

Inside ATD 2025: Insights, innovation, and what's next for learning & talent development

Event briefing | May 2025

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With more than 8,400 attendees from 83 countries, this year's ATD 2025 International Conference & EXPO proved once again why it's a cornerstone of the learning and development (L&D) calendar. From the buzzing expo hall to thought-provoking keynotes and data-rich sessions, the conference offered a front-row seat to the future of talent development—and the challenges we still need to solve.

[Learn more](#)



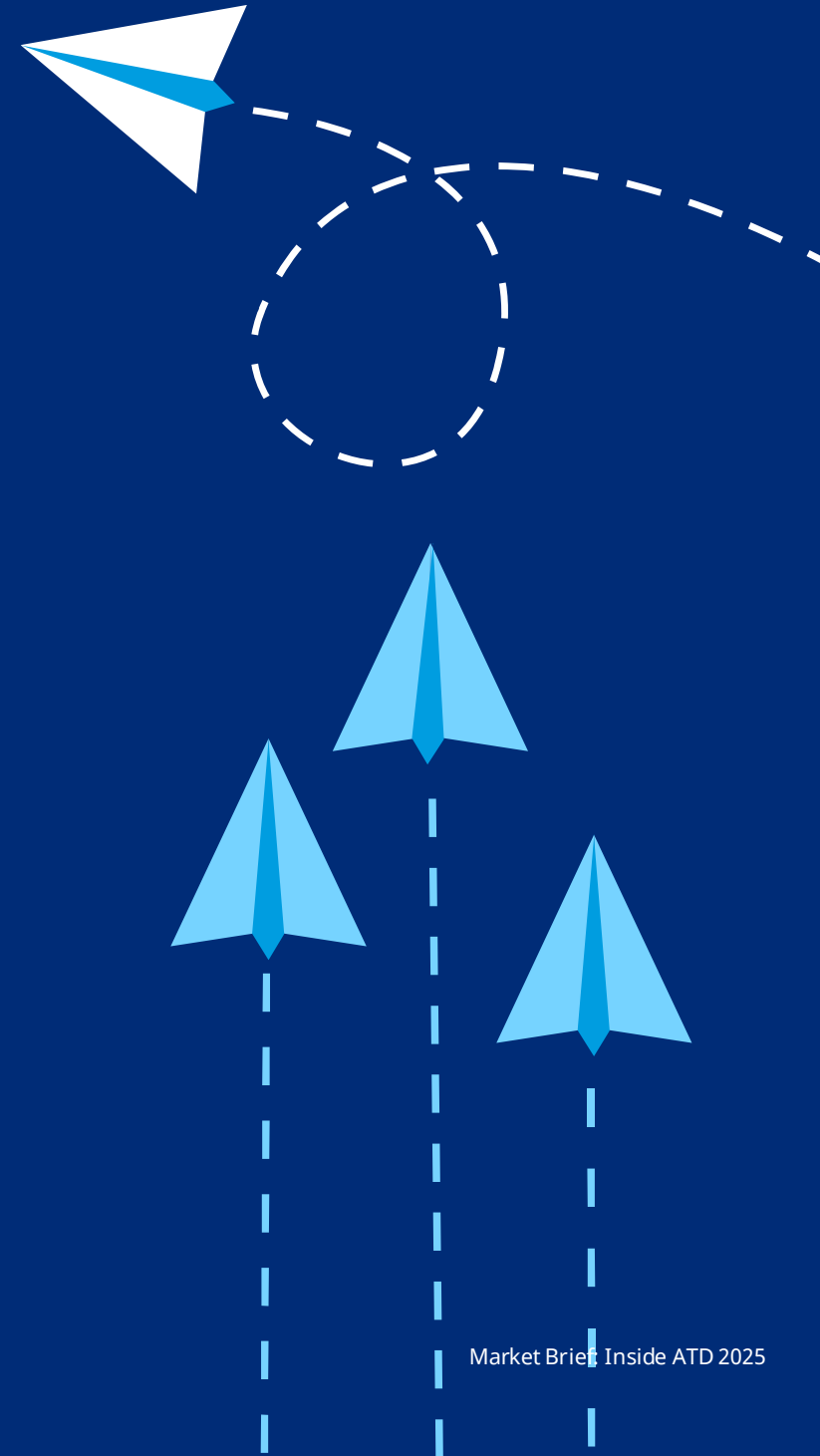


Introduction

The Association for Talent Development (ATD) just wrapped up their ATD International Conference for 2025— a major stop on the L&D circuit. If it had anything to do with upskilling, leadership, or learning innovation, it was at this event.

The expo hall buzzed with platforms, services, coaching, and solutions across the L&D spectrum. If you want to understand where talent development is headed, or wants to go, this is the place to be.

But what makes this conference truly unique may just be the audience—it's an event packed with practitioners and HR tech doers, not just leaders, so it's designed to deliver actionable advice and guidance for all levels.





Tech alone won't transform learning

ATD's **2025 State of the Industry** report revealed a striking disconnect: while learning investments remain steady, the number of learning hours per employee continues to decline. Employees are exploring fewer opportunities to build skills—even as organizations spend heavily on content and platforms.

