A number of years ago, a major research university asked me to write about lessons from the U.S. Military that had influenced how private sector organizations deal with change. One key example I shared was the development of After Action Reviews (AARs), during which a squad would assess the gaps between what had happened and what had been expected. This practice implicitly recognizes that in an uncertain environment, it is the learners that survive.

Fast forward a few years and the acronym ‘VUCA’ — volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous — has become the defining characterization of the business environment in which we operate. Success today doesn’t come from planning further and further ahead; there is simply too much uncertainty. Instead, it comes from learning your way forward.

Two particular workforce shifts present challenges to continuous organizational learning, and demand close attention.

1. Virtual Work. Virtual or remote work arrangements have become commonplace. In a study last year, my firm [Interaction Associates] found that over 30 per cent of mid-to senior-level global respondents worked three or more days a week remotely, and over half did so at least two days a week. Recent research by World at Work confirms that 88 per cent of organizations now offer formal telework arrangements. In addition, modern-day diverse work groups now often span multiple locations to include sales reps, auditors, project team members and consultants — making remote communication a reality for most organizations.

Ongoing success in supporting remote working rela-
tionships requires a higher level of trust, because managers need to be able to empower workers that they can’t directly supervise. We have found that one of the most effective ways to build that trust is to provide people with the tools, skills and resources they require to succeed. Over 40 per cent of our global survey respondents prioritized this factor from a list of over a dozen trust-building leadership actions. Providing ongoing access to learning opportunities not only prepares your workforce to perform, it increases their sense of connection and willingness to contribute.

2. Incoming Millennials. We’re also in the midst of a major demographic shift, as Baby Boomers retire and the ranks of Millennials swell in the workplace. Over the next five years, those born in the last quarter of the 20th Century will account for over half of the global workforce. Countless surveys and research point to some key differences between these individuals and the Gen Xers and Boomers who preceded them: their experience as ‘digital natives’, their addiction to multi-tasking and social media, and their impatient career aspirations, to name just a few.

As remote work becomes the norm, these digital natives are highly likely to be part of virtual teams. But as indicated, Millennial virtual workers differ from the current workforce — particularly with respect to the degree of connectedness they are accustomed to. For these digital natives, physical proximity will be a secondary consideration to constant digital proximity.

It can be disorienting for a Baby Boomer (like me) to see a Millennial (like my son) working on a team project with colleagues whose primary mode of collaboration is via their laptops — even when they are face-to-face. Digital natives are accustomed to life online, whether that entails working, socializing, consuming entertainment, or learning. Their reality is the world of Web 2.0 — the social layer of the Internet where platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter allow them to interact seamlessly and consume information and media effortlessly. Bringing these digital habits to the workplace will drive shifts in the companies Millennials join, as their habits eventually become cultural norms.

Learning How to Learn Differently

So, what happens when you try to prepare an organization full of Millennials to compete in a virtually-connected VUCA world? Unfortunately, most organizations find themselves with a mismatch between their learning strategies and the needs of both the environment and of the new learners in their midst.

The classroom-based instruction that characterizes so much of corporate development reflects the learning approaches that the instructors and course designers grew up experiencing. Some have tried to accommodate the need to ‘go virtual’ by adapting classroom methods to online platforms, but with only moderate success. On the upside, this shift to First Generation virtual learning has reduced many of the ancillary costs of training, such as travel, renting classroom space, catering, and lost time away from work. On the downside, learning approaches designed for face-to-face interactions often don’t translate well to remote contexts.

For digital natives accustomed to a quick pace and fluid interactions, virtual lectures and breakout-group exercises can quickly become frustrating. Furthermore, in First Generation programs, class sizes are generally limited to no more than a couple dozen participants — simply due to the limitations of engaging and managing spoken communications — so there are few gains to be had from scale economics.

Some organizations and universities have tried to address the scale issue through Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These courses offer the benefit of large scale (accommodating hundreds, sometimes thousands of learners), and convenience, since many are delivered asynchronously, with materials available on-demand whenever a learner has time to take the class. Despite their promise, MOOCs suffer from high attrition — a situation exacerbated by the multi-session commitment required for completion — and relatively little interaction or real-time engagement due to
the challenges of coordinating working sessions among participants.

What if you could achieve the scale economies of a MOOC coupled with the high engagement levels of Web 2.0 practices tailored to the learning styles of Millennials?

