

ENHANCING SKILL DEVELOPMENT USING COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING

AND HOW A BUSINESS LMS CAN SUPPORT THIS

Table of Contents

Introduction.....3

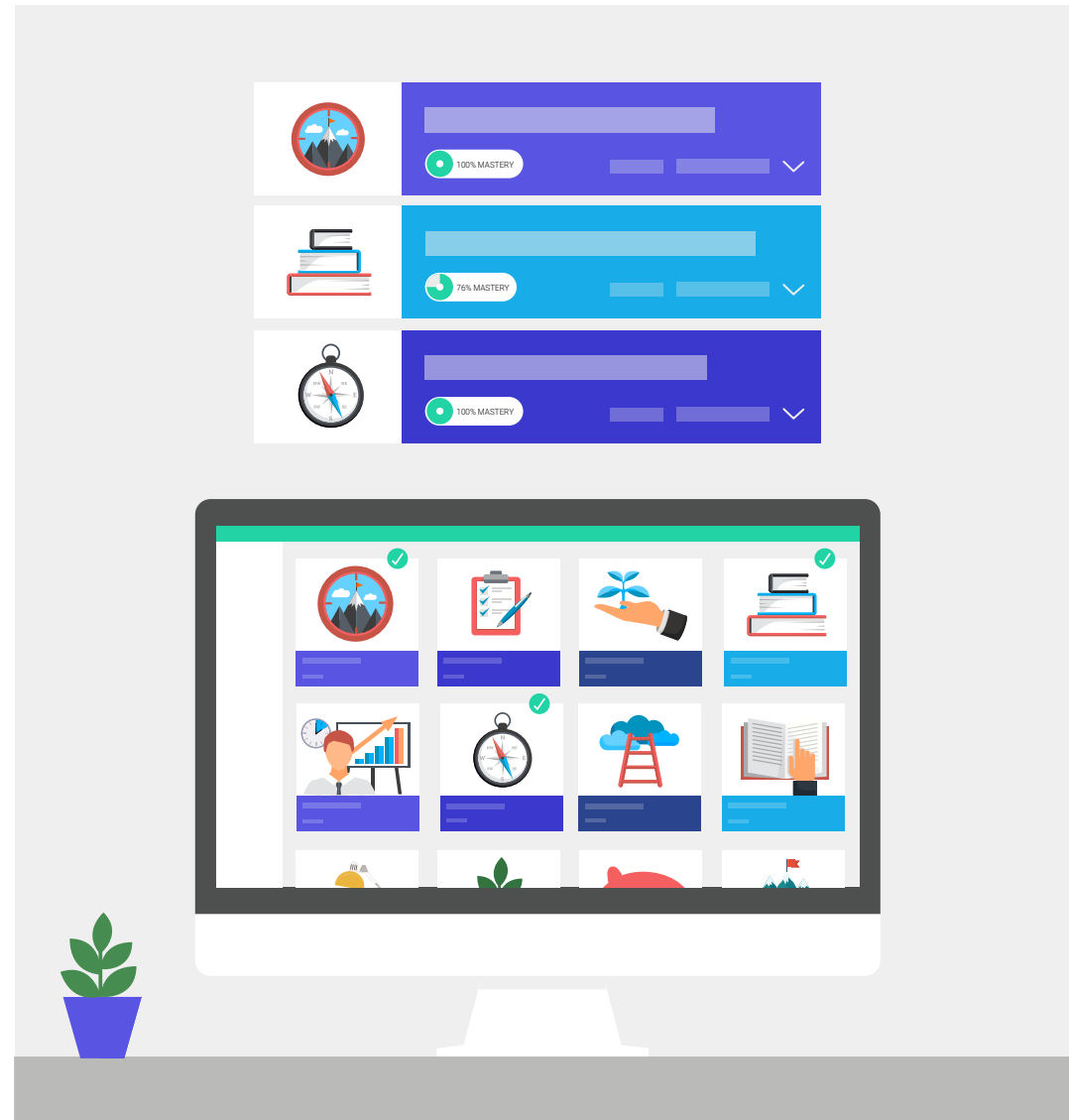
Competencies or skills? Both, actually.....4

The basics of competency-based training.....5

How to develop competency-based online training.....7

How a business LMS supports competency-based training.....9

Conclusion.....14



Introduction

The modern employee is a rather sophisticated learner. No matter if they just joined a company as a first-time hire or they've been around for a while and know the business like the palm of their hand, today's employees not only expect continuous learning opportunities from their employers but they demand the highest degree of personalization in any training program they attend.

