

# CREATING AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

*IN THE GULF*

**crf**

CORPORATE RESEARCH FORUM

**RESEARCH  
PREVIEW**



**ABOUT CRF**

**Corporate Research Forum (CRF)** is a research-led learning network dedicated to building the capability of HR leaders and their teams to drive organisational performance.

Through more than 30 years of research and practical expertise, we have developed a deep understanding of the ways HR can contribute to business outcomes – what works, what doesn't and in what circumstances. We support our network of over 275 organisations through an evolving programme of evidence-based insights: delivering expert led events, facilitated peer exchange, personalised and timely answers through our AI research tool and impactful technology-enabled learning – all informed by research and shaped by practice. Our focus enables HR to become a more strategic, future-ready function delivering consistent and measurable value tailored to the needs of your organisation.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**JO NAYLER** is responsible for publishing original research as well as adapting and developing CRF content for use across the website and member communications. She has worked on a range of research topics at CRF, including authoring research on team effectiveness and the changing role of HR Business Partners. Prior to joining CRF, she worked for over five years as a researcher and writer, gaining experience of a breadth of different research methods and publishing content in a variety of formats.



**Many learning functions are over-busy and under-influential.**

The problem is rarely a lack of learning activity, but a weak connection between learning and performance outcomes. This disconnect is becoming more visible in the Gulf, where national transformation agendas are increasing the emphasis on productivity, skills and human capability. Organisations increasingly need to build capability from within in order to meet these demands.

**Organisations need to shift away from broad content libraries towards a smaller number of critical capabilities tied to execution.**

The CRF Learning Matrix can help identify where effort should shift, particularly towards generative learning: learning that enables individuals and organisations to adapt to unfamiliar challenges and create new solutions. Generative AI sharpens both the opportunity and the risk: it can provide practice, feedback and guidance in the flow of work, but if used mainly to produce more content, it risks scaling low-impact approaches.

KEY  
TAKEAWAYS

**The organisations seeing the greatest impact are not those simply investing in more learning tools, but those focusing on how learning connects with strategy, work and talent processes.**

The CRF Effective Learning Ecosystem model helps create a clear line of sight from strategy to performance, showing how all aspects of the people experience can join up to deliver effective business outcomes through learning:

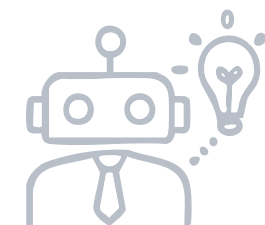
- **Aligning with the business.** This means starting with strategy, not training requests, and requires a deep understanding of where value is created and which capabilities matter most. Teams should first ask whether the issue is genuinely a learning problem, decide which intervention is most likely to work and design evaluation from the start.
- **Demonstrating impact.** Organisations should define success clearly, establish a baseline and use a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures. Strong data use strengthens credibility:

learning teams are more likely to influence investment decisions when they can show patterns and signals the business cares about.

- **Connecting learning to work.** Learning leaders need to understand how work is actually performed and how it is changing. Strategic workforce planning, job and work design, and a skills lens (applied selectively) can help translate business priorities into a small number of critical capabilities, particularly where organisations in the Gulf must plan across multiple time horizons.
- **Designing the learning experience.** Learning professionals need to apply what we know about how adults learn best, e.g. in ways which are problem-oriented, social and experiential. Rather than defaulting to large-scale programmes, which often dominate learning investment in the Gulf, they should select the best approach based on the learning need and work context.
- **Creating the learning environment.** Learning will not translate into performance

change unless the work environment supports application and reinforcement. Whilst organisations often talk about culture in broad terms, we find a more effective approach is to focus on precise behaviours: what people should do differently, how often, in what context and to what standard. Leaders, line managers and HR play a key role in shaping this.

- **Applying technology and AI.** AI presents a significant opportunity to move beyond content production and redesign learning around performance, with the greatest opportunities likely to come from aligning with what we know about adult learning. However, practitioners in the Gulf noted that AI remains underutilised in learning, with significant untapped potential.
- **Integrating talent practices.** Learning must integrate with the broader HR system, particularly the talent lifecycle. Employees do not experience learning in isolation, so learning needs to align with areas like career, performance, succession and reward.



