pm-partners

L&D in the remote age: How to work towards real-time digital training

The corporate learning landscape has changed forever. We've done the research and gathered insights from clients to find out what's next for L&D. Read on to find out how you can take advantage of these trends to further your business.

by **MIKE BOUTEL**

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Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted almost every industry and caused major financial issues for business owners, corporate management, employees and stakeholders. For the learning and development (L&D) sector, enforced shutdowns and social-distancing regulations have meant traditional face-to-face learning is impossible. More surprisingly, it's also revealed the viability – and value – that remote learning can provide.

As many of our clients and partners have told us, the silver lining is that changes to L&D have arrived at a time when companies were already exploring new ways to close the soft-skills gaps in their workforce. The market has shifted from focusing purely on *skills* to one that prizes capabilities above all else. Training, therefore, must adapt to help learners acquire and apply the capabilities they need to do their job well, rather than require them to gain new skills that may or may not be used in practical ways at their work.

For 2020 and beyond, PM-Partner's research suggests we can expect L&D to transform in line with changing notions about what it means to learn and how we should be learning. Technology will become central to learning on-the-go and in real-time; training will become more of a self-help function that allows individuals to upskill themselves on an as-needed basis; microtraining will eliminate the problem of employees only being able to allot an average of 1% of their day (14 minutes) to training; and accessibility to L&D via remote means will become the rule rather than the exception.

In this eBook, we draw on intel from clients, partners and thought leaders to explore these predictions and reveal key takeaways you can apply to your own organisation in order to benefit your people, your business and your bottom line.

Welcome to the future of L&D.

Mike Boutel
Head of Training

With more than two decades' experience in business management, training, coaching and project management, Mike is well-recognised as an industry-leading facilitator, speaker and thought leader. As a qualified trainer in several Global Best Practice Solutions qualification courses, he oversees the training and certification of up to 10,000 individuals each year and has niche expertise in modern portfolio, program and project management practices.

As an entrepreneur in his own right, Mike has first-hand experience managing high-performing teams and running profitable businesses. He recently applied his expertise in enterprise agility and risk management to his role at PM-Partners, using COVID-19 as the catalyst to successfully pivot to virtual training services within a three week period.

Chapter 1
Capabilities, not simply skills

Just as schools are taking a more student-centered approach to teaching, so too are corporate trainers ensuring L&D is delivered in a way that helps the individual become more proficient at their job. The crux of this shift from traditional to modern learning is in understanding what the learner needs to thrive in their specific work environment. Rather than an umbrella course that teaches every student the same skill – a skill that may not even be necessary in their daily work routine, or may not be used to its full advantage – modern L&D demands capabilities become the focus.

By helping learners understand the capabilities they need to perform at their peak, trainers are able to develop and deliver training that offers tangible, long-term benefits rather than being reliant on a set-and-forget learning model.

By focusing on capabilities and not just skills, the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge is more easily bridged, which means learners are able to recognise exactly what capability they need to apply, when to apply it and how to apply it in any particular scenario. Learning this way also allows training to be delivered in bite-sized sessions, meaning employees can develop the required capabilities and get back to their tasks sooner. This eliminates the time wasted by undertaking an entire session to develop a particular skill