While things have started to move in the right direction, with learning technologies developing towards supporting personalized learning and more and more L&D managers implementing these in training, we're not there yet. Progress is constantly being made but the workforce still has a long way to go until they get to receive the right training at the right time in the right way.

The good news is that we're currently witnessing a shift in the professional development of employees towards **learner-centred training**. Employees of all skills and competencies are being given more and more agency over their learning process, with self-paced online courses, microlearning modules, advanced reports that allow for instant feedback, or adaptive learning initiatives. Learner-centred training recognizes that adults in the workplace have different learning needs, so any training program should be meeting these needs by personalizing learning experiences.



One of the key aspects in this shift to learner-centred training is the focus on acquiring knowledge, no matter the means, no matter the pace. Learning gaps happen way too often in the case of traditional instructor-led training and these only lead to trouble. Companies of all shapes and sizes need their workforce to be as sharp as possible, as that's the basis for stellar employee performance and company success.

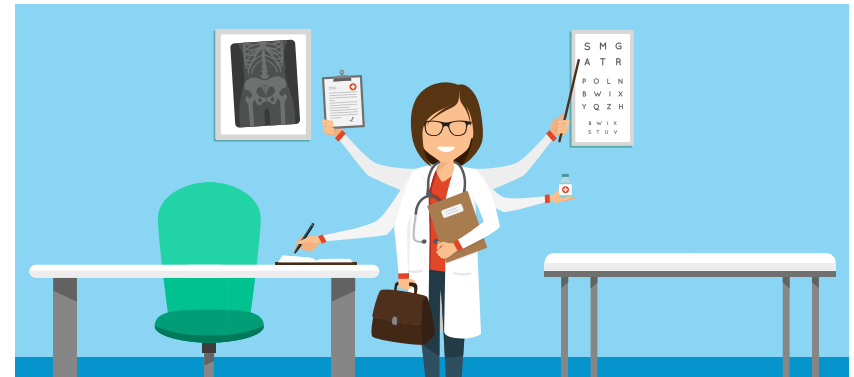
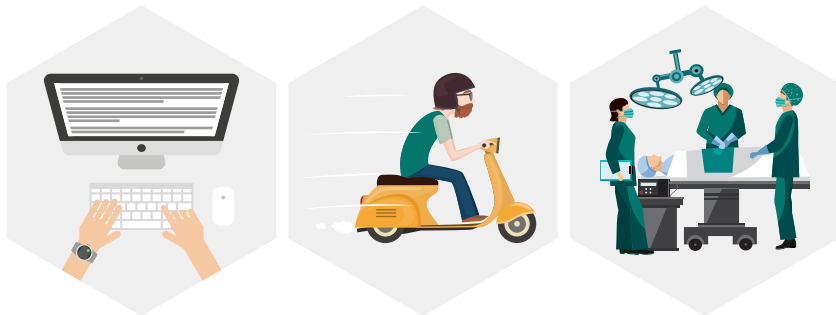


In order to achieve this, L&D professionals recognize the potential of the **competency-based approach to training**. Competency-based training ensures that each employee only moves on to more advanced training modules or courses when they are able to prove mastery over the more basic ones. Learning gaps are avoided altogether and engagement rates improve.

Competencies or skills? Both, actually

Before exploring what exactly competency-based training means, how L&D professionals should go about it, and what learning technology tools they have at their disposal to create and deliver a successful program, one basic aspect needs to be clear. Even though the terms “competencies” and “skills” are often used interchangeable, they’re not exactly the same thing.

If we were to define **skills**, they are **very specific activities**, some more complex than others. Scaling a salmon is a skill but so is typing, driving or performing a kidney transplant. They are all things that people learned to do at a certain time in their lives. Of course a lot more people can clean fish, type, and drive than perform an organ transplant but ultimately, they are all just skills. Still, a sushi chef will scale fish flawlessly and more efficiently than any amateur cook, a court clerk will type faster and more accurately than a high school freshman, a professional driver will have a better performance than a Sunday driver, and it’s only safe to assume that where a kidney replacement is concerned an experienced surgeon will do a better job than an intern.



A more academic definition of competency is “*the capability to apply or use a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities required to successfully perform critical work functions or tasks in a defined work setting. Competencies often serve as the basis for skill standards that specify the level of knowledge, skills, and abilities required for success in the workplace as well as potential measurement criteria for assessing competency attainment.*”¹

Repetition, mastery and interconnecting of skills lead to competencies. Since competencies are a lot more complex than skills are, and because they are built around an internal and interconnected logic, using them as a base for talent management requires greater attention and care. For a long time, the additional work that came with using competencies to define job success made many organizations hesitant to adopting them. But in the past few years, the process of building and deploying comprehensive competency architecture to support an organization has been revolutionized by internet-based solutions.

