Learning & Development Trends

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After our experience of 2020, anyone making predictions for 2021 is taking something of a chance.

It is impossible to think about 2021 without thinking of how the world of Learning & Development has changed in the last year.

In many situations, face to face training programmes have been eliminated entirely in favour of Covid-safe alternatives. There has been a massive change to digital and virtual delivery and everyone I know in Learning & Development has been working their socks off to ensure some kind of provision, as teams deal with unforeseen circumstances and the challenges of working remotely or observing new protocols when they do go into the workplace.

Without being Pollyanna-ish – after all the number of people who have been very negatively affected having lost livelihoods or loved ones cannot be ignored – there have been some good things for L&D in the enforced adoption of new ways of working. Not only that, but most L&D teams have really stepped up and accelerated the development of new programmes, embraced new delivery methods and generally responded with some energy - and not a little success – to the challenges they have faced. 'Necessity is the mother of invention' was never more true.

Looking ahead – the first thing to consider is what will endure assuming there is some kind of return to normality?

First the good things which deserve to last and become business as usual:

- There has been an increase in wholly digital learning - including in some circumstances a focus on bite sized learning. Often these mini-modules have been explicitly linked to work place tasks – creating just-in-time learning and upskilling for people having to work in new ways.

- The use of virtual delivery has grown - most organisations have recognized that trying to simply replicate a day in the classroom via Zoom is not a great experience for those in attendance or the poor saps expected to deliver these sessions. So short, focused interactive sessions making use of breakout rooms, supported by digital assets delivered before and between short sessions – has been pretty successful. Yes there has been some push back – working from the spare bedroom or kitchen table loses its appeal after a while and when a learning event becomes 'just another meeting' – then we've lost something. Which leads to the next good thing.

- A reduction in event based learning - as a training and learning activity. The short course has always been of questionable benefit. Of course, a day out of the office of the day to day work environment is often attractive and having the space to think about something else and discuss it with colleagues you don't see every day is good, but does it change behaviour? Does it help people to work differently? Does it improve performance? Does it pay for itself? Let's be honest, not often. The offsite course or the assembly of a group in a training room has been our default option for decades because we couldn't think what else to do – or we couldn't convince our organisations to do something else. Now people have seen that there are alternatives which are at least no worse and often better, maybe we can finally move away from being an event based travel agency instead of being performance development consultants. The best activities have seen small groups, facilitated to work together on a specific issue. They gather for short periods, interspersed with asynchronous collaboration – across timezones and geography. It has had the major benefit that the work and learning environments have been pretty similar and therefore the transfer of what has been learned into action on the job has been accelerated. A silver lining to a lowering cloud.

What about the things which don't deserve to continue?

- Hours of generic e-learning - some companies took the chance of lockdown and enforced working from home to impose a whole series of online modules on compliance issues or company policies. Because they can be monitored by the LMS, those who don't trust their team to actually work while at home have found that this gives them some chance to check up that people are doing something. The end of module quizzes have provided management information on 'impact and effectiveness' which bears so little resemblance to actual skills required on the job, that their existence is an affront to all who care about learning as a route to improved performance. By now everyone knows that the right answer is either C or the longest option and everyone is sick of being tested on their recollection of factoids contained in the text rather than anything we might find useful. If you're doing this, please stop. Working from home actually increased productivity in countless businesses. If you have employed people who are feckless wasters who can't be trusted to work from home, then review your recruitment processes. If you haven't hired feckless wasters – stop treating people like you think they are!

- Virtual lectures - it is often said that if your input can be replaced by a video, it probably should be. At its worst, virtual delivery has transferred dull, PowerPoint heavy presentations from the real classroom to the virtual equivalent. They were dull in person - but at least you got biscuits. Without the biscuits these sessions become a chance to switch off the video, go on mute and catch up on your emails or your online shopping.

So what do we need to develop to face the uncertainties of 2021?

Well let's start with addressing those last two issues. Compliance is important and training people about what to do and when to do it to ensure they are in line with regulations and legislation is a duty of every employer. In a world in which remote working continues, there are some options to improve how we fulfil this duty.

1.

Compliance content needs to be stripped back to 'why?' – introduced where possible by a member of the senior team. After all, recording video has never been easier – set up a Zoom and hit record. The only other content should be the responsibilities of the individual and the circumstances in which these are necessary.

2.

