



Executive Interview



Learning Has a New Job, From Cost Center to Business Driver

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About Absorb Software

Absorb Software is a global learning technology company headquartered in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Founded in 2003, the company has grown into one of the leading AI-driven learning platform providers, trusted by more than 3,500 organizations and 37 million learners worldwide across employee, customer and partner audiences. Its product suite includes Absorb LMS, an award-winning learning management system, Absorb Infuse for in-the-flow learning experiences, and Absorb Create for course authoring. The company's newest innovation, Aura, is an AI engine designed to connect learning activity directly to measurable business outcomes.

About Saravana Sivanandham

Saravana Sivanandham is Chief Product and Marketing Officer at Absorb Software, where he has served as a strategic driver for five years. He is a senior leader focused on helping enterprises reach and engage their customers through digital channels, bringing extensive experience across digital marketing, customer experience management, commerce enablement, enterprise architecture, process governance and business development.

His career began in enterprise application development at CA Technologies, Dell EMC and HP, before he moved into product management and marketing at Adobe. He later worked in consulting, including a role as an Expert Associate Partner at McKinsey & Company, where he guided client executives through marketing and commerce transformations, and he most recently led marketing operations and omnichannel experiences at DocuSign before joining Absorb. Saravana holds a Bachelor of Engineering degree from Coimbatore Institute of Technology.

About Rachel Cooke

Today's conversation is moderated by **Rachel Cooke**, Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst at Brandon Hall Group™. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 20+ years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research and Performance Improvement industries.

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Gold

Silver

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Learning and Development



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Redefining Learning

Q Rachel

What are you seeing among your customers and the business leaders you work with as it relates to how the market is shifting, and how organizations define the purpose of learning?

A Saravana

The primary shift I am seeing among our customers and prospects is that learning is being redefined, from something you consume to something that produces a result. For years the purpose of learning was completion: assign a course, track that it is finished, and hope it matters. Leaders have stopped accepting that. They are now asking the harder question of whether it changed the outcome, what their people can actually do, and whether they can prove it.

A Business Necessity

Learning is no longer an L&D nicety or an HR nicety. It is a business necessity.

Learning is moving from courses and a catalog to being operational infrastructure, part of how work gets done rather than a place people visit once a year. AI is what is enabling this shift. It is expanding what every person is expected to do, so building capability fast becomes a business necessity. Learning is no longer an L&D nicety or an HR nicety. It is a business necessity.

Measuring the Motion

Q Rachel

Our research shows that the strongest organizations are treating learning as a workforce performance strategy tied to retention, productivity and measurable business outcomes. Are organizations getting closer to measuring the right things?

A Saravana

I would separate this into two parts. Organizations can now actually close the gap between activity and measurement, but there is very little evidence they are moving in that direction. Can they do it, and are they doing it, are two different questions. The disconnect between learning activity and business impact continues to exist. What changed is the technology and what is now possible with AI. AI can read capability gaps live from the systems where work gets done, act on them, and tie the result back to the outcome the way the business measures it. That is possible today, but most organizations are still counting completions, hours of training and satisfaction scores. They are measuring the motion, not the impact.

Two Axes

Almost everyone is climbing the adoption axis. Almost no one is climbing the accountability axis.

I find it useful to think of two axes: adoption, meaning how much learning and AI you have deployed, and accountability, meaning whether it has changed the outcome and whether you can prove it. Almost everyone is climbing the adoption axis. Almost no one is climbing the accountability axis. Closing that gap is about measuring the right thing, the outcome. It is possible today in a way it was not in the past, but very few companies have adopted it and are actually driving that accountability.

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Beyond Pure Measures

Q Rachel

You use the term work intelligence, which sounds like a step beyond traditional analytics. How do you define it?

A Saravana

We've talked about the measurement framework, from adoption to outcomes and the gap we're trying to close is really understanding the work itself. It's not just about applying pure measures anymore, it's about understanding how work happens and how people participate in it and what they're using AI for. That is where work intelligence comes in. It lets us understand every step of a process and how people are doing it differently and that is where traditional workforce analytics doesn't have the capacity to support leaders through a change that is moving this fast.

Q Rachel

If we want to move learning from a cost center to a business driver, does the strategy, the technology or the leadership mindset need to change, or do they all need to change? And where is the bottleneck to measuring effectiveness?

A Saravana

Two Different Languages

L&D teams have been reporting in their own language... to executives who speak a different language of revenue, ramp time and retention.

