

McKinsey Accelerate

# Adapting workplace learning in the time of coronavirus

Managers can't push the pause button on capability building, so the moment belongs to virtual learning. Some tactics and strategies can help.

*by Alok Kshirsagar, Tarek Mansour, Liz McNally, and Marc Metakis*



**As businesses around the world** postpone and cancel in-person meetings in response to the novel coronavirus (or SARS-CoV-2), which causes the COVID-19 disease, workplace learning is emerging as one of the earliest and hardest-hit business activities. Based on our observations as of early March, roughly one-half of in-person programs through June 30, 2020, have been postponed or canceled in North America; in parts of Asia and Europe, the figure is closer to 100 percent.

However, businesses can't afford to put capability building on hold. Whether the effort is reskilling at the business-unit level or a company-wide aspirational transformation, companies can't simply push the pause button on critical workplace learning, even as they move rapidly to put employee safety first.

To continue enabling and delivering value-creating efforts, learning leaders have a number of tactical steps they can consider to protect employees, adapt programs and delivery, and establish and expand virtual live learning. Digital and virtual learning programs were already on the rise before COVID-19 struck, and we already see a marked increase in such learning programs, which many younger employees embrace.

Beyond tactical steps, there are strategic measures, such as exploring alternative digital learning strategies, that managers can develop during this time of social distancing. The stronger learning capabilities that emerge could stand as a positive long-term outcome from this sobering period.<sup>1</sup>

Six best-practice actions, ranging from the immediate and tactical to the strategic, can help maintain the momentum and benefits of workplace-learning programs and help build a new foundation for effective virtual learning. These actions are establishing a learning-response team, protecting employees in in-person programs, adapting delivery, promoting digital learning, exploring alternative digital strategies, and practicing and preparing for multiple outcomes.

## **Set up a COVID-19 learning-response team**

To create a comprehensive picture of learning offerings and how to adapt them to this new environment, build a cross-functional response team composed of members from all relevant stakeholder groups. These include HR business partners, learning-delivery personnel, IT and platform technologists, and vendors. Establish a regular operating cadence, and coordinate work with the company's broader COVID-19-response effort. Define clear decision points and be transparent about the criteria for canceling or deferring a program, including who will make the calls. Line up the entire team on how communication of these decisions will happen—for example, centrally or locally.

Conduct a rapid triage of the entire portfolio of learning offerings, and set priorities for what will be necessary to adapt to a virtual or digital-only format. Once you have a clear view of the entire portfolio, prioritize what to build. This is important because you can't create digital versions of everything, and you need to be strategic about the allocation of scarce design resources. Set triage criteria around a combination of impact metrics (How critical is the topic? How soon will effects be felt? How many will be affected?) and feasibility (How suitable is the topic for digital delivery?). Right out of the gate, give priority to must-have programs (such as employee onboarding), and then roll out topical programs (such as teaching remote-working skills, remote-management skills, and leadership skills in time of crisis).

Good decision making in this initial period requires appropriate information and data. We recommend developing several minimum viable products: a rolling six-week calendar of upcoming programs and milestones, an exposure heat map (for example, the number of affected participants by region or program type), a prioritized list of programs for redesigning, and a dashboard showing progress, key indicators, and decision triggers.

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<sup>1</sup> This article reflects a contemporaneous perspective on how COVID-19 could and should impact workplace learning. It is based on McKinsey's experience in delivering learning programs to our global workforce, as in well as our work supporting clients through McKinsey Academy, which is our entity for client-facing leadership development and functional capability building.

## Protect employees in in-person programs

Start by designing and executing a plan to support employees that is consistent with the most conservative guidelines available from leading local and global health authorities, such as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and WHO. Communicate clearly and often with employees on upcoming learning programs and include specific criteria for when programs will be deferred, modified, and canceled.

If you are moving ahead with in-person learning programs, communicate in advance the precautions you will take, such as social distancing, alternatives to shaking hands, and enhanced cleaning and sanitization procedures. For those participating remotely, ensure that they have—and are familiar with—the available virtual collaboration tools, including videoconferencing and cloud-based document sharing.

## Adapt in-person learning delivery

For those ongoing learning programs with an in-person delivery component, adapt the

delivery to reduce participant risk. For example, consider decentralizing in-person events. This might mean replacing global kickoff events with multiple regional kickoff events or replacing a large in-person event with multiple small-group videoconferencing sessions.

If travel restrictions mean corporate in-person facilitation teams are unavailable, consider using local employees, such as managers or alumni of previous programs. Prepare them by using a train-the-trainer approach. This entails would-be trainers first going through the program as participants, being trained on how best to facilitate the sessions, and finally receiving feedback from an experienced trainer after their first facilitating experience.

Recognize that there are limits to what can be addressed when using virtual live sessions such as webcasts, virtual classrooms, and video- and audioconferencing. For example, such platforms may not work well for deep socioemotional- and interpersonal-skill building. To address this shortfall, consider what you can do before, during, and after the session to maximize its impact (exhibit).

Exhibit

## Creating engagement and community feel in virtual live sessions requires planning and follow-up.

### Tips for delivering an “in person” feel

#### Before the session

- Ensure you are comfortable with, and have tested, the technology
- Make participation easy by providing local-access dial-ins, as needed, in addition to any weblink
- Dedicate a moderator to manage speakers and discussion
- Send materials in advance via file sharing, and remind participants prior to starting

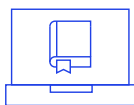
#### During the session

- Leverage technology features to keep participants engaged
- Keep video on, look at the webcam, and use gestures as in person
- Use online tools such as polling and chat to gather input
- Consider features such as virtual breakout rooms to encourage participation

#### After the session

- Distribute any work products or follow-up information as needed
- Solicit participant feedback on content, delivery, and technical experience
- Escalate any technical issues and identify workarounds or solutions

### Learning and collaboration technologies for virtual delivery



Virtual classrooms



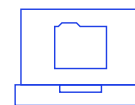
Webcasts



Video- and audioconferencing



Virtual coaching



File sharing



Content co-creation (eg, whiteboards)

# What is clearly different today is that keeping people safe and reducing risk has, for now, displaced cost as the key driver behind digital learning.