**Organisations need to consider what remains for formal learning functions to own.**

Is the function primarily a content provider, a systems integrator, a programme designer – or something else? The rollout of AI is a major opportunity for learning to demonstrate value, but only if learning leaders are central to adoption – rather than leaving design and rollout to IT alone.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** **Build an explicit learning philosophy with senior leaders and stick to it.** Use it to answer hard questions: how much autonomy do we give individuals, what is mandatory, where do we focus on leadership and high-potentials vs the wider employee population? Publish it and use it to govern decisions.
- 2** **Create trusted relationships with business leaders** and, where HR or L&D lacks influence, work with a trusted ally elsewhere in the organisation to test approaches in receptive areas before scaling.
- 3** **Adopt an evidence-based approach to prioritisation and learning design.** Start with: Is this a learning issue? Define the performance problem and the behaviour shift required, using multiple evidence sources where possible. Then ask: What is the best approach to achieving the required learning outcomes? Select the intervention type deliberately (information, practice, coaching, performance support). Where using vendors, define the business problem, ensure that any intervention fits their broader learning and talent strategy and, where possible, co-create solutions that fit the business context.
- 4** **Get closer to the work.** Learning professionals must deepen their understanding of how work actually happens, particularly friction points and performance constraints. Addressing these builds credibility and business impact.

**5 Measure what matters to the business and do not get bogged down in pursuing perfect data.** If a metric does not influence a decision, question why you are collecting it.

**6 Consider a skills-based approach, but keep it practical.** Focus on the overall goal (better linking up business priorities, the changing nature of work and the capabilities people need to develop), rather than any specific method. Consider how you might use skills in a targeted way as a conversation tool with leaders: what capabilities will differentiate performance and what must you build next?

**7 Reduce the gap between learning and doing and consider how the working context can support application.** Use models such as Nick Shackleton-Jones' four styles of learning to work out which learning method is best suited to the learning outcome you are looking to achieve, rather than just defaulting to large-scale development programmes.

**8 Be precise about the learning behaviours you want to change and establish a baseline.** Are you trying to create, stop or change the frequency of a behaviour? Get closer to the work and ask practical questions: where should learning happen, what triggers development conversations, what crowds out learning, what makes application difficult and how can leaders and HR support it?

**9 Identifying the opportunity for technology starts with purpose, not tools.** Use AI to apply what we know about how adults learn, not just to generate more content faster. Can it reduce barriers to deliberate practice, connect peers or support context-specific learning? Don't overlook AI's potential to analyse the learning ecosystem, identifying priority skills, gaps and links to business outcomes.

**10 Invest in the learning function's own capability upgrade.** In particular, learning functions need business consulting and diagnostic skills to advise on what matters most to business outcomes and the confidence to prioritise and make trade-offs. This may involve redesigning or stopping programmes that do not deliver value, focusing investment on a smaller number of critical capabilities and resisting the pressure to respond to every request for training. This is likely the most important takeaway for practitioners in the region.

*The problem with L&D is that they're very focused on the business of L&D and not the business of the people that they're supporting.*

KRIS SWANSON, FOUNDER & CEO, DAIA SKILLS

Learning is a core business capability. Organisations survive and grow by solving problems, adapting to new conditions and developing the capabilities required to execute their strategy. When organisations fail to learn fast enough, or fail to develop the capabilities that matter most, performance suffers.

Yet in many organisations the learning function remains under-powered, pulled into order-taking and struggling to demonstrate impact. Learning is still often treated as something that happens away from work, inside courses and programmes, measured through activity and completion rather than through changes in capability or performance.

This disconnect is becoming more visible in the Gulf region, where national transformation agendas are placing increasing emphasis on productivity, skills development and human capability. Organisations increasingly need to develop talent from within, as Dr Lana El Chaar, Executive Vice President Talent Management & Talent Acquisition, Acwa, observed: "As we continue to grow and expand into new markets, it became very important and obvious that we needed to start developing people from within, rather than relying continuously on external hires. We needed people who understood the business and had grown within the company."

However, many organisations still struggle to translate learning investment into measurable business outcomes. PwC research conducted across GCC public sector organisations found that only around 35% of employees had the required capability level for their jobs (PwC, 2024). At the same time, the pace of change is accelerating. Automation and AI are reshaping work, increasing demand for new skills and adding pressure to build capability at greater scale and speed.