The basics of competency-based training

Most people want to advance in their careers. They want to continuously improve their skill sets and acquire new competencies in order to have a successful professional life. If their employer gives them enough opportunities to achieve their objectives, advantages will follow for both sides. A lot of companies are highly incented to keep people moving up their career and track their learning experience because otherwise they're going to lose a lot of those people.

Competency-based training places the trainee in the middle of everything and allows employees to develop their skills and achieve their professional learning objectives, without losing sight of company objectives. Here are three aspects that contribute to this:



1. Time becomes less important

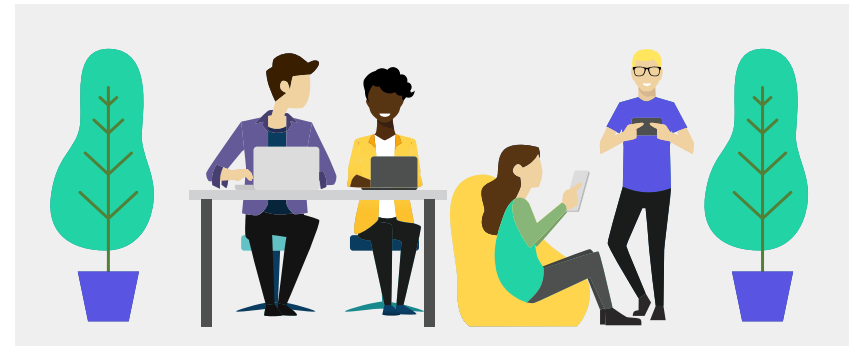
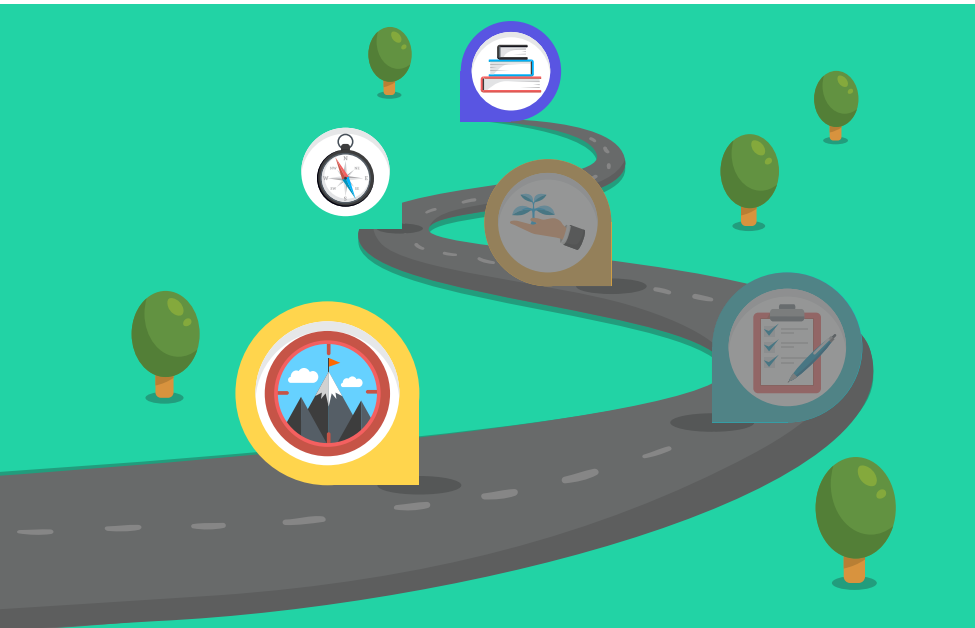
Time is the most precious commodity we have, and in today's business world with everything happening at once with astounding speed it even appears to be shrinking. If an employee can decide what task is most important and what can wait, why shouldn't they also be able to make the call as to what learning module would help most at a certain point? What's important is *how much* the employee learns, *not how many hours* they spend doing so.

The focus of any competency-based learning program ought to be transferring content into day to day performance. Learners should pick what units are important to them both on account of what skills they already have and what challenges they are presented with at work at a certain time. Some chapters may be skipped and others only browsed through but as long as the learners have good results both in the training tests and on their jobs it means the program is efficient.

2. Flexibility is a given

Adult learners need to be able to move through courses at their own pace and if possible at their own convenience. As long as they can tackle the content in a flexible manner, the information transfer is greatly improved. Skating through information that is already familiar and being able to spend more time and effort on new useful knowledge ultimately leads to more efficient learning.