Good learning sessions of all types begin with a good participant experience. Ensure that the technology has been tested, local dial-in numbers are provided as needed, roles are clear (consider assigning a moderator to manage speakers and participants), and prereading materials are distributed well in advance. During the session, use technology to keep participants engaged and energized. For instance, keep the video option on participants' computers active to create a community feel, set ground rules up front, and use online input tools to facilitate engagement, such as chat and polling. Also consider features such as virtual breakout rooms and postsession feedback to simulate the in-person experience as much as possible.

## **Promote and enhance digital learning**

A substantial increase in the use of digital delivery globally is under way across all segments of the workforce, from frontline managers to senior leaders. In regions such as Asia, where travel restrictions and work-from-home policies have been in place for weeks, digitally enabled experiences have also created new benefits. These include an increased sense of community, purpose, and focus for people who are no longer connecting with their colleagues in a co-located workplace. Around the world, organizations are using digital learning to increase collaboration among teams that are working either remotely or across different time zones, as they take courses

together and collaborate in virtual formats (such as videoconferencing and instant messaging). These are good arguments for placing additional emphasis on digital learning as the number of people working remotely because of COVID-19 increases.

It is too early to say how COVID-19 will ultimately affect the accelerated adoption of digital learning. What is clearly different today is that keeping people safe and reducing risk has, for now, displaced cost as the key driver behind digital learning. For learning leaders, that opens an opportunity to promote existing digitally enabled portfolios of learning offerings as a way to help colleagues during challenging times. Targeted communication that reminds employees that learning doesn't stop when travel is curtailed, for example, may boost attention to available digital offerings.

The uptake in virtual delivery also provides learning leaders with an opportunity to enhance the digital experience of employee learners. One way is for leaders to tie communication to the learners' individual motivations, such as a sense of personal, community, or company purpose. Another is to have senior leaders model desired behaviors through active participation in digital courses. When possible, include social-learning components. These can include discussion boards, along with participant journeys that focus on cohorts of people undertaking programs together on a set schedule rather than on individuals working at their

own pace. Also consider small (potentially virtual) group projects to drive engagement, connectivity, and application.

Finally, it is important in these rapidly evolving times to reinforce the link between business outcomes and longer-term capability building. Learning doesn't occur only in one-off, discrete events; it should be thought of as part of broader learning journeys that last 12 to 18 months and tie clearly to business outcomes. Travel restrictions may affect in-person learning programs in today's environment, but capability building needs to continue in order to advance long-term goals.

### **Explore alternative digital-learning strategies**

As organizations increasingly promote their existing portfolios of digital-learning options, a handful indicate that they are also considering migrating some existing in-person training programs to an all-digital format. Such efforts go beyond merely applying existing technology solutions to offer virtual classrooms. Rather, they represent a more fundamental rethinking of the learning experience to enable collaborative, interactive social-learning experiences for groups of learners. Digital-learning providers recognize that COVID-19 is a catalyst for this transition and are looking to help their corporate customers accelerate their transformation. Some are even offering reduced or complimentary services to help encourage new customers to accelerate such a transition.

Adhering to several principles can help migrate an in-person course to a fully digital experience. Start by reframing the "learning problem" as a design opportunity and rethink the learner's end-to-end experience as a designer would. Set priorities for the essential learning objectives and focus intently on selecting the content that will meet them. Design for shorter interactions and provide more time between sessions to strengthen learning. Focus on human connections whenever possible, creating

intentional, meaningful interactions. Finally, support a seamless learning experience from first contact to last and ensure the same learning experience for all participants.

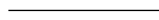
As organizations explore the longer-term implications of an increasingly digital environment for workplace learning, it may be worth considering (or reconsidering) nonmainstream technology solutions that could reduce the need for face-to-face interaction. Some examples include virtual-reality training simulations and higher-end moderated virtual classrooms. All of these can enable new and different ways to engage learners. Implementing such solutions may take longer than other action items we previously listed, and companies will have to weigh possible outcomes against the evolving long-term implications of events such as COVID-19 on their workplace learning.

### **Practice and prepare for multiple outcomes**

In any extraordinarily uncertain environment, scenario-planning techniques should be part of any approach. A cross-functional COVID-19 learning-response team should focus on practicing decision making and communication under a variety of potential scenarios. Is the virus seasonal? Is it possible that travel restrictions may be lifted by May or so? If so, the team might consider prebooking post-May capacity to deliver programs then—perhaps with generous cancellation policies attached. Similarly, if demand for digitally delivered learning shows a sustained increase, the team should make sure it understands the underlying capacity needs to deliver it and to address any technology limitations in advance.

To get a sense of how such planning can play out, consider evaluating the scenarios described in "COVID-19: Implications for business," available on McKinsey.com, and establish a plan for what workplace learning looks like under each. Practicing responses under different assumptions will enable

teams to pressure test response plans for COVID-19 and may boost confidence when the time comes to execute them.



Learning leaders who implement a thoughtful response plan for COVID-19 can minimize the disease's impact on capability building and ensure the safety of learners. Expanding learning opportunities—and improving learning overall—can also ultimately serve as a bright spot for organizations through this difficult period.

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