This mirrors what we found in **Mercer's latest HR Tech Confidence Check**: despite significant investment in HR technology, ROI and satisfaction continue to lag. Learning tech is no exception.

The problem? **Tech is being treated as the solution, rather than a tool to support strategy.** AI, platforms, and content libraries can enable scale and access—but without the right conditions, they won't move the needle.

To make learning a true business driver, organizations must invest in more than tech. They must create environments that allow room for failure and experimentation, reward curiosity, and make time for practice—not just performance.



Talent Development as a strategic business driver

Talent development isn't just about training—it's about unlocking people's potential to drive real business results. When you invest in helping employees grow, you build a more agile, innovative, and competitive organization. To highlight this impact, ATS hosted the **ATD BEST Awards**, recognizing organizations that use talent development as a strategic business tool to drive performance. This year, 57 organizations were honored, with **Panda Restaurant Group**—a six-time winner—earning the top spot. These awards serve as a reminder that when learning is embedded into business strategy, the results follow.

ATD also recognized industry leaders for their broader contributions:

- **Adam Grant** received the *Talent Development Champion Award* for his support of talent development that continues to influence corporate leaders and employees alike.
- **Whitney Johnson** was named *Talent Development Thought Leader*, honoring her award-winning work and frequent contributions to the Harvard Business Review and MIT Sloan Management Review that highlight talent development.
- **SprintRay** earned the *Talent Development for Good Award* for combining 3D printing and education to make dental care more accessible—an inspiring example of using learning to improve lives well beyond the workplace.

Key themes

Several themes consistently emerged across sessions, panels, and keynotes:

1

Practice over performance

As psychologist Adam Grant has pointed out, athletes and musicians spend the majority of their time practicing, not just performing. Yet in most workplaces, we expect constant performance with little room for skill development. With the rise of AI, there's potential to finally create "practice space" at work—whether through simulations, feedback loops, or safe environments for experimentation.

But one tough question remains: **Will organizations give employees the time to practice?** Tools alone won't make the difference. Practice must be embedded into culture, time management, and reward systems.

2

People leaders are key

With change our only constant, it's become clear that the results we want to unlock—from AI productivity gains to better data-driven decision-making—**all depend on people managers.** Those managing the day-to-day life of the organization are the ones that make innovation a reality, or stop it in its tracks.

Because of this, organizations are doubling down on equipping managers to lead through disruption. In fact, Mercer's 2025 Global Talent Trends report shows improving people managers' skills is the top HR priority for the year ahead. Many solutions on display—from coaching platforms to AI-driven just-in-time support—were focused squarely on building more adaptive, resilient leaders.



3

Psychological safety

Not just a nice-to-have, psychological safety is the cornerstone to any successful learning efforts. Dr. Britt Andreatta, an expert in neuroscience and psychology in the workplace, shared that exclusion activates the same parts of the brain as physical pain, leading to issues with performance, engagement and well-being.

As roles evolve and AI reshapes the workplace, cultures rooted in inclusion and safety will be the ones that are more resilient and able to thrive.

Culture isn't soft stuff—it's *the* stuff.

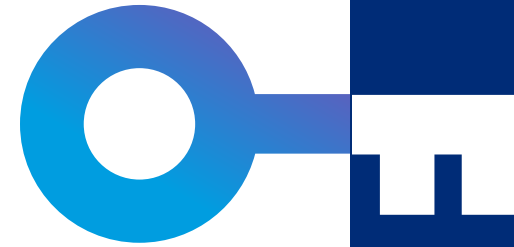
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AI in learning

AI was everywhere—on stage, in the expo hall, and in almost every conversation. The most common use cases include:

- AI-powered **coaching and mentoring**, including intelligent matching to human coaches for deeper support.
- AI-driven **course creation and management**, which is saving L&D teams valuable time while scaling personalization.
- **Personalized learning journeys**, where AI adapts content, pacing, and modalities to individual needs.
- Content creation using **digital avatars and voice cloning**, offering scalable ways to deliver engaging, lifelike instruction.

These tools are promising, but the real opportunity is in how they enable better human outcomes—not just efficiency gains.





Spotlight on vendors.