Competency-based training allows learners to develop their professional skills in a manner that meets more of their learning needs. They can decide many more aspects related to their learning process than in a traditional way of training, from what learning modules to follow and when, to how much time they want to spend on each learning activity or when to be assessed.



3. Online is the perfect learning environment

Training that is created and delivered online gives employees more flexibility and more agency over how much time they spend on training. It allows for learners to login and logout, go through one or more modules focusing on their skill gaps, participate in assessments and take tests without being disruptive to anyone.

For instructional designers it's easy to adapt the training and development plan based on the needs of the learner and their specific trajectory to master the targeted skills and competencies. Online learning data offers instructors immediate feedback on what works and what requires improvement. Last but not least, the online training environment can reach larger numbers of employees, which comes in pretty handy in the case of companies that operate across various time zones and/or continents.

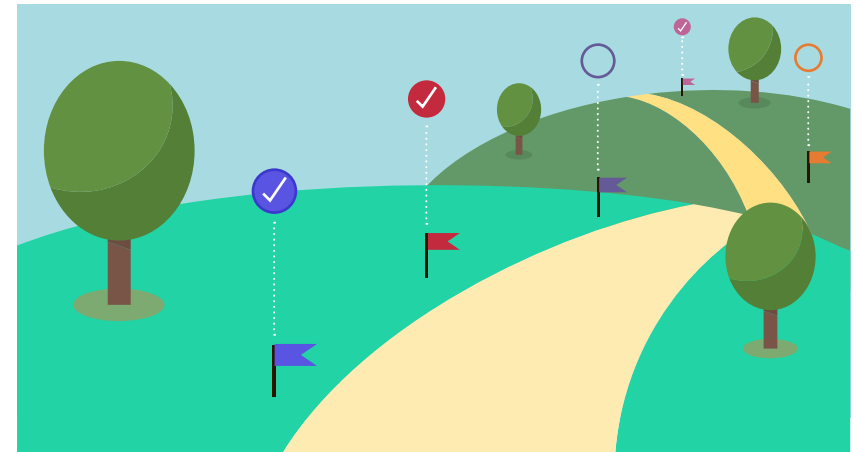
When the focus becomes how much an employee actually develops their skills and competencies instead of how much time they spend in training, they have a higher degree of agency over their learning process and can access training materials anytime, just when they need them, the training program will have better engagement and retention rates and will contribute to better employee

How to develop competency-based online training

Implementing a training program focused on employees' acquirement and development of skills and competencies is more than challenging. There are a few things to keep in mind before, during and after the process that will help L&D professionals stay on top of everything. Even though all of the following aspects can positively impact the success of such a program, being agile throughout the entire process is most important.

The first step in designing competency-based online training is to **identify the core skills and competencies** that are valuable to the organization. Depending on the industry, but most of all, on the department employees are to receive training (and also on compliance issues), businesses value certain skills or talents above others. By pinpointing these areas it will be easier to make a plan on what kind of training content needs to be delivered to employees.

Once these are set, it's best to evaluate the pre-existing knowledge of employees on each area and **identify the inevitable skill gaps**. E-learning assessments, on-the-job evaluations, and training needs analysis² can very much help with painting a clear picture of where these skill gaps exist and how big they are. Looking into all learning data will lead to identifying patterns and figuring out how the training program can bridge these gaps.

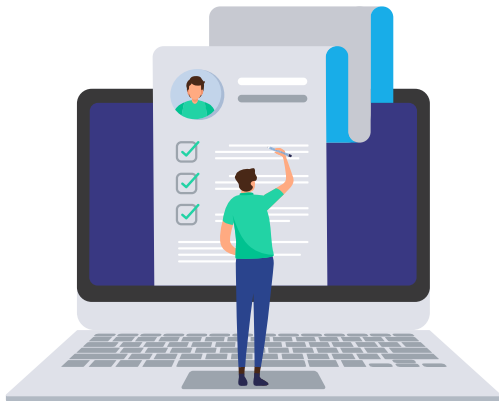


Of course, the next obvious step is to create and deliver **self-paced online training courses** based on the previously identified skills and competencies gaps. Employees are more likely to benefit from competency-based online training when they go at their own pace instead of having to keep up with peers who possess different skills or experience levels. That's why they should be enrolled on personalized online training paths that outline every step of the process but still give them the power to choose their own online training activities and goals.

