
2026

What We've Seen in L&D This Year



We all love being a **bit nosy**, don't we?
Who amongst us can resist the warm,
wonderful glow that comes from being all
up in someone else's business? Especially
when that someone is a literal business.

Hey, we get it.

That's why we're coming at ya today with a sorta-kind report on what we're seeing as an instructional design vendor and Agency+ in the year 2026. And boy, what a year it's been. (stares off into the void)

Below you'll find a few honest, unscientific observations from inside our work. We're spilling the beans on what people are asking for, what they're worried about, and what they're paying for it.

This isn't a formal trends report, so adjust those expectations! It's our own notes, deep thoughts, and hunches compiled from real conversations with one another over the past few months.

Some of it is encouraging, a little bit's kinda bleak, but for the most part, we think it'll help you feel a little more oriented, even if nothing here is shocking news to you.

Well, you might be shocked when you find out our number one client is the ghost of an independently wealthy seafarer named Captain Obadiah Grimshaw, but the rest is pretty much par for the course.

Read on to find out more!

The Team of One



We weep for this **lonely lil' L&D juggernaut**. Listen, you're really good at your job. You're just doing about eleven too many of them.



So far this year, we've met with a lot of L&D leaders who are the entire department.

We don't mean the department is small. We mean they are the department. The department is them. One person, sometimes at organizations with tens of thousands of employees, responsible for strategy, content, vendor management, LMS administration, and whatever fire is currently burning the brightest.

It's not exactly a new phenomenon, but it definitely feels like we're seeing a lot more of it lately.

We've talked to people running global AI literacy programs solo, coordinating training for thousands of frontline workers without a single direct report, or trying to stand up a brand-new training function at a fast-growing company with no precedent to follow.

The Team of One



Teams got leaner, the work kept coming, and the people left standing were asked to do more and more of it. What's especially interesting, though, is how this shapes what people actually want from outside help like IDLance.

They're not looking to hand off ownership of their programs. They're really just looking for capacity, specifically the kind that shows up fast, understands the work without a long onboarding process, and vamooses when the project ends. We're good at that.

On the flip side, our own freelance community has kept growing steadily through all of this. We don't know exactly why that is, and we're a bit suspicious of anyone who claims to know for sure. But we do have some guesses.

Of course, the most obvious answer is that organizations keep reducing headcount, and the people who might have filled those roles still need work. But we don't think that's the whole reason.

We also hear things like, "I wanted more control over my time," or "I was tired of going into an office," from new community members. The reasons are all over the map, but the underlying theme is usually the same. People want more ownership over their work and their lives.

So, that's two very different groups, our clients and community, with the same ask— a bit more control, and a bit more support, in a year that hasn't offered much of either.

Join our community!

Join over **2,000 freelance learning pros** in the IDLance Slack community! It's a free space to attend events, find gigs, make pals, and get support.

HELLO



Nobody Has a Budget Number



If we had to describe the current budget environment in one word, it would probably be "ㄟ(ツ)/".

Organizations want external help, but very few seem to have a confident number in mind for what that help should cost.

Usually, a prospective client will volunteer a number early in the conversation, unprompted, before any scope has been discussed.

It's not a negotiating tactic so much as someone trying to find a price anchor in a market that hasn't given them one.

And of course, plenty of clients are counting on AI (sometimes a bit too hard) to speed up the process and cut costs, which only adds another wrinkle to figuring out what something is actually worth, and whether the quality bar is still being met.

The truth is that there isn't a clean answer to any of this, because the scope of "good instructional design" can mean wildly different things depending on the project. Looking across our own active work this year, the range is pretty wide.

Nobody Has a Budget Number

Smaller, tightly time-boxed efforts, the kind built around refreshing existing content instead of building something new, have landed in the low five figures for a few weeks of focused work.

Larger, multi-phase engagements that span research, design, prototyping, and testing have landed anywhere from the \$40,000 to \$55,000 range for a defined phase, to well into six figures for longer enterprise relationships.

Pure strategy and governance work, the kind aimed at building out a learning function itself rather than a specific course, are at a similar or higher range, priced more like a consulting engagement than a content build.

Trying to compare these numbers directly is like comparing a canoe, a cruise ship, and a kayak. Sure, they all float, but they're solving very different problems. And hopefully one of them isn't The Titanic.

We've also noticed more buyers explicitly asking for a smaller first phase, a discovery period, or a proof of concept, before committing to the full scope.

That's a great way to test the waters before committing to a larger investment when the old reference points for what things should cost have stopped being reliable.

We don't think this is a sign that budgets are necessarily shrinking everywhere. It's more that the old benchmarks have gotten fuzzy, and buyers are visibly recalibrating in real time.

The Whole AI Thing

Check out
our work with
 **synthesia**



Unsurprisingly, more clients are asking us to use or integrate AI into their projects, especially for video creation.

Tools like Synthesia have become a pretty normal part of how we build things now.

But we've also picked up a couple of projects that are essentially cleanup jobs.

Ya know how it goes...

A team tries to get AI to handle something on its own, hits a wall, and needs help to fix it or redo it properly.

Either way, we've seen it often enough now to call it a pattern.

Our guess is this isn't a phase that resolves with a better model. It's just what the early days of any new tool look like. There's going to be a little overcorrection in both directions before people figure out what it's actually for.

Another thing we're keeping an eye on is all the companies that cut roles for AI and are now rehiring humans, often into a version of the job that also involves managing the AI. How *Inception*-coded of them! If that trend keeps going, we guess a wave of interesting, new training needs will come with it.

