD professional who can hold this space is bringing something irreplaceable to the work. It is a quality of presence: sitting with a group without judgment, fully open to what the room is carrying. Through deep listening and holding a space where the whole person is seen and acknowledged, people begin to speak about the undiscussables, and discover they are all in this together.

Sometimes a symbolic activity can lead to very powerful releasing. For example, a time capsule where people honour what they want to remember from the old way of working. Or a fire ceremony where people write what they never want to experience again — and burn it together.

The L&OD professional creating these conditions is doing what a skilled midwife does; holding the space in which something new can be born.

While the potential for AI-mediated learning is phenomenal, the L&OD practitioner must pay attention to what is being lost as human to human contact diminishes. A colleague tasked with adapting her change modules, so they could be accessed and delivered through AI systems, was reflecting on the loss of human interaction in her role. One observation she made was that when a group of humans come together for collective sensemaking, they deepen and enrich each other's understanding of context. When this gets lost, we lose both human connection and shared wisdom. Left unattended, AI-mediated learning can narrow context rather than expand it. To overcome this limitation, L&OD practitioners need to ensure that AI interventions are deliberately designed to invite people to consider what they don't yet know, and to reach out to others who hold another part of the context. And we also need to remind ourselves that human to human contact meets a crucial social need that AI can never replace.

“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born.”

- ANTONIO GRAMSCI

The Ecosystem Architect

In paper 2, we described 5 practices necessary to build cultures that are able to adapt effectively to the AI disruption. These practices are: shared responsibility for outcomes, naming elephants early, independent judgment alongside AI, evolving leadership capacity, and embedding continuous learning.

The role of senior learning and development practitioners and heads of learning are to create the conditions across the organisation in which those practices can genuinely take hold, through stewarding the soil in which they grow rather than designing how each team or function enacts them. We describe this role as the Ecosystem Architect.



Amplify Learning in the Moment

Traditional learning programs have often been criticised as detached from the realities people face at work. Unless the facilitator is skilled at learning transfer, or the training design intentionally brings in organisational context, the learning stays in the training room. With AI-augmented learning, contextualised learning in the moment becomes much more possible. AI can support reflection on a real decision just made, help a team debrief a difficult conversation, or surface relevant frameworks at the point of need, bringing learning into the work rather than extracting people from it.

This shift requires L&OD professionals to develop fluency in dialogue curation and AI-assisted reflection, designing the questions, prompts and pauses that keep genuine inquiry alive rather than replacing it with generated answers. The goal is to make learning inseparable from working.

In practice: A weekly elephant-naming forum where teams surface what is being experienced but not yet spoken, not as a status update, but as a sense-making pause. An AI dialogue review examining a significant AI-assisted decision together, not just what the output was, but how the group, including the AI, worked and thought together to arrive at the decision.



Shared knowledge and pattern recognition

AI increases the value of knowledge being shared across boundaries. Notes that once remained in personal files, observations held within a single function, or learning stored in separate systems can now contribute to a broader organisational dataset, but only where people are willing to allow their working knowledge to be visible beyond immediate contexts.

When knowledge is shared in this way, AI can analyse across it, detecting patterns no single team could see alone. Questions arising in one division often mirror those arising elsewhere. Emerging customer behaviours observed in one channel echo shifts appearing in another. Viewed together, these signals begin to show direction.

As explored in the earlier paper on pattern continuation, once patterns become visible they can also be projected forward. AI can help trace where something already underway may be leading, bringing into view needs and possibilities that are not yet fully formed but are beginning to take shape.

Technology enables the analysis. Trust enables the sharing that makes analysis meaningful. L&OD has an important role in creating conditions that build trust across boundaries, including forums where patterns surfaced through AI-supported analysis can be explored together. These shared spaces allow insight to be experienced as collectively shaped, increasing the likelihood that people contribute what they are seeing from within their own context.

In practice: Cross-boundary forums where patterns identified through AI can be explored in relation to strategic questions. Selective mobility across functions, strengthening the organisation's capacity to interpret patterns in context. Learning processes that help people recognise weak signals and consider their implications together.



Continuous Growth with AI Focus

AI rapidly takes people to the edge of what they can absorb, through an overwhelming volume of information, or a question that provokes deeper reflection than expected. It exposes the limits of what people currently know how to hold. And that exposure is raw.

At the same time, AI absorbs more of the routine cognitive load; the first draft, the initial analysis, the background research, freeing up capacity that was previously consumed by tasks that no longer require human attention. The same technology that unsettles also liberates.

The L&OD task is to hold both. To support people through the exposure and discomfort, while creating the conditions in which the freed capacity gets directed toward the distinctly human capacities that organisations most need to develop: critical judgment, ethical reasoning, and the ability to sit with questions that don't have easy answers. Left unattended, that freed capacity tends to fill with more AI-generated content rather than deeper human thinking. These capacities are almost entirely absent from most organisations' current learning frameworks.