Generative AI therefore sharpens both the opportunity and the risk. AI can support learning by providing practice environments, personalised feedback and guidance embedded in the flow of work. At the same time, it lowers the barriers to producing large volumes of content. If organisations respond primarily by accelerating content production, they risk scaling approaches

1.0

## INTRODUCTION

that have struggled to improve performance. The real opportunity lies in using AI and other technologies to rethink where and how learning happens, and how capability is built.

However, technology alone will not solve the problem. In most organisations, the challenge is not a lack of learning activity. Many have already invested heavily in platforms, programmes and content libraries, yet the same issues persist. The deeper problem is that learning often remains weakly connected to performance and business priorities. The organisations seeing the greatest impact are not those simply investing in more learning tools, but those focusing on how learning connects with strategy, work and talent processes. This report explores what that joined-up approach looks like in practice, beginning with what we mean by learning in an organisational context.

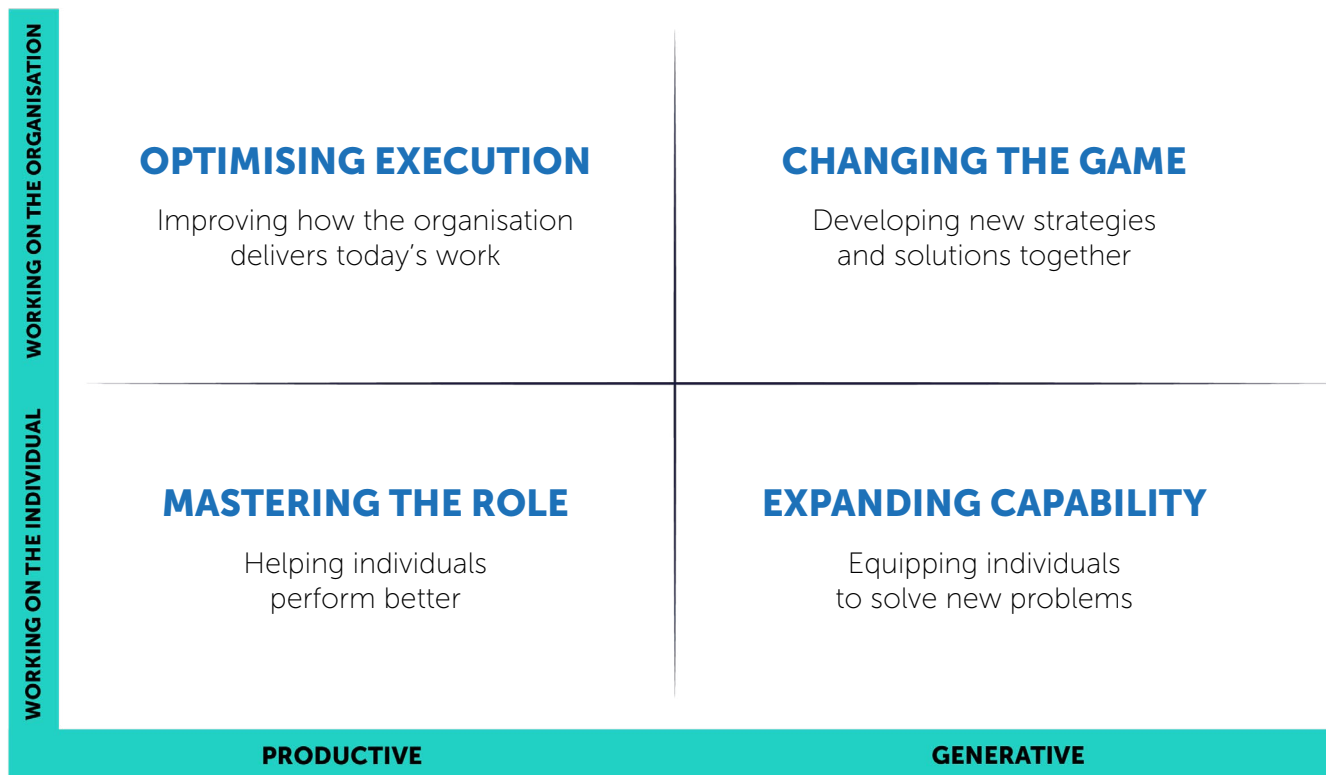
### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY LEARNING?

The role of learning is to enable the organisation to drive better business performance. In reality, learning happens everywhere in organisations, all the time, regardless of whether the learning function exists. People learn through deadlines, customer issues, new systems, mistakes, observing others, informal coaching and peer advice, among many other mechanisms.

