

How Covid-19 is shaping organisational learning

As the major change event of our times, the global pandemic has brought about a unprecedented experiment in how we live, work and learn. By necessity, humanity has gone online in ways that could not have been predicted, and have not been previously preferred. To ensure continuity, major sectors and fields such as education, business consulting and customer engagements have transformed from in-person to digital experiences.



Stephen Rothgiesser

Across the world, countries are grappling with lifting or lightening lockdowns to ignite much-needed economic activity. Like every other phase of Covid-19, this is a time full of uncertainty. Many talk of this as establishing a 'new normal', but no one knows whether the measures taken now are going to be long-lasting. What we do know is that we cannot afford to freeze like a deer in the headlights of Covid-19. Organisations, teams and individuals need to be adaptive day by day so as to function as effectively as possible, no matter how the pandemic unfolds over the coming months.

While we must now take advantage of the opportunities for distributed work and distributed learning, there's no clear indication that we should cement this, lock, stock and barrel, into the structure of the future. In essence, what Covid-19 has done is manifest a pivotal time of teaching and learning that is unfolding in real-time. Our responses need to be open and agile. Qualities such as curiosity, and skills such as critical thinking are fantastic strengths at this time, as is the emotional intelligence to

be humble and capable of coping with uncertainty.

In the business consulting space, Covid-19 has presented radical challenges for practitioners and clients who place great value on the intimacy of in-person interaction where sensitive information can be safely shared and contained. Thanks to distributed work, we've all become incredibly aware of the rigours of engaging over digital platforms where it is so much harder and utterly exhausting to try and process all the rich nuances of human communication that we take for granted when we are face-to-face. This alone may speak to a future where we look rather towards hybrid strategies for the post-pandemic future.

Across the world, many industries and organisations have embraced the teaching and learning around Covid-19. The Change Consulting Group (CCG) has seen an eagerness amongst their networks where clients very much want consulting expertise to support them as they grapple with wide-ranging Covid-19 impacts.

"When we embraced distributed learning in March and transformed our CCG Change Academy into the Global Change Academy as a digital platform, people from four countries on four continents came together to be part of this community of practice," says Stephen Rothgiesser, managing director at CCG.

"Worldwide disruption has caused an unprecedented crisis, and also created the opportunity to test existing and new ways of providing learning programmes to organisations. Once you are through the initial crisis management stages, you can ignite a bloom of unprecedented organisational learning and organisational creativity."

To help clients navigate a future potentially heavily impacted by Covid-19, CCG has identified three scenarios that track how distributed learning might be shaped in the coming years:

1. **Learning is forced into the cloud** and online: In this worst case scenario, the Covid-19 pandemic lengthens into an 18-24 month cycle with repeated organisational infections that lead to repeated temporary closures to allow for disinfection of buildings and workstations.

We hope to avoid this scenario at all costs because of the financial, socio-economic and political impacts involved, and because CCG's view is that screen-based learning and consulting is not best practice for all required organisational outcomes and requirements. Online learning is useful and can be cost effective for static learning and assessment, while screen-based webinars can be extremely useful in the delivery of global communities of practice, and where real-time interaction with an educator or facilitator is preferred.

2. **Learning becomes more balanced and blended** than current practice: The world gets back to work in a steady stream and workplace disruption is kept to a minimum with careful workplace and social management. On this basis, online learning is used in a balanced way.

This is probably the area in which the pandemic will influence online learning most, and appropriately so. Here, based on the sensitivity of the data to be shared, the nature and composition of the group, and the purpose intended (learning as opposed to innovation, strategic, change and transformation activities), we would see a blended approach to learning that is dictated by outcomes sought (such as individual accreditation as opposed to a group workshop experience).

3. **Online learning retreats** - We move into post-lockdown in a fairly easy way and the focus remains on real world learning, while digital learning is seen as expensive and hard to ensure maximum impact. Our view is that this approach applies mainly to instances where a strong group experience and interaction is required, as in leadership development workshops and should not be considered a desirable outcome for organisational learning in general.

Contemplating a range of scenarios provides organisations with a mechanism to design and implement strategies to build suitable solutions that are tailored to their specific needs. CCG is of the view that a balanced and blended strategy is the preferred approach for most industries and organisations.

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