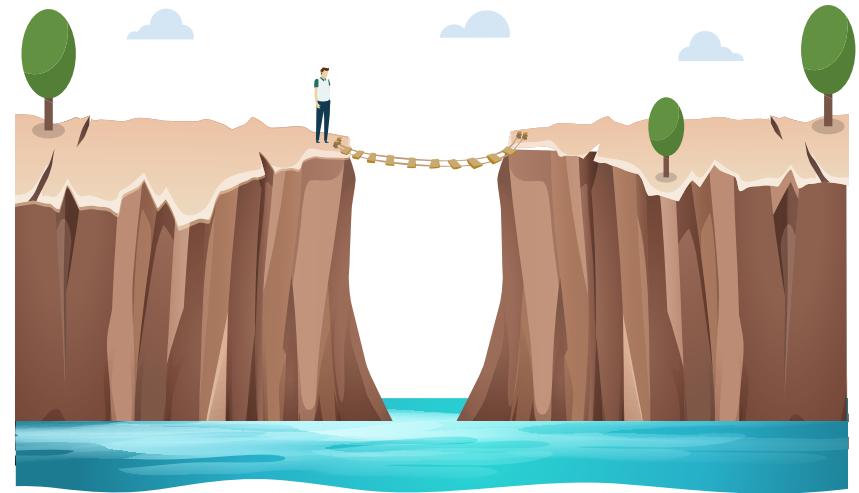
Competency-based online training is all about the practical application of newly acquired knowledge rather than knowing things theoretically. Therefore it's best to **align online training resources with job duties**, tasks, and essential skills. Each online training activity should explore a topic, task or skill in greater detail instead of merely brushing over the discussion points. The resources included in the course must allow for real-world application so that learners can build experiential knowledge and put it into context when necessary in real life.

Another thing to keep in mind is the forgetting curve³. People naturally forget. That's why employees need to refresh their memory and reinforce key concepts even after they've mastered each competency and proven their proficiency. A great way to ensure this is to provide an **online training library for ongoing development**. These microlearning online training repositories could feature separate categories for every competency so that employees can quickly access the online training materials.

Training assessments are like built-in progress trackers. If pre-assessments create the benchmark, the final ones indicate whether an employee is proficient in what was taught. But evaluating employees in between is crucial to the success of a competency-based training program. **Frequent assessments** are necessary to **monitor learner performance**. This allows instructional designers to provide relevant personalized feedback at the right time to each learner so that they'll be able to constantly adapt in their learning process.



Personalizing the learning experience can be done to a certain extent through the use of feedback from the part of each employee, so that instructors can **create individualized competency resources**. Surveys, LMS metrics, and manager evaluations are great starting points, but focus groups and e-learning assessment results are also a great way to gather the needed feedback.



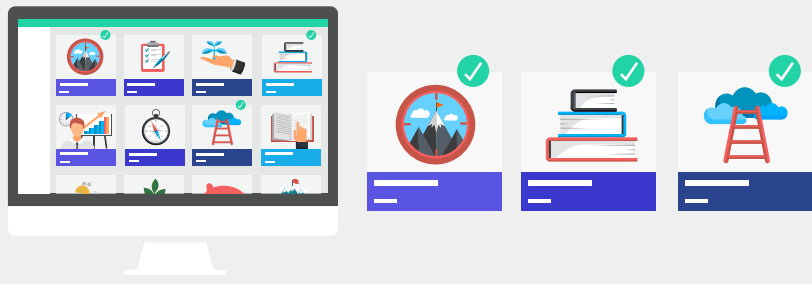
Employees need to be encouraged to participate in self-guided online training activities that involve real-world situations and challenges. This allows them to put their skills into practice and gradually build on their existing knowledge. Using **real-world examples**, case studies, simulations, branching scenarios, and serious games in training **improves their practical proficiency**. These tools also give employees the chance to demonstrate their skills and strengths while highlighting weaknesses.

Learning technologies have taken competency-based online training to a new level. Learning and development professionals no longer have to give up on this kind of approach to training for fear they don't have the resources to develop and manage it efficiently. They can evaluate task performance and practical skill application, while personalizing the entire process so that employees get the online training resources they need to fill crucial skill gaps.

How a business LMS supports competency-based training

An online training course must cover all the skills employees of a company need for their professional development in a specific area. By mastering these skills they develop competencies, which puts them on the track of improved performance and career advancements. Better employee performance leads to better business results, so L&D professionals need all the help and support available when it comes to creating successful competency-based training.

A learning management system provides an effective way of implementing competency-based learning for training programs through the many relevant features and reports it offers. It really is a complete solution and the most visionary vendors put a lot of effort into developing their products in this direction.