The challenge for the learning function is therefore not simply to create learning activity, but to ensure learning is focused on what the business needs to grow and succeed, and that it directly addresses those needs.

A learning ecosystem helps organisations make learning more deliberate and purposeful. It clarifies what the business needs people to get better at, and reinforces this through mechanisms such as governance, data, leadership behaviours and talent processes. Without this joined-up system, organisations risk treating learning as a series of disconnected activities – programmes that are well received but weakly linked to performance, or initiatives that compete rather than reinforce each other. To think more strategically about the types of learning organisations should prioritise, CRF’s research introduces the CRF Learning Matrix.

## THE CRF LEARNING MATRIX



Source: CRF Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance, 2017

## THE CRF LEARNING MATRIX

The CRF Learning Matrix provides a way of assessing learning activity along two dimensions:

1. **Purpose** – whether learning focuses on improving current performance or developing new capabilities.
2. **Scope** – whether learning targets individuals or collective organisational capability.

The matrix distinguishes between **productive** and **generative** learning. Productive learning strengthens current performance by helping people and organisations improve what they already do, such as enhancing quality or customer outcomes. Generative learning is more future-focused and collaborative, supporting the development of new solutions and capabilities in response to emerging challenges.

Organisations need both. Productive learning supports reliable execution, while generative learning enables adaptation as strategies, technologies and markets evolve.

The second dimension highlights scope. While much learning investment focuses on individual capability, some of the greatest performance gains come from collective learning, such as teams building shared understanding or experimenting with new approaches.

In practice, many learning innovations have focused on scaling productive learning. However, much of the strategic value lies in creating space for generative learning – something that is becoming increasingly difficult as pressures on the learning function grow.

## THE LEARNING FUNCTION UNDER PRESSURE

To understand the role learning functions are expected to play, it is helpful to consider their current operating context. In practice, learning functions in the Gulf are under growing pressure to demonstrate impact while navigating a set of interrelated challenges:

- **Increasing demands.** Organisations face rapid technological change, shifting skill requirements and rising expectations around productivity and adaptability. In the Gulf, this is reinforced by national transformation agendas, localisation priorities and significant investment in AI and digitalisation. This is reflected in employee expectations, with PwC (2024) finding that 52% of respondents in the Middle East expect their jobs to change significantly within five years, compared with 36% globally. Organisations are expected to build new capabilities quickly and demonstrate clear returns on these investments.

- **A credibility gap.** Despite rising expectations, relatively few learning functions can clearly demonstrate how learning investments translate into improved business outcomes. In a region where capability development is often tied to high-profile strategic priorities, including transformation and national talent development, this gap is becoming more visible. Learning teams are expected to deliver strategic impact while still often being perceived as providers of training programmes.
- **Fragmented ownership.** Responsibility for learning is becoming more distributed across organisations. Business units may introduce their own tools and initiatives, while individuals increasingly use AI tools to learn independently. This creates a risk of duplication and misalignment with business priorities.

This highlights how AI is already changing how work gets done and how learning happens, creating a real opportunity for the learning function. If learning leaders are not central to this shift, they risk being sidelined and organisations risk treating AI as a technology rollout rather than a chance to redesign how learning supports performance.

The remainder of this report explores how organisations in the Gulf region can respond by building a more joined-up learning ecosystem. It sets out practical recommendations, trade-offs and examples across the seven building blocks our research has identified as critical to building an effective learning ecosystem. The report also outlines the skills the learning function will need to deliver this agenda and remain future-ready. Without them, learning functions will struggle to stay relevant and to influence the changes that matter most.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Our research consisted of:

- Interviews with 41 senior learning and HR practitioners, and other experts, both from organisations predominantly operating in the Gulf region as well as global organisations.
- A review of academic and practitioner literature.
- An online survey of CRF members and others, completed by 93 respondents between 21st January and 20th February 2026.

# BUILDING HR CAPABILITY

## Research, Learning, Events and Peer Exchange

- › Regional and global research
- › On Demand, Open and Custom Learning
- › Specialist communities for peer exchange
- › Advisory Support
- › AI Simulation and Research Tools

Find out more via our [website](#), or contact Michael Whelan (Managing Director) to discuss how we can support your function.



## Join our clients including



**Managing Director**  
**Michael Whelan**  
michael@crforum.co.uk