Nobody's Requesting "Off the Shelf" Anything

One of Our Recent Projects

FIVE
SPECIALISTS

Project Manager

Instructional Designer

Video Developer

Quality Assurance Pro

LMS Admin

LEARN MORE

In the last several months, we've gotten requests that range from train-the-trainer programs for subject matter experts who've never taught before, to highly specific instructional design support for niche higher-ed and nonprofit-adjacent programs, to scripted, narration-ready microlearning built around very particular interaction levels.

Like most learning projects, each one came with a few catches.

Limited budgets, tight deadlines, specific requirements, or audiences that didn't fit neatly into a one-size-fits-all solution. We're seeing fewer broad requests and more highly specific, bespoke ones.

Recently, we worked on a multi-month project that spanned research and stakeholder interviews, brand and visual identity development, a curriculum map, and a tested proof-of-concept prototype, with deliverables built across several different formats (printable guides, microlearning, self-guided digital modules) for several distinct audiences within the same program.

A single project increasingly touches research, design, writing, visual branding, and platform-specific build work, often with three or four different specialists involved instead of one generalist doing everything.

Maintenance Mode

Call us Bob the Builder, because a lot of our work this year was about gettin' things fixed. Yes, we can!

That means lots of fixing, updating, refreshing, and maintaining things that already existed.

Some stuff we've seen:

- A product changes its interface, and suddenly, a library of existing courses has outdated screenshots scattered through it.
- A release goes out, and the training that explains the old version needs a fast, surgical update, not a redesign.
- A company switches platforms, and hundreds of existing courses need to move to a new system without losing what already worked about them.
- A big ol' dinosaur-sized safety course needs to be migrated to 7taps so it can reach workers in the field as soon as possible.

We've taken on more of these tightly scoped, short-duration projects this year, sometimes just a week or two. We think this says something about how organizations are thinking about their existing content.

It's not disposable, but it's not precious (cue Gollum voice) either. It's an asset that needs periodic, modest upkeep, the same way you'd patch software instead of rewriting it from scratch every time something changes.

Here's how we do it...

Contrary to popular belief, we do not rely on wizardry or witch covens to get large-scale conversions and migrations done fast.

LEARN MORE

Skills That Pay the Bills

So what skills have been the most in-demand this year from our community of 2000+ freelance learning pros? Looking at our active and recent work, the most consistently requested skills are:

Microlearning

More often than not, we're using 7taps specifically. The need usually comes up in service of a specific access problem, like reaching people in the field, between shifts, or anywhere a full course just isn't realistic.

Articulate Rise and Storyline development

Yup! Those old chestnuts. Still the foundation of most projects. It'll be interesting to see if and how this changes as the year goes on, with tools like Claude Design reshaping the way we think about authoring tools and learning environments more broadly.

Project management and program coordination

We include project management and coordination with just about every project now. That includes a dedicated project manager role to keep everything on track, instead of folding coordination into someone's job.

Quality assurance

Increasingly its own standalone function, focused on consistency, tone, and accuracy across deliverables. This one's especially important if AI-generated content is in the mix.

Visual design

Consistent layouts, colors, iconography, and overall visual polish applied across all deliverables. We recently brought on a dedicated Director of Visual Design for this very reason. The best learning experiences are ones where the visuals are doing real work, besides just looking good.

Skills That Pay the Bills

Learning strategy

Helping build out the actual learning function, not just a single course. That includes stuff like governance, proficiency frameworks, and everything that makes the whole program work together. We've even got a learning strategist from our community working on retainer with one large firm now!

LMS administration

Hands-on platform work, including Cornerstone OnDemand and similar systems, to make sure content actually functions once it's live.

AI-assisted video production

Primarily through tools like Synthesia and WellSaid Labs, for both new builds and updates to existing video libraries.

Train-the-trainer and facilitator design

Building frameworks and coaching tools for subject matter experts who know the content but haven't been trained to teach it. We've also noticed a bit of a pendulum swing back toward in-person and guided learning experiences lately! Could the post-COVID eLearning bubble be deflating? Hmm.

Strong writing

Named to us directly and repeatedly as a skills gap, especially for technical content, where AI-generated writing just doesn't cut it. We have a strong suspicion that demand for this skill is only going to increase as all of us get faster at recognizing AI writing from a mile away and want something better.

None of this points to one clean conclusion, and we didn't really write it for that purpose anyway.

But from our lil' corner of the L&D world, it seems that organizations are trying to do more sophisticated, specific work, with fewer people and less certainty about what things should cost, while simultaneously discovering the limits of trying to automate their way around the gap. Woof, that's exhausting.

We don't think any of this is going away anytime soon.

The organizations that seem to be handling it best are the ones building flexibility into the way they work. We know, we know... flexibility is the new buzzword. But it is for a reason.

These orgs are creating content that's easier to update, building relationships they can scale up or down as needed, and getting comfortable with the fact that AI is useful for some things and not particularly helpful (raises eyebrow) for others.

That goes for us, too. We're not watching this from the sidelines. We're right there with you guys, figuring this stuff out and trying to become more resilient.

A lot is changing, and it's changing quickly. Everyone is trying to figure out what stays the same, what needs to change, and what "good work" looks like now.

If there's a group of people built for a moment like this, it's probably L&D professionals. Helping people learn, adapt, and navigate change is kinda our whole thing.

What This All Means

And there ya have it, folks. That's what's been goin' on with us.

Now it's your turn to spill some beans. How's your Aunt Marge doing? Is she still seeing that one guy? Ya know...the one with the eyebrows?

Here's how you can stay in touch with us!

Feel free to use any of these communication methods to talk shop, get help, or compare notes on the current state of L&D.

Visit our website:

www.idlance.com

Send us a message or schedule a call:

www.idlance.com/get-started

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