Instructors need to create or upload a new set of competencies and then tag each module and assessment with the competencies that they are teaching or assessing, depending on the course and the seniority of employees. Then they have to monitor if a module only partially teaches the desired concepts or if there are certain learning units that don't cover any of the competencies. Instructors need to also track each learner's progress through the course and see how well they are progressing through each competency. Last but not least, they need to also intervene in the training process when learners need recommendations or extra help to master a certain skill.



At every step of the way they need comprehensive personalized reports, so that they are able to make the most informed decisions on what aspects need to be adapted or changed completely. The training program needs to be periodically re-evaluated, as employees' skill sets and competencies evolve as the organization evolves.

Let's explore the most important features and reports a business learning management system can provide to organizations that care about their employees' skills and competencies development.

10 LMS features that support skills and competencies development

Instructional designers need to make sure the course content is compliant with the skills they want to teach and assess, and also to be able to track learner progress. For this to happen, the LMS they're using to create training courses must act like a swiss-knife tool. Here is a list of features any business LMS that supports competency-based learning should have:

1. Upload or create competencies. Instructors should be able to create competencies directly in the LMS or upload their own. The system should offer a library of built-in standards, depending on the industry the company is activating in. Also, instructors should be able to add one or more sets of competencies to a class.

2. Add competencies to modules and assessments. After competencies have been added to the course, instructors should be able to tag learning modules corresponding to the competencies they were created to teach. Likewise, they should be able to tag assignments with the competencies these should be assessing.

3. Coverage analysis of competencies. After tagging the course content and assessments with competencies, the system should be able to offer an overview of how well the course covers the targeted competencies. This would provide a great way of identifying weak spots in the course and making sure each competency is being taught and assessed during the course.

4. Automation for mastery. Instructors should be able to add actions that are triggered automatically when a learner reaches a certain competency level. For example, if a learner achieves more than 80% on a competency the system could automatically unlock an advanced module that was previously hidden. Or, if a learner lingers at 30% or 40% competency level for more than 10 days, the instructor could set up a rule to get an alert when this happens and send learners recommendations on how to improve in that area. There should be many options for this to be done, triggering actions like enrolling learners in other related courses and paths, sending messages to learners and instructors, locking modules, and more.



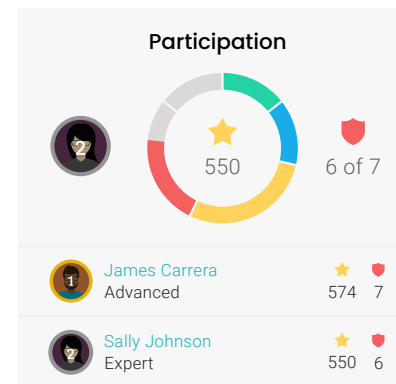
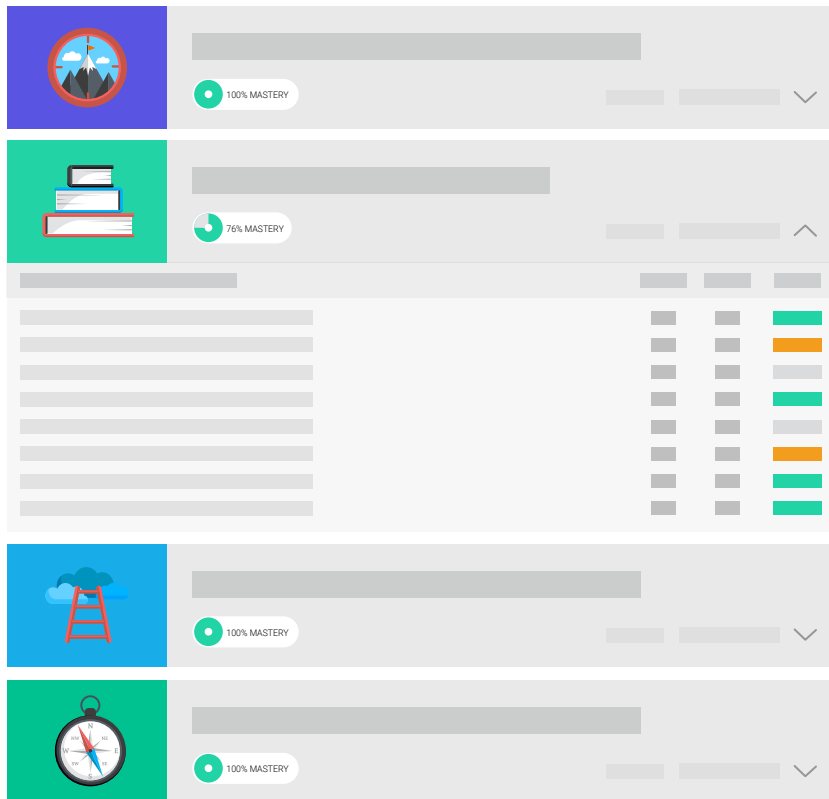
5. Save and share competencies as resources. Created competencies should be stored in a centralized library and reused for other courses whenever necessary. They could also be shared with other instructors from within the organization if needed.

