

## What's the Difference between Learning and Training?

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The words learning and training have six letters in common and touch the same field of interest—education. Often the words are used interchangeably, but some say there is a subtle distinction between the two. Of course, definitions for that distinction vary according to whom you ask. Some learning leaders feel that learning is a long-term process related to development, while training is a timely, technical skills-based process that might or might not involve a lower level of skill acquisition. But as time rolls on and the value stakes surrounding learning, development and training in the enterprise continue to escalate, training might get pushed into the learning and development arena whether it likes it or not.

“My background’s in instructional design, and when I was in school they explained that the difference was training is for a specific task,” said Maureen McCormick, director of learning and development, University of Iowa. “(Training) is sometimes, not always, a more functional, low-level task. Let’s say you had some sort of machinery to operate. There was a specific process for learning how to operate that machine, and it was directly related to the functionality of your job. That would be a training issue. At that time, the two words used were training and education, but you’re definitely seeing a shift in people going from staff development and training offices to learning and development offices. We made that switch a couple of years ago.

“Learning, on the other hand, has been viewed as something that’s much more broad-based. It isn’t necessarily related to a job. For example, we have a management series program where we teach people emotional intelligence. The series focuses on the various soft skills necessary to be emotionally intelligent at your job. None of it is specific task-based training processes. That would be how to fill out a performance review form, whereas learning would be how you give feedback to someone in an emotionally intelligent way when you need to give corrective feedback.”

McCormick added that learning tends to involve longer-range, future-based planning to develop people from a career standpoint in different areas that might not be directly work-related. “For example, a couple of months ago I was shopping, and I had a woman come up to me who had been in the management series five years ago. She said, ‘I just need to tell you how much I learned going through the series in terms of how to deal with people. A lot of it I use at work, but a lot of it I use in personal life when dealing with my children or when I’m with my family. It really had an impact on me, and I wanted you to know that.’ That’s something that’s really learning based because you’re talking about people’s growth. Beyond that the training field has tried to be more credible within organizations, (hence) the move to the chief learning officer title as a C-level position, which has more credibility within the organization and is tied to the bottom line. Training for a lot of people feels like, what are we training, monkeys? I really believe the word training is going to go away from the field. I don’t really care if you call it learning or training. It’s semantics to me. However, learning plays better up the ladder, and words are powerful. Learning has more credibility attached to it.”

“I look at learning as a series of self-directed activities that can enhance one’s knowledge about a topic of interest or professional relevance that’s typically self-directed. I’m not talking about e-learning. It can be any methodology or media,” said Vince Eugenio, Ph.D, SPHR CSP, chief learning officer, Randstad US. “Training is a series of very specific, structured activities that are related to the achievement of clearly stated performance objectives that are typically related to doing a job. I look at learning and development as falling into the same bucket, and I see training falling into a separate bucket. From the context of enterprise learning, training would be a series of specific programs that have specific objectives associated with them. They’re designed to target the development of skills, knowledge or attitudes that are related to the job at hand or a job that will soon be stepped into.”

Learning, Eugenio explained, can be conducted formally or informally via learning networks within organizations where people exchange information. Learning is not as rigidly directed as training within the context of an enterprise. "For example, I learn every day on the job, yet I am not taking formal training courses. I learn how to better handle myself within the context of how to influence, how to move initiatives forward, how to position initiatives within the company, etc. I learn professionally every day based on what I have done well or have not done well. There are no specific objectives or programs associated with that. It's what happens going about your daily life or developing something that you're interested in. I'll go onto the Web. I have newsletters that I subscribe to. To me that is what learning is about. It's a non-directed, non-formalized way of making yourself better either around implicitly stated objectives or very explicitly stated objectives."

Eugenio said which term you use usually depends on the situation. "For example, we have a new software system that we're going to introduce that is going to help us manage our back-office functions. We have a series of very specific classes that will teach the users how to use a specific functionality within the program. That's training. Learning is going to go on every day as they become more familiar with the system and see how they can do different things with that system that will probably not be taught in the context of training. That learning happens outside the classroom. Learning does happen inside the classroom, typically that's directed and very specific and very targeted. When they say leadership development, notice it's development and not training because they're unstructured, kind of free-wheeling classes that might have specific objectives around greater executive presence, deeper financial business acumen. Typically those are not going to be specific objectives like you would have in systems training. That might say, 'We're going to learn how to use functionality X, Y and Z,' which is much more specific and targeted. One is not better than the other, but training happens very discretely as you kind of go through your job. Learning happens every single day, all throughout the day."

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