I will answer this in two parts: what is the bottleneck to measuring effectiveness, and then what needs to change. On effectiveness, two things get in the way. First, the systems everyone uses were built to measure activity, not outcomes. The data that would prove impact either does not exist or lives in a system other than the learning system itself. Second, L&D teams have been reporting in their own language, completions and engagement, to executives

A Receipt, Not a Result

who speak a different language of revenue, ramp time and retention.

What should they measure instead? It is simple to say and hard to do: pick the business metric the function already uses and tie learning directly to it. For a sales org, that is win rate and ramp time. For support, it is resolution time and CSAT. For a safety-critical business, it is incident rate. The discipline is to stop inventing learning metrics and use the ones your CEO, CFO and business leaders already use. That is how you build trust and prove effectiveness. A completion rate is a receipt that interests no one in the business. The business wants results.

As for what needs to change, it is mindset, strategy and technology, all three, but the order of operations matters. It starts with mindset. If you still believe your job is to deliver programs, reports and completions, no strategy or technology will change the outcome. The shift is to own an outcome, not an activity. Strategy comes next, moving from HR-led training to business-led training, where HR becomes a strategic enabler and learning is planned against business goals rather than a content calendar. Technology is the third part, because it is what lets you measure and prove the outcome.

You need a system that can close the loop: understand the gap, decide the action, operationalize it and measure the result. But I would caution against leading with technology. If mindset and strategy have not changed, technology cannot deliver. Technology is an enabler of your strategy, but the first thing that has to change is the mindset.

Mindset First

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mindset.*

Q Rachel

As AI changes the pace at which skills and jobs evolve, what should HR and learning leaders address around workplace readiness today while anticipating what the business will need tomorrow?

The Trap For L&D

A Saravana

The honest answer is that you cannot plan this out. You cannot build a static map of skills and close the gap that way. That has been the trap for L&D for years, even before AI. Our instinct is to build a skills taxonomy, categorize every skill, map every role to it, then close the gaps. But by the time the map is built, it is out of date, and the learner never experiences it that way.

The better approach is to make the system continuous: infer the signals of what people need in their actual work, build a dynamic individual learning plan to close that specific gap in the flow of work, measure where it moved the outcome, and let the system get smarter with every cycle. That way you are not predicting next year's skills, you are building an engine that adapts as skills change. Skills are an input, performance is the outcome. The organizations that win this wave will not be the ones with the most complete skills map. They will be the ones that close the newly discovered gap the fastest.

Q Rachel

With the LMS as the hub linking people to learning, what should the modern learning system look like?

From Destination to Substrate

The LMS has to evolve from a destination to a substrate.

A Saravana

The LMS has to evolve from a destination to a substrate. For twenty years or more, the LMS was where we sent people, a system of record of completions. That is not the future of an LMS. The center of gravity is moving to two places, which is what we are building

Foundation, Not Front Door

our product against: an intelligence layer that decides what each person needs, and orchestration of that learning in the flow of work, in Teams, in the browser, on the job site. A catalog is no longer the center of gravity.

But the LMS as the system of record for people's capability, as the home of your own proprietary learning data, what worked for an individual, a function or a company, matters more than ever. The LMS stops being the front door and becomes the foundation. The intelligence sits on top of it, the experience moves out to where work happens, and the learning data becomes the engine that makes your workforce AI ready for the future of work.

Rachel

We are hearing a lot about agentic learning infrastructure. What does that mean, and how is it different from simply adding generative AI features to an existing learning platform?

Saravana

It is the difference between a feature and a system. Adding generative AI to a learning platform usually means one thing, a chatbot bolted onto the site to do what you already did in the past. That is what I am seeing with most vendors in this space. It is useful, but it does not change how anything works. Agentic infrastructure is a coordinated set of agents that can actually do things: detect a capability gap, deliver the right intervention, follow up, measure the results, and remember the actions and outcomes to make future decisions. These agents also share the context of the organization, operating from the same approved knowledge and respecting the same permissions.

A Feature vs. a System

*It is the difference
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Three Questions to Ask

Does this AI answer, or can it act? Does it start at zero every time, or does it evolve over time? Does it prove it changed the outcome, or does it just say it was used?