– where many elements of that skill are potentially not relevant to the learner's job.
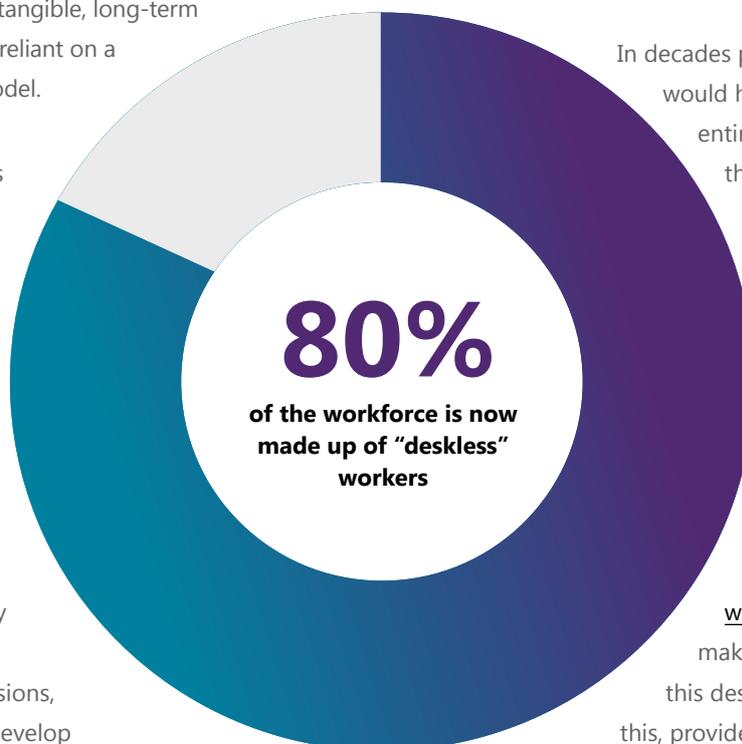
In decades past, this type of learning would have been challenging if not entirely impossible. But with the assistance of technology, mobile training content allows users to access the training they need, when they need it and from wherever they may be – whether it's on a worksite or at home with a few hours free. With 80% of the workforce now made up of "deskless" workers, L&D providers must make their content available to this deskless market. To achieve this, providers are developing training platforms that are comprehensive and searchable, making content easy to find for users who are hungry to learn.

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As Jeff Carr, writing for *Forbes*, predicts:

"There will be a shift from integrated talent management offerings to learning solutions that actually work and are available when and where employees need them."

Chapter 2

A growing demand for integrated microtraining

When we consider corporate learning and development in the traditional sense, we understand it as 'session-based' learning that involves an employee taking a course – either outside of work hours or at their workplace, but away from their typical duties – for a block of time. While this more compartmentalised training method has its advantages, we're also seeing the undeniable benefits of integrated microtraining.

Instead of, for example, spending the morning in a face-to-face training session before returning to usual duties in the afternoon, microtraining allows learning to occur in real-time and in conjunction with work activities, so that the lessons can be applied immediately to a project or task.

This 'learning in the flow of work' requires an overhaul of long-held ideas about what L&D should entail. Indeed, for microtraining to be successful and not inhibit an employee's capacity to learn while on-the-job, it must make the necessary resources freely available and easily accessible whenever they are needed.

Does this mean traditional training courses – i.e. L&D sessions spanning anything from a few hours in a classroom to several weeks' worth of in-person learning – are no longer necessary? Not at all. There will always be a need for this type of training. But this learning method is no longer the only option. Instead, quick and bite-sized training can occur in the form of a short video or a visually-led infographic explaining the steps to complete a certain task.

So how 'micro' is microtraining, really?

A minute-long video; a simple handout on an employee's desk; a brief rundown of how to use a new work app. These are all ways to train someone in short bursts without distracting them from the task at hand.

There will no doubt be naysayers – L&D luddites who insist that corporate training can only occur in a classroom setting and in the presence of a trainer and other students. But what they fail to realise is that they are already experiencing microtraining in their daily lives. That how-to guide you Googled earlier this week? The YouTube explainer video that helped you streamline a time-consuming task? The easy-to-digest signage that showed you how to properly wash your hands during the COVID-19 outbreak? All training tools – condensed into a micro format for our fast-paced, time-poor lives.

As Tristan De Vera writes:

> *In order to achieve learning in the flow of work, your training program should be accessible, on-demand and curated carefully. This means that learning resources must be available in the time of need of the learner, and that these resources should also be relevant to whatever her/his needs are.*

Chapter 3
The role of technology in L&D

Just as organisations need to embrace their own <u>digital transformation</u> in order to thrive in the digital world, so too is L&D leveraging the power of technology. The sci-fi impossibilities of the future are no longer so impossible. In fact, technology is making learning easier to manage for all parties, and is eliminating the time constraints often associated with L&D.