6. Ability to tag resources with competencies. Formal training courses are only one way for employees to learn new things; all the extra resources of a course (in all their various formats) can be as valuable for them. That's why the system should allow instructors to tag any learning resource with a corresponding competency.



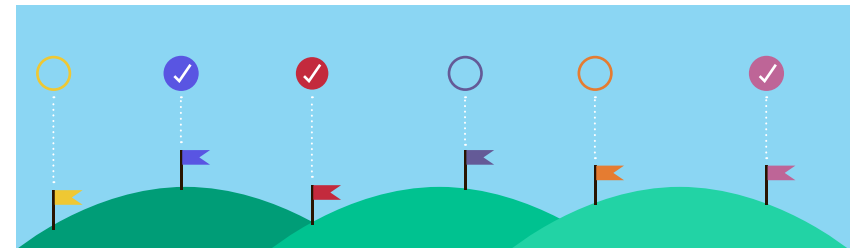
7. Tracking learner progress in courses. As learners advance through the course instructors should be able to see an overview of their mastery level and how well they understand the concepts. It should therefore be easier to identify areas where learners are doing well or where they are struggling. These mastery levels for all course participants should be updated in real-time.

8. Learner view of mastery. Mastery progress should also be displayed on the profile pages of each employee attending a course. They should be able to see a detailed overview of their progress through the course competencies, so they can also identify on their own any weak points or strengths and work towards improving their performance.



9. Charts that show mastery over time. There are two kinds of competition: one against others and one against oneself. These types of charts could help learners get an overview of their learning progress over a longer period of time, even over more than one course, thus becoming aware of how far they are on their journey.

10. Competency picker. Adult learners are more often than not self-directed learners. They are perfectly capable of identifying their own learning gaps. Based on their goals, a competency picker would allow them to pick and choose certain competencies that are available within the system and pursue their mastery.

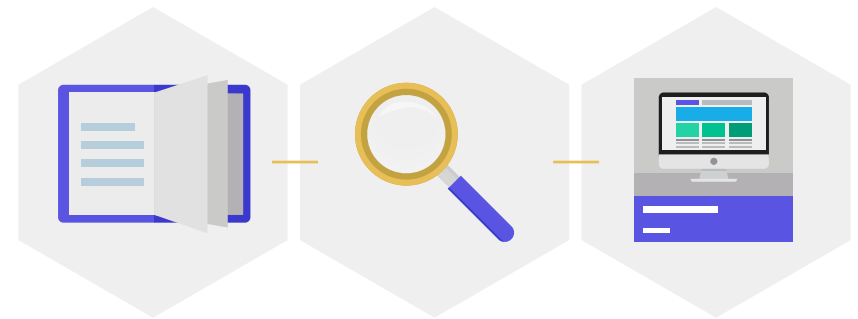


This list of LMS features that support competency-based learning is by no means an exhaustive one. New features will continue to join it as long as the technology continues to advance. Things have just only started to move towards competency-based learning, after all.

5 LMS reports that support skills and competencies development

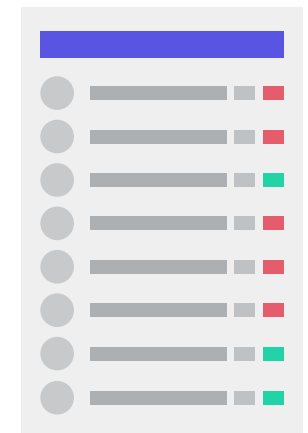
One of the most important aspects of an LMS is its reporting and analytics. Each course participant creates numerous learning data points during their learning process, so it's crucial for instructors and administrators to be able to create reports that are not only comprehensible, but also customizable. These reports are the basis of monitoring the skills and competencies of employees that are most relevant to the organization. Here are five types of LMS reports that can help L&D professionals track skill growth:

1. Work competency reports. These reports help track skill growth and employee progress. They are usually comprised of several data points, including on-the-job observations and manager evaluations. This data is compiled in the LMS to provide a complete picture of the employee's current skill-set levels versus the desired proficiency level. As a result, instructors should be able to determine which skills each employee needs to improve based on their job duties and tasks.