As an L&D leader, I would ask three questions. Does this AI answer, or can it act? Does it start at zero every time, or does it evolve over time? Does it prove it changed the outcome, or does it just say it was used? A bolted-on chatbot fails all three. An agentic learning system passes all three. This is not unique to learning. I see the same pattern across a wide variety of products: an agent to build a report, an agent to assign courses. These are not really agents, they are chat interfaces to actions you could already take. A true agent understands the situation, takes decisions, takes action, measures the outcome of those actions, and remembers those outcomes for future decision making. Everything else is a bolt-on chat layered on top of existing platforms and functionality.

Q Rachel

Absorb recently introduced Aura. Describe Aura and its impact.

A Saravana

Aura is aimed at solving everything we just discussed. Think of it as an ambient, proactive agent that understands the needs of an individual based on their context and the business context, defines what interventions would be helpful, delivers on those interventions, interprets the outcomes, and improves with every intervention. It is a closed loop performance system built to solve the oldest problem in this industry: connecting learning to the business.

A closed loop performance system built to solve the oldest problem in this industry: connecting learning to the business.

For two decades, the L&D function could deliver programs but could not connect them to the business. Aura is the intelligence layer that closes that loop. It identifies capability gaps from the systems where work happens, delivers the right intervention in the flow of work, measures where performance improved, and uses that data to decide future interventions, across employees, customers, suppliers

One Continuous System

and partners. Learning needs, individual development, workforce performance and business outcomes stop being separate.

They become one continuous system instead of four different reports: a system of record of what someone can do right now, a system of action that creates the intervention based on that capability, a system of intelligence that understands the outcome of the action, and a system of measurement that powers it all. We now have Aura live across 150 of our customers, and the early results support our hypothesis. 95 percent of learner questions are being answered successfully, about 90 percent within the first response, and 100 percent of Aura's answers are enterprise compliant. It is still early days and the product is evolving extremely fast.

Q Rachel

How are you building Aura, and is it personalized per organization? Can you go a little deeper with a use case example?

A Saravana

Built at the Individual Level

Aura is built at an individual level.

Aura is built at an individual level. Take an account executive who has a major deal tomorrow. Instead of waiting for him to go looking for help, Aura has already noticed, based on his past performance data, that he struggles with handling technical objections. Once it identifies that gap, it offers a role play to rehearse handling those objections. Based on that outcome, it can then generate micro learning built on the fly for that individual. All of this happens in the workflow, whether that is Salesforce or Slack, wherever work happens, with full context of the user and the business. That is the employee view.

From the manager's standpoint, she does not have to wonder whether it worked. She can see which reps did the training and

One Loop, Three Needs

whether it measurably improved their win rate, and Aura will suggest assigning the same intervention to other reps with a similar need. From a learning leader's standpoint, for the first time they can walk into an executive team and show that a specific program moved the win rate or increased ramp time, in the language the CFO, CEO and CRO already understand. It is one loop solving for the needs of the learner, the manager and the leader, and that is what I believe distinguishes it from every other platform.

Q Rachel

For learning leaders who want their function to be viewed as a genuine business driver, this is all great, but where do they begin?

A Saravana

Start Narrow and Prove It

Start narrow and prove it. Do not boil the ocean.

Start narrow and prove it. Do not boil the ocean, and please do not start by building a skills taxonomy. Pick one outcome the business already cares about and already measures, tie a learning program to it, own it, and prove the connection. One credible number in the language the business understands will do more to earn you a seat at the table than a year of engagement dashboards. Once you prove that one outcome, expand from there to the next. I do not see a different way to do this. You have to start narrow, prove the outcome in the language the business understands, and move from there to the next step.

Q Rachel

As we wrap up, what excites you most about where the field is heading?

A Saravana

We have known for two thousand years, maybe longer, that people learn best one on one. The best way to teach is one on one, but there were never enough teachers, so we settled for classrooms, schools, colleges, podcasts, courses and catalogs, all of which are alternatives to that one-on-one relationship between teacher and student. AI is probably the first technology that lets us give a one-on-one teacher to every individual in the workforce, one that knows them, knows the business, and is focused on their outcomes.

Everyone Is Learning at Once

Everyone is learning at the same time, so you can no longer rely on the most experienced person to carry everyone else.

It matters more now than ever because AI is expanding what everyone is expected to do. My role has expanded, and so has every role on my team. Leaders, managers, frontline workers, everyone is learning at the same time, so you can no longer rely on the most experienced person to carry everyone else. Giving every one of them a personal teacher is how you keep an organization moving forward. That is probably the most human thing this technology can do, and we are finally able to do it. I feel like I am at the right place at the right time to help make that change happen, and that is what excites me most.



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