This is precisely what is emerging as Next Generation virtual learning. Whereas First Generation virtual learning is designed ‘classroom-out’, by trying to adapt face-to-face teaching methods to an online platform, Next Generation virtual learning is designed ‘digital-in’, by taking the interactivity of Web 2.0 platforms and leveraging them in service of learning.

Regardless of its topic, Next Generation virtual learning has the following characteristics:

- **IT IS LEARNER-CENTERED.** Most MOOCs and much First Generation virtual learning is all about ‘the sage on the stage’: programs are primarily about an instructor imparting knowledge. In contrast, Next Generation virtual learning is learner centered: it emphasizes content that can be practically applied, and programs are delivered in a short format — generally under 90 minutes — to minimize disruption of other work activities. The interests and time constraints of the learner are a primary consideration.

- **IT IS TEXT-BASED.** When speaking the primary way that participants interact with the instructor and with other participants, the number of participants is limited by the challenges of managing conversations. But when interactions follow the text-based norms of Web 2.0, multiple concurrent learning conversations can occur. The instructor’s spoken contribution becomes that of a moderator or facilitator of the written dialogue — drawing out key points and keeping the conversation moving, in addition to providing instruction on content elements. With over a hundred people typically participating in a synchronous learning session, contributions in multiple concurrent ‘chat windows’ can range from observations, to suggested links to other resources, to sidebar discussions of a point that has captured the interest of a subset of the learners. This contributes to the next feature of Next-Generation Virtual Learning.

- **IT IS CO-CREATED.** The content of a Next Generation learning program is always a collaboration. The instructor brings models, frameworks, tools, examples, video and stories — a variety of content on the program’s topic, which may or may not be introduced and expanded upon. But participants are equal collaborators, bringing their experiences, questions and often adding ‘hot links’ to outside resources to their chat contributions. Such contributions don’t distract from the learning, they are an integral part of it, as learners pool their perspectives and even coach each other in real time.

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**How to Bridge the Learning Generation Gap**

**Engage with Millennials in Program Design.**
You have expertise right in your organization: learn from your Millennials how they are interacting and using social media, and partner with them to develop strategies to bring those practices to your virtual learning.

**Emulate Media Models.** The ‘sage on the stage’ is a dying model. Shift from presentation-based models to dialogue models. Think social media, but also radio talk shows and TV programs. Visual richness and conversational tone are key.

**Focus on Interaction.** Bring-in creates buy-in. The more opportunities for co-creation and participation, the more engaged your learners will be. In most cases, they’ll have relevant experience and resources to share. You can tap into centuries of cumulative experience in the virtual classroom.

**Make Learning Part of the Solution.** Executing strategies in a VUCA world requires learning your way forward. Next Generation virtual learning allows you to rapidly integrate the emerging experience of large groups of people throughout your organization.

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Next Generation virtual learning represents an opportunity to democratize learning in organizations.

To illustrate the impact of this approach, let’s look at the case of a Fortune 500 global software development firm that decided to transition its leadership development efforts from classroom-based courses (which had received rave reviews) to Next Generation virtual programs. The firm wanted to use the virtual programs to introduce a new leadership model. The programs it created were 90 minutes each or less; media rich, with streamed video featuring company leaders and illustrating the skills in the new leadership model; and highly interactive, with continuous opportunities for participation throughout.

The result? Satisfaction with the programs and willingness to recommend them to peers was 95 per cent or higher. Moreover, in the first two months of the programs, learning opportunities were provided to more employees than in the preceding twelve months. This example points to an emerging opportunity for virtual learning: with the ability to engage large groups of learners, Next Generation virtual learning lets us move beyond considerations of how we teach and learn to considerations of how learning can quickly impact our organizations.

In closing
Our past reliance on classroom-based approaches to organizational learning limited the reach of our efforts to a chosen few. While this was certainly important to ensuring organizational continuity and succession, it also reinforced a view that success is driven by a chosen few key contributors.

Sustaining large scale organization change requires helping the crucial masses in our organizations make these changes. With Next Generation approaches, learning can become a scalable tool for organization development. The learning strategies described herein represent a welcome shift towards the democratization of organizational development. *RM*

Andrew Atkins is the Chief Innovation Officer at Boston-based Interaction Associates. Named a Top 100 Thought Leader on Workplace Trust in 2014 and 2015, his clients include Adobe, Comcast, Biogen Idec and GE.