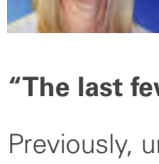


2020: The year that virtually changed my mind



Louise Scott-Worrall
Head of KPMG Learning Solutions



“The last few months have changed how I think about virtual learning.”

Previously, under normal circumstances, I would have said that digital platforms were good for taking onboard knowledge and new ideas. And I would have said that a face-to-face environment was by far the better option for social learning; for discussing new ideas and practising new skills alongside our fellow learners. I doubt I was alone in thinking this way.

Needless to say, these are not normal circumstances – and they have now shown us what can be achieved within a virtual environment. Virtual social learning has come of age.

The longer that restrictions remain in place, the more time that virtual social learning has to continue proving its worth. As a result, the harder it is to imagine ever going back to face-to-face as our primary delivery mechanism for social learning, in the corporate world at least.

“Virtual social learning has come of age.”

Now there's something I never would have envisaged saying back at the start of 2020.

This isn't just about the obvious cost savings (or the slightly less obvious environmental benefits of reduced travelling to workshop or training venues). It's about the options for reinvesting into other areas of Learning and Development (L&D), reskilling people and potentially saving jobs. It's about how virtual delivery is making learning so much more accessible for so many people.

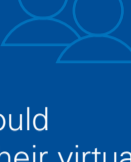
But it's primarily about quality. Since March, organisations have been delivering high quality, virtual learning experiences that are every bit as effective as – if not better than – their face-to-face equivalents.

“...organisations have been delivering high quality, virtual learning experiences that are every bit as effective as their face-to-face equivalents.”

86% of virtual learning events achieved a quality score of seven or above



96% of learners would recommend their virtual learning experience to a colleague



60% of virtual learning events received a higher success score than the face-to-face version



Source: Data relates to learner evaluations of virtual learning events between April-December 2020.

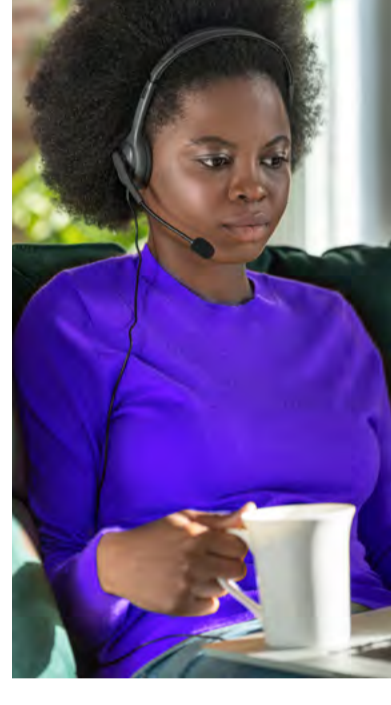
What now for face-to-face learning?

It makes me wonder what the future holds for face-to-face learning. Providers who operated primarily in this space will no doubt have long since flipped their organisations to offer the same service but virtually. We're a good example of this as for one of our clients, we managed to port 80 percent of the L&D activities we offer into a virtual setting within two weeks of the first lockdown.

For those businesses who are far more dependent on face-to-face learning – meeting venues being the most obvious – my heart genuinely goes out to them. But I hope they're not simply banking on activity levels returning to normal once this is all over because I don't think that will happen.

For face-to-face social learning to make a real comeback, it's going to have to be so high quality and so experiential that its activities couldn't possibly be replicated within a virtual learning environment. That's hugely challenging – although not impossible. There's an analogy here to the evolution of the retail sector once online shopping really took off. Far from rolling over and capitulating, shops invested more heavily in the experience and the provision of valuable advice and insights from in-store staff. They fought back.

However, rather than dwelling too much on face-to-face learning's possible future struggles, let's just take a moment to appreciate quite how good virtual learning is right now.



Workshop

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Leading smarter working teams, an all-day workshop.



Making a difference

The learner evaluation scores we collate across our curriculum show that learners rate virtual activities every bit as highly as face-to-face. The trepidation and reticence that they admitted feeling previously about virtual learning has fallen away. Most importantly, they say that what they're learning virtually will help them to do their jobs better.

I'm a huge fan of how incorporating technology has made social learning more inclusive. Chat bars and hand-raising options might not seem that big a deal – but to learners who feel uncomfortable in a group setting or who lack the confidence to fully engage, they've been great additions, especially in the hands of well-trained, sympathetic facilitators.

“I'm a huge fan of how incorporating technology has made social learning more inclusive.”

There are also accessibility advantages to be had. Employees who have already had accessibility adjustments made to allow them to work from home will have no concerns about the accessibility of their learning when it's delivered in a virtual environment, unlike when they travelled from their office to some other training venue.

