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Coronavirus and the workforce: learning in a COVID world

Why learning and development is more important than ever as organisations navigate the global pandemic

Learning and continuous improvement in our workplaces is always important. Investing in employee development and putting the right practices in place for businesses to collectively learn is vital, and this is even more true in times of great disruption and change.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has forced businesses to adapt and learn, in 'normal' times this way of operating is not the norm for all organisations. Our [Professionalising Learning and Development report](#) found that just over a third of learning and development (L&D) practitioners feel their organisation has a positive culture for learning.

We also know that individual learning and development can take a backseat in difficult economic times. As the [People Profession Survey 2020](#) demonstrates, while learning was a key priority for 42% of business stakeholders before the COVID-19 outbreak, it is no longer receiving immediate attention within businesses (24% now report L&D as a top three priority). In the short term, this is understandable – health and safety and operating models are of immediate concern for businesses. However, it's important that learning isn't forgotten in the coming months.

Making learning a priority in challenging times

For learning to become the norm in the medium and long term, it needs to be embedded into how things are done throughout an organisation. Recent CIPD research [Creating learning cultures: assessing the evidence](#) finds that this involves creating a positive environment for learning that connects the dots between individual reflection and

learning and wider organisational transformation. This requires leadership vision, line managers who prioritise learning, and organisational practices that support risk-taking, reflection and open dialogue.

Our recent research report, [Learning and Skills at Work 2020](#), examines L&D trends and practices, including the environment for learning. This survey finds that, while organisations think they have the correct practices in place to support organisational learning, wider HR practices, line management and individual level learning could be improved. As there is no silver bullet to create a positive environment for learning, where should organisations focus their efforts to create a positive environment for learning?

Learning is valued by leaders – but the vision isn't always clear

Positively, three-quarters of respondents in the [Learning and Skills at Work 2020](#) report say their learning strategy is aligned with organisational goals, and that leaders value L&D.

However, more than one-third of respondents say the vision and strategy for learning is unclear in their organisation. The same number also feel that processes and behaviours aren't adapted to support learning.

This highlights that many organisations need to consider how wider management practices – like employee voice mechanisms and feedback loops – connect individual learning with organisational vision and change. In other words, does individual and team learning filter through the organisation to create transformation?

As organisations change how they work – and many adapt to working remotely or in a different way – these learnings are key.

Individual-level learning: does rhetoric match reality?

While perceptions of an organisational vision for learning are generally positive, the picture is less positive about individual opportunities for learning. Fewer than half of organisations from the [Learning and Skills at Work 2020](#) survey report that employees get time away from their day-to-day jobs to take responsibility for learning, and just a third of organisations report that employees are encouraged to reflect on their learning in their day-to-day job. It appears that there is a disconnect between the organisational vision and strategy for learning and how this vision relates to employees.

Line managers are key facilitators of learning, but need guidance and support

Findings from [Learning and Skills at Work 2020](#) highlight how vital line managers are in connecting individual learning to organisational learning. It also highlights that manager involvement in learning is linked with employee satisfaction. For example, line managers are twice as likely to facilitate continuous learning and be involved in determining learning and development needs in organisations where employees are satisfied. They are also much more likely to support informal learning, learning transfer and help assess the impact of learning. As teams adapt to new and unfamiliar ways of working during the pandemic, this is particularly important.

However, only half of organisations report that line managers encourage participation in L&D, while under one-third report that line managers help facilitate continuous learning or support their team to transfer their learning.

What does this mean for L&D professionals, or those responsible for learning strategy? First, it's important to recognise that managers are likely to be under pressure during the pandemic, so it's important they're supported and given clear guidance. Second, L&D professionals must help line managers understand their role as champions of learning and reflection, and the importance of prioritising learning – both formal and informal.

Digital learning provision: are organisations set up to learn differently?

There are other short term, practical considerations that need to be made around learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only are far more of us working remotely, but for those who are going into their usual workplace, group face-to-face learning delivery will need to be adapted or paused because of social distancing guidelines. How ready are organisations to deliver digital learning opportunities?

[Learning and Skills at Work 2020](#) finds that while online learning is far from the default way of delivering learning, it was the second most popular delivery method over the last 12 months (behind on-the-job learning), with more than half of organisations doing this. Positively, this suggests that many organisations have the right infrastructure in place to support digital learning. However, digital or remote learning is more common in large organisations compared to SMEs. For example, over the past 12 months, large organisations are more likely to have funded and arranged online learning methods (67% in large organisations vs 44% for SMEs) or mobile device-based delivery (20% vs 5%), as well as emerging technology-enabled methods, such as AR and VR (23% vs 11%). This means many SMEs may need to quickly invest in new systems or approaches to enable learning.

In addition, early research from the [People Profession Survey 2020](#) finds that organisations are taking a mixed approach to remote learning during the pandemic.

While just under half provide this type of learning, more than one quarter see no need to do so. This doesn't automatically suggest that no learning is taking place – on-the-job learning may still be ongoing. But, if organisations are serious about investing in L&D in the coming months, they need to consider what resources are available to employees.

The role of the people profession

Learning and development often falls down the priority list in turbulent times. Given that change, and recession look to be a reality in many regions for months and even years to come because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there's a danger that learning is left behind at a time when it is needed most.

It is essential to ensure employees have the right capabilities to deliver in challenging times, and for organisations to adapt and thrive. This should be a core part of any people strategy. The people profession has a key role to play in championing learning, supporting line managers to guide their teams, and ensure the right strategy and resources are in place to facilitate learning.