Here are just a few ways technology is playing a major role in L&D's evolution:
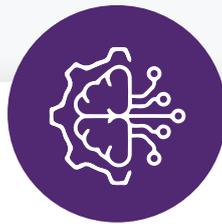
Artificial intelligence (AI)

The future of learning and development is in the personalisation and individualisation of training. AI is making this happen in a number of ways. The way we search for information online (i.e. Googling something) is driven by AI-based algorithms, and artificially intelligent content delivery is able to change and adapt to an individual's corporate training requirements.
AI is able to identify knowledge gaps in training programs; in partnership with a blended-learning approach, it allows users to personalise their training path and choose the right modality for learning content; and biometrics like facial-recognition tech can be used to <u>measure the training's effectiveness while out in the field</u>.

At this stage, the biggest detractor from AI is its lack of uptake in corporate settings. According to the <u>*AI At Work*</u> report, only 6% of HR professionals are actively deploying AI in their workplace, despite believing it will have a positive impact on L&D in the coming years. This is unfortunate because with regular user feedback, AI and machine learning processes can be improved to enhance the employee training experience. The greater the number of people using AI-based learning tools, the better they become.

Virtual reality (VR)

Previously reserved for training pilots, VR is becoming a useful tool for everything from gaming to construction and beyond. In the corporate world, virtual reality is a helpful training mechanism as it allows users to 'practice' their new skills in an environment that is free from real-world risks – meaning mistakes won't cause physical, financial or reputational damage.

The cost will likely be the biggest barrier to high adoption, but expect VR and augmented reality to become a staple in L&D for jobs as diverse as surgeons and customer-service representatives.

Geofencing

This smart solution allows users to get relevant training information delivered to them at the most appropriate times via their smartphone (or other device). During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Hong Kong used geofencing in its StayHomeSafe app to track citizens' movements.

From timely updates to last-minute changes in regulations at the worksite, geofencing uses location technology to ensure the right information is delivered when and where it's needed.

Big data

A common argument against embracing new ways of training is the concern that it won't return any real value on the investment – especially when it may be months or years after the fact that an organisation has enough data to accurately demonstrate to the ROI.

Thanks to the **power of big data**, organisations can use data analytics, performance metrics and reporting tools to analyse the value of their training strategies. Moreover, these insights can reveal any training gaps so leaders can quickly plug them.

Hybrid learning

Hybrid learning uses technology to make established training models even better. It eliminates the need for students and trainers to be at the same location for learning sessions by using virtual tools to connect the two.

Hybrid learning is not remote learning. Rather, it's a way to support users in their training. Hybrid learning can be anything from a chat window during a training presentation (allowing real-time feedback) to a tracking tool that monitors the learner's progress and informs them when they hit certain milestones or checkpoints.

Learning platforms

Learning management systems (LMS) can be adopted as part of an organisation's digital transformation. The right learning platform is not just a repository for all the company's relevant training tools, it can be used to assist employees in their normal work days by keeping them engaged through things like gamification.

Chapter 4

Gamification ensures positive learning

Gamification in the workplace is nothing new, but rather than being a strategy deployed by fringe organisations and millennial bosses, today everyone from government departments to Forbes 500 companies are realising the diverse benefits of gamifying learning and development.

Arguably the most encouraging argument for gamification is how responsive employees are to the process. According to the 2019 *Gamification at Work* survey, employees at companies with gamification are more productive (89%) and happier (88%) at work. Moreover, 83% of respondents who receive gamified training are more motivated, while almost two in three (61%) who receive non-gamified training say they are bored and unproductive.

The survey also uncovered what types of training employees want to have gamified. Corporate compliance training was the runaway leader at 30%, followed by training on products and services (18%) and technical skills development training (16%).

Technology has made it so easy to gamify L&D. Whether it involves purchasing a gamified workplace platform from a dedicated provider or simply setting up a 'leaderboard' that tracks which employees have completed the most professional development modules, you don't have to blow your entire year's budget to start slowly gamifying training.

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18%

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Technical skills development

So what are some ways you can start integrating gamification into L&D?

Badges: These can serve as incremental rewards after completing a module and keep users motivated for future learning.

Leaderboards: This creates healthy competition between users and can even encourage personal competition (i.e. beating your own high score).

Avatars: This allows everyone to personalise their own learning account.

AR/VR: If you have the technology or the budget, augmented and virtual reality tools can make learning sessions more enjoyable and allow for hands-on training.