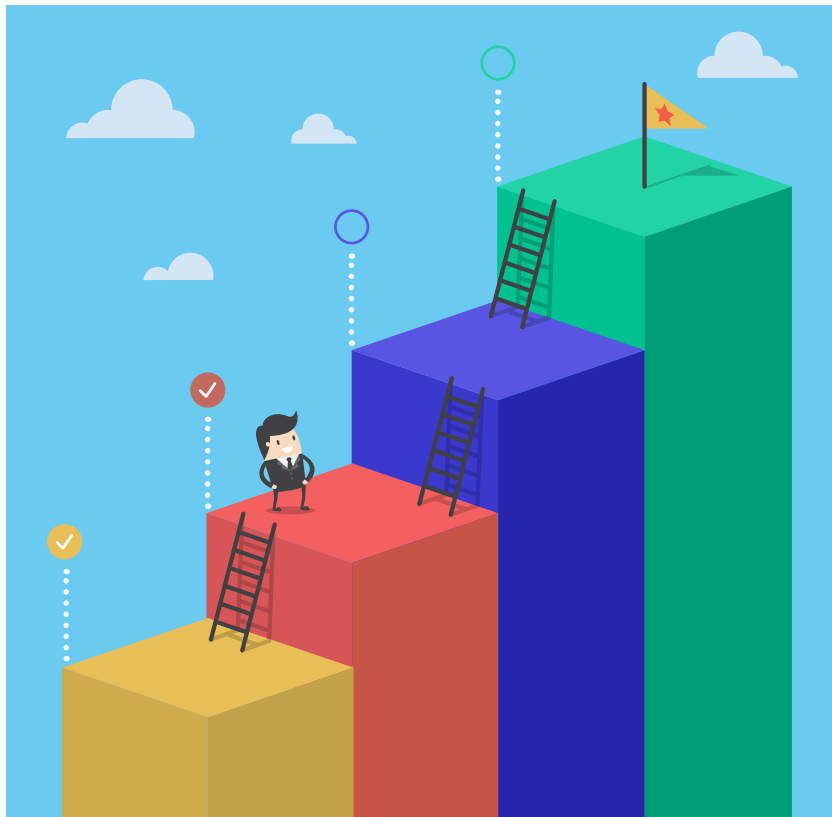


2. Learner-generated online training content. The best way to truly learn something is to teach it. If employees are invited to develop online training resources that focus on specific skill sets, in the process of creating these resources, they will deepen their own understanding of what each skill involves and how to use it in real-world contexts. All these online training materials that employees develop can be compiled into a categorized database and instructors could use that as a microlearning online training repository.

3. Assessment reports. Pre-assessments serve as a benchmark for employee progress, while final exams allow instructors to monitor how much they have developed their skills and bridged gaps. With the built-in assessment reports of the LMS, instructors should be able to compile data for individuals and groups and look for trouble spots. For instance, if a high percentage of learners don't show much improvement in their test scores after completing the online training activity, there might be an issue with the online training strategy rather than learner motivation or participation.



4. Branching scenario success rates. Scenarios require participants to master a certain amount of skills if they are to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Employees must use these skills to choose the right decision-making path. Low success rates indicate that employees lack the crucial skills they need to navigate the situation. Instructors could check LMS reports looking for skill gaps and then figuring out which talents and abilities align with each task.



5. Online certification training overview. The LMS should have the ability to track online certification training programs. As such, instructional designers can develop skill-based certificates that consist of online training activities, modules, and assessments. Learners must complete the requirements to earn the certificate and prove their skill mastery. For best results, each skill set should have a corresponding online certification. This will allow the tracking of skill growth on a case-by-case basis, instead of dividing comprehensive certification results into distinct skill or performance issues.

Of course, the business learning management system should be able to offer all these types of reports (and more) whenever an instructional designer or manager requires one. Whether we're talking about just a few particular aspects of a learner's performance within their targeted competencies or an all-details overview, the system should pull the necessary data and deliver an on demand report.

Conclusion

Competency-based online training can benefit employees of all types, in all company departments, of various job tenures, as it has the great advantage that it allows focus on practical, hands-on knowledge instead of academic theory. L&D professionals can meet the various learning needs of trainees and design training based on personalized skills development and competencies acquirement by using learning technologies such as a business LMS with a comprehensive set of features and reports.

If you're looking for a tool to help you get started with competency-based training and skills development, try out CYPHER Learning, a learning management system for business organizations with a comprehensive set of features. To the best of our knowledge, CYPHER Learning now has the best support for competency-based training of any mainstream LMS, with all of the above mentioned specific features and reports either already implemented within the system or on the roadmap for the very near future.

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