Social learning is all about forming bonds with fellow learners, using those connections to bounce ideas off one another, reflect on what's been learned and to support each other in embedding new-found skills back in the workplace. At first, I did wonder how well learners would be able to create those connections from scratch in a virtual environment and whether the necessary degree of social engagement and interaction could only ever be delivered face-to-face.

However, from what I've seen, learners are managing to do it. Maybe it's not that surprising as we're now so comfortable with this technology, both at home and at work. Perhaps this is just another thing we've learned to become adept at; another addition to the list of skills we didn't realise we had.

“Perhaps this is just another thing we've learned to become adept at...”



Workshop

Change can be unsettling, but team members who understand why it's necessary will adapt more quickly to their new environment.

Engaging people with change, a three hour workshop.



Virtual learning saves jobs

While employers will no doubt have been delighted with how virtual learning has allowed them to keep their L&D programmes alive during lockdown, there's also no denying that they will also have been pretty happy with the impact on the bottom line.

I know that the amounts they've saved on venues, travel and expenses won't have been gigantic – but they'll still have been significant. Significant enough for me to feel confident in saying that virtual learning saves jobs. Here's how.

First up, if organisations are simply looking for ways of cutting costs, then a switch to virtual learning will help (before we even consider the potential cost benefits of repurposing entire training venue estates for those that have them) – and lower costs could mean fewer redundancies having to be made.

However, if organisations take the savings and plough them back into other areas of L&D, preserving the same overall budget, been at used to help reskill people who might otherwise have been at risk of redundancy. That's great for the individual employee but also in terms of the 'corporate memory' and experience that isn't lost from the business.

Businesses that reinvest in this way might even steal a march on their competitors, using this freed up cash to rebalance their employee skillset, with one eye on whatever their post-Covid reality might be. Employees who benefit from this may feel an increased loyalty to their employer. The return on investment from something that initially looked like just a handy bit of cost cutting now looks far more substantial.

While on the subject of employee-employer relationships, I do think that learning from home, in a virtual environment, could now become an integral part of the new hybrid ways of working that so many organisations are investigating currently. With employers and employees alike keen to retain the benefits that working from home have brought (such as flexibility and productivity), this could be part of the new deal – i.e. work from an office location but undertake all your learning from home. Sadly, you'd no longer be able to complain about the quality of the tea, coffee and sweets on offer.



“Businesses that reinvest in this way might even steal a march on their competitors...”

Workshop

Be the leader who can promote and effectively explain the benefits of embedding a digital culture at work. Help make the Civil Service 'digital by default.'

Embracing digital to lead and innovate, an all-day workshop.



Testing times ahead

It's not all plain sailing for virtual learning providers though. I mentioned before how virtual learning environments have delivered a really high quality product over recent months. The quality bar now has to be kept at this height and that takes a lot of work.

Learning that depends on technology is somewhat binary; it either works or it doesn't. Everything has to be so precise. Therefore, the amount of planning, preparation and testing required for any virtual learning activity is phenomenal. As we all become more digitally savvy, our expectations of such experts tend to rise as our tolerance for errors, technology fails or obsolete content, for example, continues to diminish.

The technology isn't the only consideration. The pedagogy, scheduling and facilitator skills need to be carefully thought through too. There still needs to be a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. The sequencing of those activities needs to be well-paced, spread out, bite-sized and manageable. And the particular requirements of facilitating a virtual social learning activity cannot be underestimated.

All of which places an extra strain on L&D professionals but I see this as a huge opportunity for them to elevate their status within their organisation. Helping to reskill the workforce, while leading on the digital transformation agenda, having a big say in the new hybrid ways of working and delivering a brilliant virtual learning experience? That's quite a big ask – but it comes with huge benefits for any business; benefits that you'd want to be personally associated with, I imagine.

Moving away from face-to-face learning won't detract from an L&D professional's role. Quite the opposite, in fact, as the switch is going to require more L&D support, not less. For anyone involved in L&D, these really are exciting times – and those are definitely words that haven't been used enough in the past few months.

“... I see this as a huge opportunity for them to elevate their status within their organisation.”



You may also be interested in:

In the early weeks of lockdown, we set ourselves to thinking about how this was going to affect the delivery of corporate learning. “More upside than downside”, we said at the time. Looking back, it's hard to disagree. **To read the full story, click here.**



When Covid-19 brought face-to-face workplace learning to a shuddering halt in March 2020, Learning and Development teams had no time to stop and feel sorry for themselves. Once staff were safe and secure at home, learning needed to resume – and quickly. In early May, we dropped in on HMRC, to see how they were getting on. **To read the full story, click here.**