Prizes: Hold a brainstorming session with your team to find out what prizes will motivate them. Offer them as 'grand prizes' to be rewarded to the top employee on a weekly or monthly basis, for example.

Events: For training events, gamification can involve getting people to collect a range of items from different booths, sharing pictures on social platforms and tagging the company, networking and collecting the most business cards, or tweeting with brand-specific hashtags.

Chapter 5

Employee training in the age of cost-cutting

Globalisation and the ubiquity of our digital interconnectedness may offer a range of benefits for the individual, but for organisations it equals tighter margins and more competition. That means cutting costs wherever possible is integral for corporate survival. So how do you align your L&D strategy to current trends without making a serious financial investment? It pays to take a holistic view of the situation.

Training – whether face-to-face, remote or hybrid – is a way to retain top talent, reduce turnover and improve productivity. And while it requires a financial investment, the returns can more than make up for the initial outlay. For example, according to the Association for Talent Development (ADT), companies with a solid training strategy enjoy 218% higher income per employee than businesses with no formalised training. Moreover, they see a 24% higher profit margin than organisations that don't invest enough on corporate training.

As we've seen from the coronavirus-enforced shutdowns, remote learning is a valuable training tool, and one we will likely see adopted more aggressively in the coming years. When employees are able to get training delivered to them via remote, virtual means, it also reduces learning costs and the potential disruptions of face-to-face L&D.

Think about it over the long term. Say you typically require your team to engage in professional development or industry-specific upskilling every quarter. By switching to a remote-learning strategy, that means no travel costs, no room hires, no catering – times the number of employees who require training, times four, every year. In addition, you can 'bank' the learning content either on-site or in the cloud and reuse them for future hires. This in-house capability is yet another cost-saver that is ideal for organisations looking to reduce their L&D outlay.

Chapter 6

Why face-to-face learning will always be relevant

It's important to celebrate successful changes in any industry. For L&D, the ability to train remotely offers serious financial and productivity benefits to all parties. However, while it was the only viable option during the COVID-19 shutdown, in 'normal' times it should never replace face-to-face learning entirely. Instead, remote learning is most valuable as a complementary solution.

Consider the drawbacks of a 100% remote-learning strategy. Unless monitored at all times, employees may not be engaged with the content. They may find work-arounds to 'check off' their modules but not actually be present for the sessions. Without real-time, personal feedback with the trainer, they may struggle to parse the most relevant information, wasting their own time and costing your organisation money. And, most importantly, they simply may not learn at their peak capacity unless they are in a dedicated learning environment. Blurring the home and work lines can create hurdles to learning and understanding, so finding a healthy balance between face-to-face and remote training is recommended.

At the other end of the scale, think about all the tangible benefits of face-to-face L&D. Fewer distractions in a dedicated training environment means employees can slip into 'learning mode' and be able to concentrate better. This reduces the risk of having to repeat certain parts of the course. Body language and voice are also critical support tools when learning. Being able to physically see your trainer helps relay their information, and when you are in an environment with other learners, you will be able to leverage the diversity of the group to problem-solve, strategise and network.

Then there's the issue of fulfilment. Whereas a variety of factors can muddy the waters when confirming whether your team has actually completed their learning tasks remotely, a face-to-face, teacher-led class delivers a completion rate almost five times higher than online learning, according to research from Headspace.

