

COVID-19 and the renaissance of organisational learning

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has turned into an unprecedented humanitarian and economic disaster, a rare bright spot has been the boom in organisational learning. This 'overnight digital transformation of learning' can be compared to the renaissance in European art and literature during the middle ages.

At the KPMG Learning Academy, we carried out a qualitative study, with the goal of understanding new trends in learner behaviour, knowledge consumption and assessing the future for learning in leading organisations. The following trends emerged from the study, which drew on conversations with learning leaders across industries such as consumer goods, information technology (IT), agri-business, financial services and professional services:

- **The tipping point**

The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the potential of digital learning. Everything has moved online, even workforces hitherto considered ill-suited for online training, such as field staff, contractors and distributors. In some organisations, learning hours increased up to 10X. Not surprisingly, companies with higher growth in learning hours were those that had invested in digital learning before the outbreak. With digitisation, geographical distances were rendered irrelevant and trainers, especially for niche domains, became readily available.

- **Change in the learning agenda**

As work from home became the new normal, trainings were initially introduced with the goal of keeping employees engaged. Organisational learning, however, evolved quickly to meet a new set of learning requirements. Skills needed to engage in a virtual world became top priorities. Several programmes on physical and mental wellbeing and resilience were introduced for employees to help them overcome the crisis. Changed operating models in companies meant new topics were introduced, and employees were encouraged to be flexible in their learning modules. Some examples include training programs for field sales staff on how to sell products through the phone, sessions on how to conduct virtual meets for editorial staff in a large media house, or trust-building trainings in a virtual environment for a big consulting firm. In addition, most companies saw an increase in time devoted to functional and domain training.

- **Efficiency jump in Learning and Development (L&D)**

While L&D budgets have been reduced 25 to 30 per cent across the board, typical metrics like coverage and training hours are on track and will see a significant increase by the end of the financial year. Efficiencies brought in by the shift to digital allow for a greater output in terms of completed training hours or workforce covered.

We asked every L&D leader if they saw themselves ever going back to the pre-COVID-19 normal in terms of operating models, strategies, performance benchmarks etc. The answer was unanimously negative. Over the past few months, businesses have recorded substantial gains in productivity and efficiency as a result of the shift to digital, and these changes are too significant to abandon once the crisis eases.

However, in our view, this is easier said than done. The *en-masse* move to digital learning has been forced upon us. Moreover, employees are more willing to complete online trainings to stay relevant amid the economic slowdown. What will happen when business picks up again? Options for in-person trainings may come back on the table and so may the pressure on L&D to revert to earlier models. What, then, should L&D do to protect digital gains in the future?

What will the new high-performing L&D function look like?

Highly engaging programmes

A key success factor in digital training is ensuring learner engagement. Online learning has to fight against learners' tendency to multi-task, remain passive listeners while attending the session, or to simply not log in. Part of the reason for this disengagement is the fact that most companies haven't given enough attention to designing great online learning. They simply break a day-long workshop into shorter chunks delivered over online meeting and collaboration platforms and tools. While this approach may work in the short term, many organisations are already seeing early signs of learner fatigue with this adaptation of learning. The only way to leverage the online medium most appropriately for highly skilled and engaging learning tools is through design thinking which will lead to enhanced learner experiences. Curating and incorporating new tools in training programs will also play a vital role.

Cater to new skills for the new learner

Learners will be expected not only to work, but also thrive in virtual environments. This requires individuals to be purposeful, empathetic, accountable and trustworthy – old skills with a new, virtual twist. There is increasingly a need for skills that are new to the industry, and not just limited to the organisation. Catering to these demands will be critical in delivering relevant programs and will involve crafting interventions that borrow and adapt from other industries.

Sharper focus and greater business alignment

Virtual training does not have the advantage of an audience that is 'captive' (sometimes in fun, offsite locations!). So, it needs to work harder and be even more stimulating to garner attention. Training programs will increasingly need to have a sharper focus and greater alignment with business needs for them to be relevant. The training needs assessment process will be critical and may have to be run multiple times a year to keep track of evolving priorities.

Communication will play a more substantial role

With content becoming a commodity, learners will become more driven about what they want to learn. So, the way the benefits of a program are communicated will become more important. Dry, automated learning management system (LMS) notifications will no longer be relevant. Informative communication that explains the 'why' of learning and draws a potential learner into a program will be critical. Communication specialists and learning experts with a sharp focus on the unique selling value of every program will be a key asset.

Harness data better

A significant advantage of digital learning is that it simplifies tracking and generates a large amount of learner data in the process. This data can be better harnessed for critical insights that can drive decisions on learner needs, programs and expenditure. Advanced analytics will play a big part here, and L&D teams will have to learn new skills on data analytics, visualisation and storytelling.

Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced companies to shift to digital learning, leading to massive efficiency gains for L&D. Efficiency, however, is not enough as a differentiator. To emerge stronger, L&D teams will have to focus on how to harness the real power of digital and sharpen their insights to create learning that impacts both the individual and the organisation.