

COMMENTARY

The vital role of training in an organization's response to a pandemic

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As the world continues to grapple with COVID-19 and its effects, both personal and systemic, organizations are coming to terms with how to respond to those effects on an individual, team, departmental, and organizational level. Below, we address the focal authors' call for "colleagues to consider how additional topics in our field will be affected by COVID-19" (Rudolph et al., 2021, p. X).

Since April, Training Industry, Inc. has surveyed over 1,500 training professionals to learn their struggles, successes, and challenges during the pandemic. The results primarily reveal how the pandemic has affected formal and informal workplace learning through shifts in delivery methods, creating both challenges and opportunities. The results also highlight how the pandemic has diverted training priorities to technical training for new technologies, return to work ("reboarding") training, and even programs targeted at employee well-being. Taken as a whole, these results point to the critical nature of training and development in navigating organizations through these unprecedented times.

Shifting delivery methods

Formal learning

Perhaps the most obvious challenge and shift in the training function has been the change in training delivery methods, particularly when it comes to formal training. Before COVID-19, our sample used in-person, instructor-led training (ILT) to deliver, on average, 41% of their training content. After COVID-19, this average dropped to approximately half of its previous levels (22%). Similarly, before COVID-19, virtual ILT and e-learning made up roughly 50% of training content delivery. After COVID-19, their combined average jumped to 73% of training delivery. Although there have been challenges in rapidly converting content for virtual delivery, including challenges in adopting new technologies, the forced shift could be an opportunity for positive change.

As technology has advanced over the last few decades, training professionals have increasingly looked for ways to effectively incorporate it into their programs. The use of e-learning and virtual ILT has become more common over time, but there has always been pushback from people who maintain that there's no replacement for in-person learning. COVID-19, however, counteracted those objections. When maintaining employees' health and safety precluded them from being in a classroom, organizations had to choose between moving learning online and eliminating it altogether.

We've heard both anecdotally as well as in open-ended responses to our survey that many organizations are engaging in serious talks about not returning to "normal," even when the danger has passed and businesses can bring their employees back into the office. Organizations have invested a great deal of time and resources into converting their learning and development (L&D) offerings to a virtual format, and they are seeing real benefits, including cost savings and increased efficiency.

“We are invested in the future of remote learning as a real possibility, [along with] reduced face-to-face delivery,” wrote one survey respondent. “Our challenge will be helping the business understand we don’t need to go back to a traditional ILT environment for everything after [the] gains [we] made in efficiency, cost, and business results with a virtual environment,” wrote another. These responses highlight how training professionals are taking this opportunity to invest strategically in the future of virtual delivery for their organizations.

Of course, in-person training facilitation often requires very different skills than virtual facilitation, and many instructors have had to upskill on the fly. With the massive increase in virtual ILT, it will be important for industrial-organizational psychologists working in the training field to identify the distinct knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of virtual facilitation. These KSAs may include the following:

- The ability to use learning and videoconferencing technologies
- An understanding of the challenges of engaging virtual learners—and the strategies to do so effectively
- The ability to multitask (for example, simultaneously managing the platform, monitoring the chat and learners’ facial reactions in the video, and teaching the material)

These new KSAs mean that organizations that choose to maintain their virtual training offerings may have to revisit their selection and training practices for their own instructors.

Informal learning

Social learning theory emphasizes learning through the observation of an expert’s modeled behavior. This type of learning is natural in an in-person workplace but becomes less natural and more difficult when employees are far away from each other and collaborating online.

“Development happens through collaboration and team building, and currently we are working apart and not communicating enough,” wrote one respondent. This comment was echoed by another respondent, who said, “Our employees are distributed and working from home, so collaboration while learning is more difficult.”

L&D professionals tend to focus on formal learning, but informal learning has a significant influence on employee performance and must be considered as well. Training professionals will need to explore ways to recreate social and workplace learning through virtual means. Some strategies include making both asynchronous and live, synchronous, virtual discussion forums available to work groups; scheduling regular team building activities; and creating guidance and training on the best channels of communication for various circumstances (i.e., when to make a virtual, video-enabled call instead of sending an email or chat).

COVID-specific training

Regardless of industry, organizations have had to put in place some form of training—even if it’s only informal communications—related to the COVID-19 pandemic itself. In fact, over one third (35%) of our survey respondents reported that they are rolling out new training in response to the pandemic.

Technical training

Organizations are rapidly training employees and, in some cases, customers on the use of new technologies they have adopted to combat the challenges of the pandemic. For example, hospital staff and patients need training on virtual appointment portals, teachers and students need training on virtual classrooms, and restaurant employees need training on quick-response-code menus.

The list of new technologies, and new technical training needs, can go on and on. As technical platforms and tools continue to evolve to accommodate pandemic-related changes in the ways both employees and customers operate, training professionals have the opportunity to play an integral role in the adoption and rollout of these new technologies.

Return-to-work training

As organizations begin to bring employees back to into their physical workspaces, many are recognizing the need to create training to reinforce safety protocols and policies. For example, manufacturing plants and factories must follow more thorough safety procedures and hospitality and restaurant workers must comply with social distancing requirements. Even in a traditional office environment, training must address questions such as how to have meetings while maintaining distance, which personal protective equipment is required or recommended, and how to keep the office and individual workspaces sanitized. Training departments are tasked with quickly educating employees on new regulations and guidelines and their importance.

Anxiety and well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced many new anxieties and stressors to employees' lives. Beyond the obvious—and significant—fear of becoming ill or having a loved one become ill, employees are also facing stressors from working from home for the first time, balancing work with family obligations, and in some cases job instability. As a result, many survey respondents told us that they have developed new training programs and resources to address the stress, anxiety, and well-being concerns that have arisen from working from home during a global health crisis.

It is more important than ever for leaders, and learning and development professionals in particular, to exercise compassion when working with employees who are uncertain and afraid. As employees continue to face a range of new stressors, training professionals will continue to do their part by creating outlets and resources around promoting well-being and reducing anxiety.

Conclusion

It is clear that the pandemic has hastened many already occurring and, perhaps, inevitable shifts in the delivery and content of L&D programs. The extent to which these shifts will continue beyond this uncertain time remains to be seen. It is our belief that the changes we have observed thus far represent the tip of the iceberg in terms of how the programs, initiatives, and demands of L&D professionals will evolve and diverge based on these new experiences. For example, an entire generation of K–12 and higher education students have now been exposed to virtual and distance learning. How will these experiences influence their perceptions of learning and the expectations that they bring to the workplace in the future? As we continue to manage through this crisis, it is important that we continue to investigate the changing nature of the L&D industry and profession to better understand how we can provide value through employee training and development.

Reference

- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirschi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S., & Zacher, H. (2021). Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *14*(1), 1–35.

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