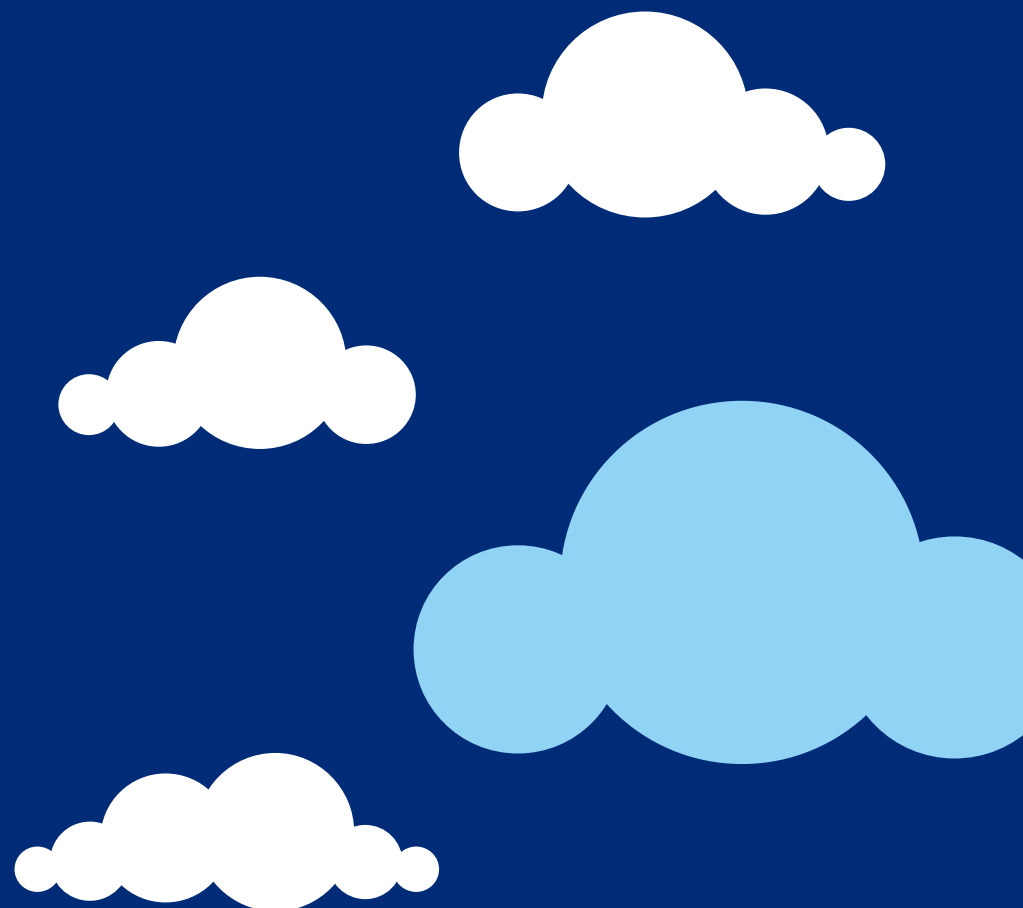
With hundreds of vendors present, there was plenty of innovation on display, but a few made a strong impression:

- **Schoox** came in hot with news that Drew Brees (former 20 season NFL quarterback and 2009 Super Bowl MVP) selected their platform for frontline training at Surge Entertainment. Their focus on hourly and frontline workers is a strong differentiator.
- **OpenSesame** showed how they're evolving from a content provider into an AI-powered partner helping organizations connect skills, learning, and careers.
- **Abilitie** expanded on their 12-week MBA program with AI that challenges leaders with real-world scenarios—helping them practice decision-making in high-stakes environments.
- **Hone** continues to bridge the practice-performance gap through AI-powered coaching. As CEO Tom Griffiths shared, the real value lies in human-machine teaming: AI supports daily development while human coaches step in for the moments that matter most.

Real learning is messy, human and cultural

The week closed on a powerful note with [Seth Godin](#), who reminded us that results—profits, growth, “honey”—are byproducts of a healthy hive. Focus on the hive: your people, your purpose, and the conditions for meaningful contribution. Do that, and the sweet stuff will follow.

The message echoed across the conference: if we want better learning outcomes, we need to make space for people to grow, make mistakes, and try again—whether they’re on the front line, stepping into management, or leading at the top.





Our advice

To L&D vendors

The innovation gap is real—help your clients cross it. AI innovation in learning is moving fast—and vendors are clearly leading the charge. From AI-powered coaching to personalized content creation and real-time skills development, the tools now available are impressive. But here's the hard truth: **most organizations aren't ready to fully leverage what's been built.**

The gap isn't technical—it's cultural. Many companies still struggle to create environments that support experimentation, reward learning, or give employees time to practice. Vendors have the opportunity (and responsibility) to do more than sell tech—they can become partners in readiness. That means helping clients assess their learning culture, shift mindsets, and embed new habits that enable adoption. Right now, it feels like the market is looking at the future, not the present. The tools may be visionary, but vendors need to **meet clients where they are**, and guide them in building the foundation that allows AI to deliver on its promise.

To L&D leaders

Now more than ever, there's a need to move from learning metrics to business value. L&D leaders today are being asked tough questions: How is learning impacting performance? What's the ROI? Can we cut spend or automate more? With AI accelerating what's possible, the pressure to prove value is only intensifying.

To lead through this moment, L&D **can't rely on old metrics** like completion rates or hours logged. Instead, it's time to reframe learning as a strategic business lever. That means connecting learning data to outcomes that matter—like employee safety, customer satisfaction, retention, revenue growth, or renewal rates. It means using learning insights to **inform workforce planning**, hiring, and budgeting. The shift is from proving activity to showing impact. AI will play a key role in enabling this, but the power lies in how L&D aligns with business goals and tells a compelling story about its contribution to performance and growth.