Assessments should be scenario based, giving people circumstances and situations and asking them to make a judgement about what they should do. Most important, this provides the much needed context often missing from one-size fits all compliance programmes. Using **confidence ratings** gives the organisation an indication that people not only know what to do and what not to do, but also what they are likely to do in those circumstances. (The process of asking how confident the individual is that their answer is correct, after a multiple choice question also – crucially - helps identify those who are more likely to enthusiastically make the wrong choice.)

3.

Managers follow up individuals – including compliance issues on regular team meetings and one to ones – especially if people are working alone, remotely – provides another reason for human contact which we know is vital if people are to be properly supported in enforced working from home.

What about getting rid of the Zoom lectures? As outlined above, video is now easier to produce than ever and perfectly acceptable for those used to Zoom calls and Teams Meetings. As well as working tirelessly to improve the skills and confidence of those required to facilitate online, strip out as much content as possible and host that on your own You Tube channel or Vimeo site, or build it into short digital modules. By recording these inputs, often presenters get visceral feedback about what they are presenting and how they come across. Chastening for some, but valuable in improving online performance.

By asking people to watch the videos before the virtual session, the facilitator can actively facilitate - prompting discussion, managing group tasks, and setting up workplace activities and action plans to support learning transfer. The flipped classroom works and is more important than ever. However, it won't just happen. Individuals expected to participate need to be given the time and space to participate properly. Just because the videos and reading list is available doesn't mean people have the time and head space to access the content and think about the implications of what it means to them and their work. Set expectations and protect the time required to read, view and reflect.

After a period of rapid and enforced change, it is inevitable that some of what has been created – quickly – is going to be less than perfect. As those involved in agile development know – creating a minimum viable product, trying it out, reviewing it (with the target audience) and re-building to more effectively meet requirements – is the very essence of how innovation happens. We have all been required to innovate in 2020 and the start of 2021 maybe allows that time to pause, reflect and review in order to ensure what has been produced in trying circumstances remains part of our tool kit in the future.

However, as well as fixing things where we are less than satisfied, there are a some other trends I predict may well be part of 2021.

1. MOOC style learning journeys

Remember the Massive Open Online Course MOOC? They seem to have dropped out of favour, and in some cases rightly so. But the idea of a disparate, large group, accessing content, sharing their comments on their experiences and what they have seen and following a learning path over a number of weeks, supported by a library of resources and insights, may have found its reason for being in the corporate world. Imaginative use by some organisations may plot a new way forward to end the ubiquity of the one-off, event based learning programme.

2. Digital journeys and apps

I also think many of us have learned new things while locked down and to do so, we've turned to apps and digital resources. Is it time to make the leap from crafts, baking and gardening and into learning for work? This has been much heralded in the past without really ever breaking through. Maybe, just maybe, the experience of 2020 has created the conditions in which this type of programme can flourish in 2021.

3. Return to the classroom

Starved of face to face contact with colleagues, as soon as it is safe to do so, I predict there will be pressure to return to the classroom or conference room. However, lets not throw the baby out with the bath water. Use of just in time digital inputs, asynchronous discussions via learning platforms, spaced group activities over weeks rather than everything being condensed to the time we can arrange in an off-site meeting room –have proved their worth and should be maintained.

There will also – inevitably – be some reluctance to return to the classroom. Organisations have found they can deliver learning activities and interventions without the expense and logistical upheaval of physically bringing people together – so short, interactive virtual learning sessions will endure and have earned their place in our tool set.

Of course, like all things involving technology, those at the top of our organisations will be first in the queue for the expensive face to face activities where lunch is provided and networking opportunities abound. Going to a course or a conference may well become a status symbol enjoyed only by the few. This should be resisted. Use the medium which most effectively meets the need, not which massages the self-importance of those who may feel themselves to be above a Zoom call. If it's justifiable for the top team, its justifiable for everyone.

I fully expect to be re-reading this in December 2021 while being amazed at my naivety and wondering how I missed what ever it is I failed to predict but which has become the next big thing in the world of learning. But between now and then, I shall enjoy my optimistic take on our industry and our profession. After all, who thought we could do what we have done in 2020?

Robin Hoyle

Robin Hoyle is the Head of Learning Innovation for Huthwaite International, Chair of the World of Learning Conference and Online Summit and author of two books on corporate learning – Informal Learning in Organisations and Complete Training.

@Huthwaite_Intl
huthwaite-international
TheHuthwaiteGroup

Tel: +44 (0)1709 710 081
Email: enquiries@huthwaiteinternational.com

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