

Interface Virtual Learning

The recent Covid 19 pandemic has had a major impact on the training activities that we planned to provide for our clients. We have of course been turning our minds to how we can continue to support areas in the best way possible going forward. We have also been talking to many of our clients and are already hearing that virtual learning is being considered in the long term as well.

There are of course pros and cons to consider when choosing any method of training delivery. When considering virtual training we need to make sure that we can support participants to **learn**. It is not about ticking a box to say that X staff have been trained in Y. This paper outlines our thoughts regarding the pros of virtual learning and also what we need to think about when developing and providing training in this way.

So what do we know about how people learn? The Theory

Kolb (1984) outlined that we learn from:

- The 'here and now' examples
- Being able to reflect on experiences
- Apply learning from one situation to another
- An opportunity to rehearse and plan how to apply learning

Malcom Knowles theory of andragogy identified five assumptions that we should make about adult learners.

1. Self-Concept – Because adults are at a mature developmental stage, they have a more secure self-concept than children. This allows them to take part in directing their own learning.
2. Past Learning Experience – Adults have a vast array of experiences to draw on as they learn, as opposed to children who are in the process of gaining new experiences.
3. Readiness to Learn – Many adults have reached a point in which they see the value of gaining knowledge and are ready to be serious about and focused on learning.

4. Practical Reasons to Learn – Adults are looking for practical, problem-centered approaches to learning.
5. Driven by Internal Motivation – While many children are driven by external motivators – such as punishment if they get bad grades or rewards if they get good grades – adults are more internally motivated.

Honey and Mumford (1986) found that people have a preference to start this cycle of learning at one of four different points;

1. Understand the theory – theorists
2. Identify how it is relevant to their practice – pragmatists
3. Try our new experiences – activists
4. Reflect on their existing practice – reflectors

We have used this knowledge to think carefully about how we bespoke training for each subject, service area and also each group of participants.

We need to make sure that virtual training offers a highly adaptive, effective and continuous learning model that focuses on application, reflection and reinforcement of new knowledge and skills over time.

What does that mean for practice?

Based on this we have and will continue to create programmes which are:

Interactive - where participants have an opportunity to learn from each other and share their experiences. There is so much to be gained by understanding someone else's viewpoint and learning from their experience. This has always been an integral part of workforce training. So, we will run facilitated group sessions with the learning group to discuss/explore ideas and concepts to allow for reflection, challenge and support.

Efficient - we compress face to face training into short manageable chunks to make easily digestible sessions. These suit different learning styles and we do not lose any content. Compressing learning in this way is a pedagogical necessity—because maintaining interest for more than 90 minutes in a virtual learning environment is extremely challenging, if not impossible.

Short compressed sessions work to the benefit of the program because learners get:

- information that is drip fed so that the brain doesn't switch off
- allows the best use of time
- provides less disruption for the day
- supports participants to learn in the way that best suits their needs
- allows for practical and reflective learning between sessions
- allows them to learn at their own pace

Useful for application - Sometimes we have seen training programs where participants seem happy to walk away from training with 1 or 2 nuggets of wisdom. Our virtual learning provides more than that. It supports learners to:

- focus on the practical application of new approaches and tools
- integrate all components of the learning environment including learning, application, peer collaboration and performance coaching

Convenient – it allows learners to train away from their job. Without the location or time limitations of a traditional classroom setting, learners have the freedom to absorb content and engage with peers, at a time and location that they will learn best. We know that not every learner is the same and sitting in a classroom for hours to learn about a topic is not effective for everyone. A virtual classroom allows learners to comprehend topics on their own terms, on any device and anywhere there is internet. It also reduces travel hassles which can support improvements in the quality of work life balance.

Flexible - The ease of accessibility of an online learning platform gives learners the opportunity to take a break at certain times of the work day to take a class. This allows employees to learn at various times of the day to suit the needs of their employer and themselves.