In practice: Tension labs where teams hold competing truths without resolving them prematurely. Using polarity mapping to make the tension between AI efficiency and human judgement visible and actively managed. Structured reflection pauses asking not what was produced, but what was noticed about the thinking.



Measurement as Illumination

How we typically apply measurement can imply good or bad, pass or fail. In complex, disruptive environments we need to reframe measurement toward what can we learn. When people are feeling cynical or fearful, measurement can do something more important than assess and critique. It can identify progress and highlight how learnings have been applied, and through this elevate hope.

L&OD has a role in shaping forms of measurement that reinforce the qualities needed in an AI-enabled environment. What we choose to measure signals what matters. If we only measure efficiency and frequency of use, we encourage speed. If we also measure discernment, judgement and learning, we strengthen the capacities that allow AI to be engaged thoughtfully.

One way that L&OD can do this is through crafting survey questions such as:

"I notice strong discernment before AI responses are accepted"

"Working with AI is strengthening my professional capability"

"I see people building on AI outputs rather than simply accepting or rejecting them"

In practice: Tracking elephant-naming frequency as a live indicator of psychological safety. Asking three questions at the close of significant projects: what did we do well, what signal did we ignore, and what are we noticing now that we didn't notice then? A discipline of collective attention.



Stewarding Human Judgement

As AI embeds more deeply into how organisations think and operate, the Head of Learning occupies a uniquely valuable position in relation to the C-Suite, as the person closest to what AI is actually doing to the humans inside the system. That is intelligence the C-Suite cannot get from a dashboard or a vendor briefing.

The Head of Learning can surface what is working, and help the executive team understand what conditions produce it. For example, *“AI is producing genuine improvements in the quality and speed of thinking: better synthesis, faster pattern recognition, richer connections across previously siloed knowledge. People are developing new capacities and engaging with complexity they previously avoided. This has been enabled through leader role modelling, a collaborative and human centred approach to AI role out and learning forums where experiences are shared.”*

And then there is the harder intelligence. What AI is doing to professional identity and agency across the workforce. Where judgment is quietly eroding as people defer to machine outputs. Where the embedded ethics of the platforms being used are subtly shaping decisions in ways that may be drifting from the organisation’s own governance commitments and board obligations. Where leaders themselves have blindspots: about the pace of change, about what their people are carrying, about the gap between the official narrative and the lived experience.

Part of the Head of Learning’s role is to help the executive team move beyond surface familiarity with AI toward genuine fluency. This could include designing immersive experiences that take leaders to the edges of what is possible, exposing them to the risks and benefits through lived encounter rather than briefing documents. These learning experiences are typically far more impactful than providing a Claude licence and a lunchtime demo. Leaders who have genuinely wrestled with AI’s capabilities and limits are far better equipped to make the governance decisions their organisations need them to make.