For organisations that want to get the most out of their teams while also cutting costs wherever possible, knowing their people are completing the required training provides much-needed confirmation – and only face-to-face learning can ensure that.
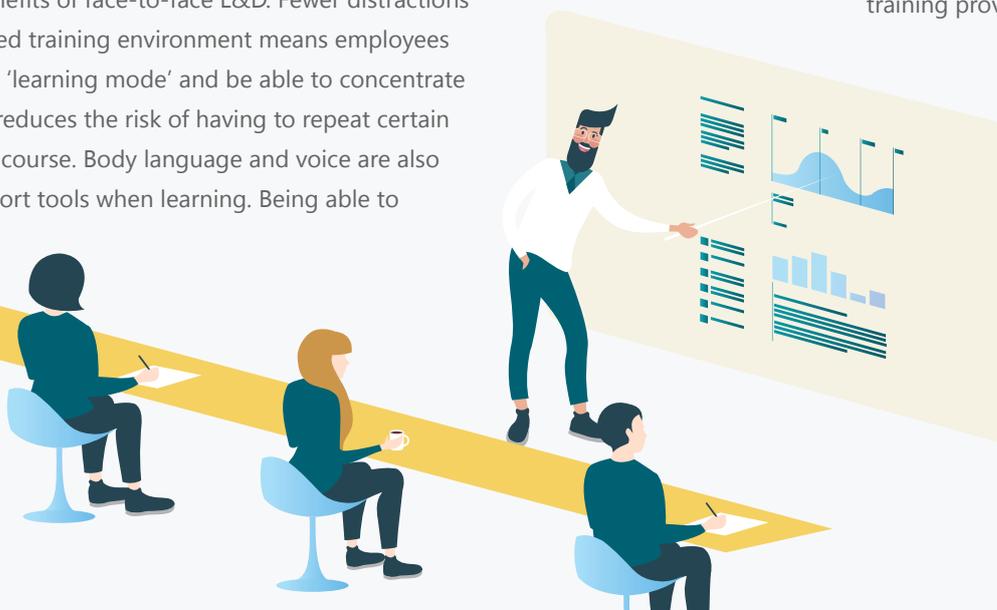
Chapter 7

Developing an L&D strategy that aligns with your organisation

As experts in project management and corporate training, we understand the immensity of what these predictions mean for L&D. Working closely together has – and will continue to be – a foundation of successful learning. From whiteboard and Kanban session to group collaboration, we have always taught our clients that face-to-face contact is essential to get the most out of learning and development. That still holds true.

The issue that COVID-19 has surfaced is that remote learning is not some far-off impossibility. Rather, it's already here – and here to stay. Traditionalists may rightly believe that remote learning goes against what it means to receive successful change management or agile coaching, for example. However, what's more dangerous is for organisations to acknowledge that the winds of change are approaching but still not do anything to become more adaptable.

The smartest organisations understand that people want flexibility with their work. Even before COVID-19 forced the vast majority of Australians to work from home, more than two-thirds of them (68%) worked for a company that allowed remote working. And that desire for flexibility bleeds into how they want to learn and upskill themselves. Employees want to be given the option to train remotely – even if they ultimately decide on face-to-face learning instead.

You need to consider what your staff really *need*, what they really *want*, and then deploy a learning strategy that best balances those wants and needs. Are they more likely to take advantage of remote L&D if it means less time commuting? Do some employees thrive when they are able to sit and self-learn, rather than attend a class? Or perhaps the distractions of working and learning from home are too great – and the higher costs of face-to-face learning far outweigh the drawbacks of 100% remote training?

Consider all the L&D options available to you: remote or face-to-face learning, self-taught or instructor-led modules, or a mix of all. Most importantly, speak to your team before you implement a training program. This will give you the knowledge to execute the best strategy to support all the different types of learners, and it will encourage greater buy-in across the organisation.

Once you've made a decision, it's equally crucial that your people are properly equipped to use the training technology. Are there less-tech-savvy employees who would struggle with online learning? Do some team members have health issues that make sitting in front of a screen for consecutive hours painful if not impossible? Would it be worth the cost and man-hours to deliver regular training sessions on how to use the remote technologies, or would that negate the benefits of online learning?

Finding the right balance will take time and likely multiple rounds of revisions. However, if coronavirus shutdowns have taught us anything, it's that L&D is no longer restricted to a physical classroom – and nor should it be. The ways in which we learn are fluid and constantly evolving. Ensuring your organisation is able to adapt to those changes will future-proof your learning strategy and help your team get all the benefits of L&D, whether it's face-to-face, remote or – most likely – a mix of the two.

Contact

pm-partners

SYDNEY

Level 5
45 Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000

P: 1300 70 13 14
info@pm-partners.com.au
www.pm-partners.com.au

MELBOURNE

Level 8
500 Collins Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

CANBERRA

Level 4 & 5
15 Moore Street
Canberra ACT 2601

SINGAPORE

20 Bendemeer Road
#03-12
Singapore 339914

P: +65 6818 5771
info@pm-partners.com.sg
www.pm-partners.com.sg