Learning and growing community – this is particularly important at the moment when people are working from home. Many areas are using online systems to engage and communicate with their team providing a sense of containment and the importance of togetherness. This is essential but there are also added benefits with virtual training to learn and develop together as well whether in the same team, or across services.

Support knowledge retention - For many, online instruction delivers a more effective learning experience due to its ability to have short, interactive modules that can be repeated if needed. These short modules also help learners find what they need quickly and help break up learning to make it more manageable and memorable.

Things to consider

Skills Practice - there is not the same opportunity to provide skills practice sessions. In a face-to-face training environment, we would often split the room into small groups and get staff to practice concepts that we have previously discussed in terms of the theoretical application. This can be a lightbulb moment for participants when they realise that something they have been learning, needs to be consciously considered and applied in their daily practice. For example, we probably all think that we are good at using open questions. We all know the advantages of using them, and so we can intellectually answer ‘what’ they are and ‘why’ we use them in our minds without much conscious thought. Yet in a skills practice scenario we realise that our questions are not as open as we believed them to be. We may be used to the way we and our colleagues ask for information. We are also thinking about our perspective or possible scenarios/answers/suggestions etc. when asking the

question. All of these mean we are not as open as we hope. Being able to remind ourselves of the theory, share some good practice examples and trying it out with an observer and facilitator enables a much deeper level of learning.

This means that after receiving training, there is **further action required** on behalf of the learner. This needs to be **supported by the organisation** in order to embed new skills into practice. In the example above, practice will not be changed by knowing how and when to use open questions. It may seem obvious, that this skill requires **conscious practice**. Learners need to practice the skills, and see the results of the changing practice, to reinforce their learning and ongoing desire to continue to use the skills.

Body Language - this is a big one. We know that 55% of our communication comes from body language. As experienced trainers we are acutely aware and conscious of body language in a training room. We pick up on cues and respond accordingly:

- moving on if we sense the pace is too slow
- slowing down and elaborating if we sense that more explanation is required, asking for thoughts
- asking for input from people we see flagging or who are not engaged
- chatting to people at break times if we see anything that we think needs a check out
- making sure that people feel comfortable with the issue being discussed and supporting/intervening/challenging if we sense all is not OK

It's hard to quantify the importance of this but it is certainly much harder in a virtual environment. It is harder to build rapport between the trainer/facilitator. We cannot judge reactions and support as easily/in the same way. It almost totally relies on participants feeling comfortable and being committed to sharing openly and partaking in the virtual environment.

For this reason we have found that the optimum number of participants in a virtual training environment is 7. The maximum we would ever recommend is 10.

Time to prepare - the time to prepare to run a programme in a virtual environment cannot be underestimated. It requires extensive planning and consideration. In essence we are chunking up elements of existing courses and thinking about what methods would work best for the majority of learners.

- What can be sent as information prior to the virtual online meetings?
- What research can we expect participants to read prior to attending an online session?
- What information would work well as a short video that we pre-record?
- What elements need discussion as a group?
- What planning tools get the most out of virtual sessions?

There is often more actual 'content' as a result.

It is therefore not a cheaper option than face to face training. The reality of having lower numbers of learners in a virtual training environment than would be workable in a training room, often means that it is a less economic option, though the benefits outlined above,

(e.g. the fact that the learning can be woven more easily into the normal working day) should not be forgotten.

Commitment of participants - many programmes require that participants either (or all) watch videos, read some information, look at some research prior to attending a virtual online meeting. We cannot of course know whether this takes place. It can be frustrating for those who have carried out prior work when others have not as this limits the discussion. We understand it can be difficult for some people to commit to any prior work. There needs to be an open, supportive and transparent relationship with the client to understand the commitment and support provided by the organisation to either ensure that this takes place being clear on expectations on both sides.

What next?

We are talking to many clients and testing out various methods. **Please talk to us.** We are highly experienced in providing training and we are fully committed to supporting you to meet your precise needs. We will tailor every program to meet the needs of the participants and your organisation. We can share what has worked well/less well across the country and help you to make informed decisions about what will suit your needs best.