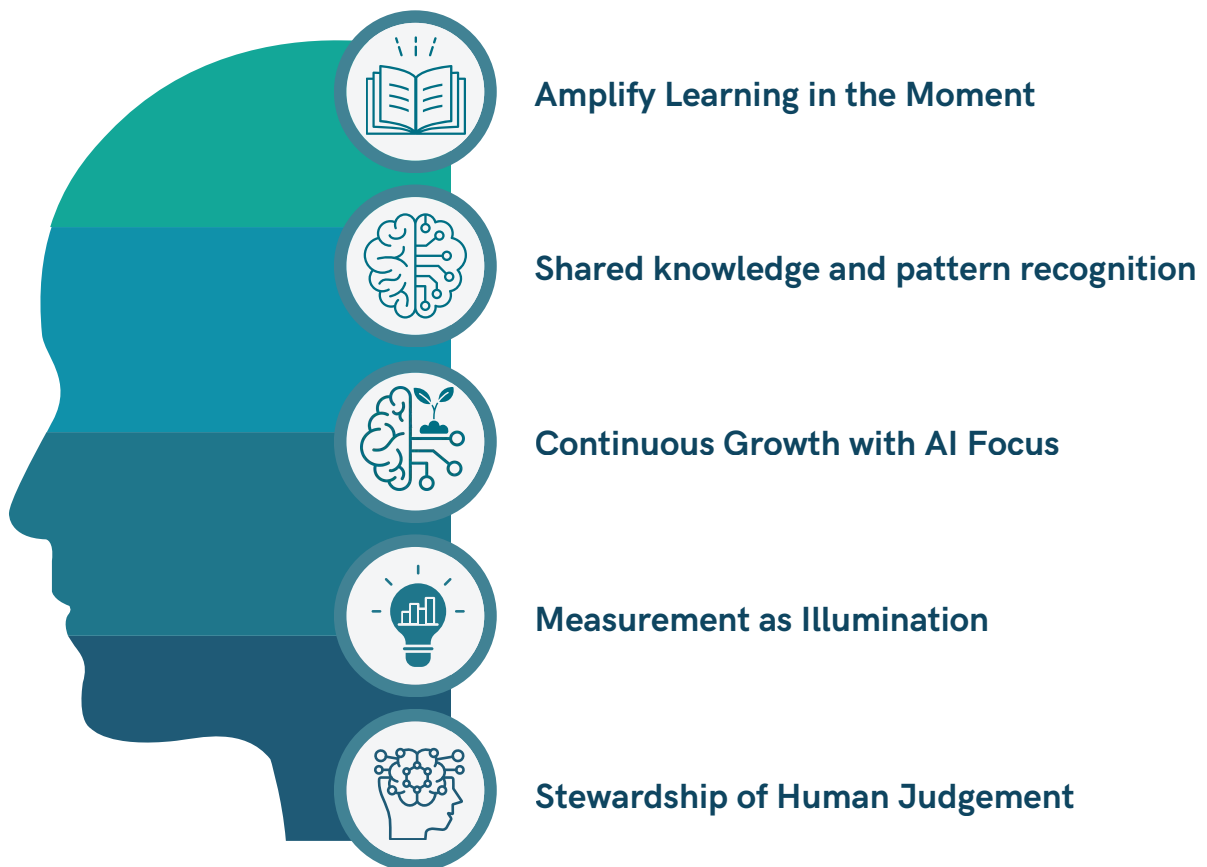
This is a new kind of advisorship: a strategic thinking partnership that offers real-time human intelligence on what the AI transition is doing to the organisation, and what it will take to navigate it well.

The Co-evolving L&OD Leader

The L&OD ecosystem architect is a co-evolving leader, one who develops alongside the people, systems, and AI they are stewarding, without needing to lead from a fixed position of expertise. And they are a crucial partner of leaders across the organisation, creating the conditions in which an organisation learns continuously: from its people, its AI systems, and from itself.

Their work is only as powerful as its alignment to the strategic direction the senior leadership is holding.

The Ecosystem Architect



*“There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in..”*

- LEONARD COHEN

Closing Reflection

That gentleman at the conference who said out loud what everyone else was sitting with - how I do my job when what I know is under threat - was standing at a threshold.

The same threshold that every L&OD professional is standing at right now.

The invitation is to do what L&OD professionals have always done at their best: hold the space in which development becomes possible. For themselves, their team, and for everyone they serve across the organisation.

Post paper reflection - while this paper provides a guide on who L&OD needs to become in this emerging world, how L&OD can actively embed AI across the different learning, development and performance processes in an organisation is also crucial. This will be covered in a paper that follows on from this series. Please reach out if you would like to explore further.

Questions for Reflection



To help L&OD teams process the disruption of AI and transition into the role of Ecosystem Architects, we offer these questions for individual reflection or team dialogue:

- 1. Naming the Transition:** What specific craft or traditional authority am I being asked to lay down as AI assumes more responsibility for content creation?
- 2. Honouring the Past:** What is the uniquely human essence of my past work: empathy, connection, seeing unseen potential, that I must carry forward into this new medium?
- 3. The Edge of Identity:** When observing any resistance I may have to AI tools, where am I concerned for the health of the learning system, and where am I reacting to a fear for my own relevance?
- 4. Stepping into Stewardship:** If I am no longer the sole provider of instructional content, how can I find deep meaning in curating the learning environment, designing productive tension, and fostering critical inquiry?
- 5. Ecological Responsibility:** What am I creating for the learners who will inherit the ecosystem I am building now? What seeds am I sowing that I may not see the consequences of?

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A note about imagery:

The imagery in this series continues our long-standing use of nature to reflect the patterns and dynamics of living systems. In this instance, some images have been created or refined with the support of generative AI — a natural extension of the inquiry itself, as we explore what it means to co-evolve with these technologies.

Adaptive Cultures exists to enable cultural evolution for the good of people and planet. Working alongside WDHB, we partner with organisations to evolve culture, leadership and collective impact in ways that are grounded, practical and responsive to a rapidly changing world.

We work with leaders, teams and internal practitioners to understand how culture is really created and sustained: through patterns of thinking, relating and working that shape everyday decisions and outcomes, especially under conditions of uncertainty and change. We support intentional shifts that align purpose, strategy and systems with the culture required to thrive.

Our approach combines deep diagnostic insight with developmental practice, building the adaptive capacity needed to navigate complexity and create meaningful, lasting change.

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